Queer work
productivity, reproduction and change

Siân F. Bradley

Supervisor name: Malena Gustavson, Gender Studies, LiU

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### Author

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### Abstract

Work in general is under-theorised as a site of oppression in queer and intersectional studies, despite the power imbalances it manifests and its far-reaching effects on everyday lives. Anti-work theory is a useful conceptual tool for examining work critically. The purpose of this study is therefore to form a bridge between queer and anti-work politics and theory. Using a broad conception of work drawing on the Marxist and feminist concepts of social reproduction and emotional labour, this study explores anti-work politics situated in relation to the author (who is queer), in contrast to previous accounts which focus on a heteronormative division of labour. The text lays down a theoretical background bringing together elements of queer, anti-work and intersectional theory. With the lack of previous work on the topic, the study instead incorporates previous empirical research on queer work and delves into their problems, before returning to theoretical texts on the relation between queer and capitalism, and the politics of anti-work. This study is centred around the reports of nine queers in Berlin, Germany. It uses the ethnographic methods of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to gain intersectional insights into the links people make between queerness and the drive to work, resisting work, and the future.

### Number of pages: 74

### Keywords

Queer, Work, Anti-work, Intersectionality, Social reproduction, Social change
# Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 2  
Purpose ......................................................................................................................... 3  
Outline ............................................................................................................................ 6  
Theoretical views ......................................................................................................... 7  
  Choosing not to choose ........................................................................................... 7  
  Work ............................................................................................................................. 7  
  Anti-work .................................................................................................................. 9  
  Queer? ....................................................................................................................... 9  
Intersectionality .......................................................................................................... 11  
Previous research ..................................................................................................... 13  
  “Counting” queers: time use surveys and domestic labour division .................. 14  
  Class and queer ......................................................................................................... 15  
  The Problem with Work ......................................................................................... 16  
Methodology ................................................................................................................ 18  
  Feminist research: transforming gendered lives .................................................. 18  
  Queer methodology .................................................................................................. 19  
  Change and futures .................................................................................................. 19  
Ethnography ................................................................................................................ 20  
Method and materials ................................................................................................. 22  
Ethical considerations ............................................................................................... 24  
Analytical themes ...................................................................................................... 26  
  1. Queer .................................................................................................................. 26  
    Gender and relationships ..................................................................................... 27  
    Fluidity and change .............................................................................................. 27  
    Intersectional locations, identity and context .................................................. 28  
    Contestation ......................................................................................................... 30  
    Homonormativity .................................................................................................. 31  
    Political awareness ............................................................................................... 32  
  2. Jobs ....................................................................................................................... 35  
    Queer in the workplace and queer careers ....................................................... 35  
    “Good jobs” and “bad jobs” ............................................................................... 37  
  3. Social reproduction ............................................................................................... 40  
    Housework ............................................................................................................ 40  
    Biological reproduction ....................................................................................... 42  
    Care work and emotional labour ........................................................................ 44  
    A history of queer care: The AIDS crisis ........................................................... 47  
    “A space where I can be”: Chosen family and queer community ..................... 48  
    Health and self-care ............................................................................................. 50  
  4. Subjectivity and self-worth .................................................................................... 53  
    Neoliberalism ......................................................................................................... 53  
    Productivity and work ethic ................................................................................. 54  
    Leisure, non-work and laziness .......................................................................... 61  
  5. Change and futures: Getting a life ....................................................................... 64  
Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 70  
References ................................................................................................................... 71
Introduction

Though this study takes place in my current home of Berlin, Germany, I was born in Salford, UK. It was one of the first industrialised settlements in the world, an environment shaped by the demands of early capitalist work. Friedrich Engels described poor workers in Salford in 1845 in *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, having made the journey in the opposite direction from Germany to Salford – an ethnography of sorts. His family owned some of the mills that shaped my region, and he used his cut to fund his friend Karl Marx’s work on his book *Capital* (1867).

I knew nothing of this, no Marx and no mills, despite growing up in one of the redbrick workers’ terraces iconic of the post-industrial north of England. I was child of a single working mother. As such, I spent time in workplaces. Sitting cross-legged on the floor of a workers’ rights organisation, itself housed in a former mill warehouse, I listened avidly to one-sided phone calls about withheld wages, homeworking scams and unfair dismissals. I got to know her colleagues in Salford’s more cosmopolitan neighbour Manchester, including the only lesbians I ever met back then. Although I saw how work such as my mother’s could be full of personal and political opportunity, I felt from a young age that it was more often a problem.

Housework was rather ungendered in all my childhood homes and I was shocked to later discover that people were still expected to take on housework roles on the basis of being women. Women’s work in relation to men has long been an important topic for feminists. But I am queer and gender non-conforming. So are a very large number of my friends and acquaintances. And we work. We are in homes and workplaces. We are cooks, cleaners, academics, doctors, parents, carers, organisers, and volunteers. Many of us are not men or women. Many of us share our home lives and work in non-heteronormative ways. How do we fit in?

In Manchester later I saw in my social and political circles a simultaneous re-emergence of a lively queer-feminist scene and of libertarian-communist left politics. While I and a couple of others had a foot in both worlds, the two never quite seemed to fit together. Discussions on the left led me to be somewhat captivated by the ideas of work critique and social reproduction that I expand upon in this text. However, I experienced that the same people rejected or rather ignored current queer and feminist politics. Feminist discussions seemed

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1 having likely been given access to communities by local Irish working-class woman Mary Burns (Irving 2010)
welcome only as long they reinforced existing Marxist interpretations. As for queer issues, they appeared totally irrelevant in this frame. At the same time, while some queers and feminists I knew tried to raise issues of class, others (mainly university educated feminists) were quite unaware of it. Critique of capitalism was often missing, and work on the whole was not discussed. How could the two perspectives come together?

**Purpose**

Work permeates the lives of most people. It structures our daily lives. Employers and employees are bound together in an asymmetrical power relation through work. Despite our apparent “freedom” to sell our labour under capitalism and our freedom as individuals to pursue our interests under neoliberalism (Larner 2000: 7; Weeks 2011: 52), work is not a choice. We rely on it for survival.

Work also takes on a moral character. Kathi Weeks, a feminist drawing on autonomist Marxism, and a key theorist informing the ideas in this study, begins her analysis of this at Max Weber’s (1958) conception of the Protestant work ethic: hard work is the correct activity of morally good people, and leads to happiness. This idea, now removed from its religious roots, has long been normalised in capitalist society. Not only does the work ethic shape workers, but was mobilised in the past to usher in the material conditions of capitalism itself (Weeks 2011: 39). Weeks seeks with her anti-work approach to denaturalise the moral imperative to work by examining how the idea was created, thereby revealing its historical specificity and its ultimate potential to change (2011: 41-2).

However, work is viewed positively even often by those who seek to change power structures in society. For example, union and worker activists demand the ‘right to work’ – rather than their right to resources. Black and racialised minority, feminist and LGBT groups campaign for equal access to workplaces – rather than their abolition. Though access to the resources and opportunities afforded by work is undoubtedly important, this means that intersectional politics often does not change work as a power relation and the societal valuation of people based on their productivity.

Work thus also has profound effects on how we act, how we view ourselves and how we fit into society. It has strong material and subjectification effects which extend beyond the traditional confines of paid work (Weeks 2011: 53-6). My renewed personal interest in queer

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2 A note on terminology: Week’s anti-work approach is that which she hopes leads to a post-work future. Thus throughout this thesis, I use “anti-work” and “post-work” to refer to different aspects of the same outlook, where the former refers to strategy or perspective and the latter to goals.
work has come from a long time of seeing friends run into the ground by unrealistic self-expectations of productivity. I observed what seemed to be a tension between a rejection of capitalist ideals on the one hand – my networks are also overwhelmingly left-wing and anarchist – yet an enduring tendency to harshly judge and value themselves based on their productive output. People become ill, depressed, feel compelled to compete and self-improve, come under unreasonable expectations from employers or themselves, and are pressured to dedicate more and more of our lives to work (Weeks 2011: 106-7). This pattern of often negative effects is also highly differentiated by intersectional location, with some people more than others feeling both the pressure to work and the consequences of non-work, and some people more able to work than others. As such, work merits renewed intersectional research.

This research is particularly relevant now, in a time of economic crisis precipitated by the 2007 financial market crash, and against a backdrop of intensifying neoliberalism, both of which bring profound changes in the way most people in Western Europe interact with work (Srnicek & Williams 2015: 125-6). At the same time, queer identities are now more protected and formalised in Western Europe than ever before with the introduction of new workplace equality protections as well as state-recognised partnership and parental relations. Queer people’s relation to work, the family, and the state is therefore perhaps at a critical turning point located at the nexus of these socio-economic trends.

I wish to begin to rectify what I see also in recent intersectional gender studies as a lack of critical engagement with work as a larger site of unequal relations, or indeed of class or capitalism on the whole. As I will explore below, class analysis was very present in what are often considered the founding texts of intersectionality (Lykke 2010: 67-76). I wish to return to these theoretical traditions in which capitalism is always made visible in feminist analysis of society, while at the same time gendered oppression is not reduced to the logic of capitalism, as happens with much Marxist analysis.

Indeed, little knowledge seems to be produced about LGBTQI people’s relation to work. Studies that do exist tend to focus on legal rights or quantitative measures of, for example, wages. Although these measurements can tell us something about the position of queers in paid work, they do not investigate the nature of the links between queerness and work. And while other studies exist on the intersectional position of queer and working-class people, queer theorising of the working class seems often detached from the concept and materiality of work itself (Arruzza 2015, 32-3). Work is often simply discussed as if it is already a given,
and to which simply equal access is required. Its fundamental properties are not questioned, nor is how it comes have such properties.

Work leaves the majority of people worldwide little time and energy to decide our own present, let alone our future. This poses an important problem to a field like gender studies which is concerned with societal change. In gender studies we are used to talking about queer lives, while experiences of lives structured by work are often ignored. For Weeks, work is the site where most people most directly experience power relations, and thus contends that it should be more studied more in political sciences (2011: 2). As mentioned, work is both a power relation between employers and employed and a vital component of capitalism. Furthermore – and though I would be wary of generalising about where “most” power inequalities are felt – work is undoubtedly also a site at which many other intersectional power imbalances play out in social, political, and economic terms. Work is a way that those in relatively privileged social positions can assert their power over others including women, migrants, poor people and racialised people (Weeks 2011: 62). I therefore extend the assertion that work merits more study to the field of intersectional gender studies.

Weeks chimes with other anti-work thinkers in proposing a reduction in working time so that all people are freer to be co-creators of their own futures. However, some post-work utopian thinking, for example Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams’ 2015 book *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* can be more monolithic in nature, calling for a unity of vision and goals. As post-work futures and utopian thinking gain traction among some sections of the political left in Europe, I ask again, where do queers fit in? This is then also an intersectional challenge to monolithic post-work utopias. Without an intersectional investigation of what it means to work, post-work politics is doomed to failure. Similarly, if intersectional analysis is to really focus on everyday lives, work must play a bigger part in it. Put simply: work critique and intersectionality need each other.

I want to explore the complicated status of work for those in marginalised intersectional locations, here focusing on people for whom queerness makes up a part of such a location. I aim therefore to investigate queer understandings of work. How do queers view queerness, work, and the links between them? I aim to explore what it means for people to identify with the term ‘queer’, and also what it means to work. As I am interested in subjectivity and meanings as well as “just” material outcomes, I set out to do feminist ethnographic research to investigate how people who identified with the word queer related this to work. I want to
explore the links and conflicts between these views and current theory in intersectional gender studies. As such, I will present these side-by-side in my analysis section.

While this qualitative study concentrates on the attitudes and experiences of a small number of people in a specific place, it also offers reflection on wider-scale tendencies and structural inequalities by choosing to engage with macro categories of “work” and “capitalism”. As Nira Yuval-Davis describes in the paper *Intersectionality and Feminist Politics*, inequality exists on many levels (e.g. structural, interpersonal, representational) simultaneously (2006: 198). I hope that this combination of levels of analysis will increase the study’s potential to help bring about change. More specifically, I am interested in presenting a critical challenge to work, to destabilise it as a major measure of people’s worth and a prerequisite for receiving necessary resources. I want to do this while also staying conscious of people’s complex relation to work. I hope this study can add to the project of denaturalising the status of work as part of a larger anticapitalist strategy.

This research thus revolves around the following questions:

- How do the people I interview define queer? What is their relation to queerness and what effect does it have on their lives? What does queer mean to other people, and how do they negotiate queer’s multiple and fluid meanings? How does queerness intersect with other locations such as class, race and disability, in relation to work?
- Which of their activities do interviewees see as work? Which activities are not seen as work? Where do the boundaries lie between work and non-work, and why? What kind of work or activity do people do and why?
- What meanings do queer subjects give to work? Conversely, what meanings does work give to queer subjects?
- How do queers share work and why? For example, how does the heteronormative division of labour (both in the workplace and in the home) stand when it comes to queers?
- To what extent and why might queers resist work? In which areas do they embrace work? And how does their understanding of this link to their conceptions of queerness?
- What can the people I interview imagine to do if they did not work? What can all of this tell us about post-work politics?

**Outline**

I begin by briefly outlining the main theoretical viewpoints which inform my approach, namely anti-work Marxist feminism, intersectionality, and queer theory. In the following
thematic analysis, I treat knowledge from academic and political texts alongside knowledge from people interviewed and my observations. This move allows not only for a ready comparison of ideas between different types of knowledge, but also intends to favour first-hand knowledge of lived experience to the same extent as theoretical academic knowledges. I end with a short discussion bringing together the themes arising from the interviews and texts in relation to the aims of the research.

Theoretical views

Choosing not to choose

Intersectional gender studies is the home of this thesis, which guides my outlook as opposed to, say, a Marxist sociological or political-scientific one which might be more common when looking at class or work issues. However, due to the inter- or post-disciplinary nature of my home field, there is also no one “correct” theoretical or methodological approach to gendered research (Elam 2006: 6). Theories and methods – and these are necessarily entwined – can be seen as tools to be called upon when needed (Lykke 2011: 141). This is not a case of “anything goes”, but instead a question of tactics: which way of looking is capable of the most positive change (Butler 1994: 8)? I choose not to choose between the Marxist, anarchist, intersectional, and queer perspectives that inform my understanding of power relations. Each of these offer their own particular yet sometimes overlapping challenges to the status quo. Instead of seeking a unified and stable position, I view this as a queer theoretical approach (for more on queer methods, see Methodology). I also agree that “theory should be employed when it offers some insight into ethnographic evidence rather than prioritising theory and then seeking to find evidence to ‘prove its validity’” (Rooke 2010: 27).

Work

Waged work is described in Karl Marx’s Capital as the basic mechanism of capitalism. In Marx’s detailed description of the functioning of a capitalist economic system, work in the form of ‘labour power’ is what allows the creation of profit, which in turn is the driving force behind the economy (1976/1867: 283). It is important to challenge work as a fundamental site of inequality under capitalism. However, work is a contested category, and indeed part of my investigation here is to see what people view as work and what they do not. Work also has a dual nature: it does not only produce profit and reproduce the conditions of capitalism, but also often reproduces the conditions necessary for life.

Lise Vogel’s 1983 book Marxism and the Oppression of Women rejected the classification of work as only that which happens in the paid workplace, pointing out the hours of unpaid
labour necessary to support the system of paid labour and therefore, the profit-based economic system. This other labour is known in the Marxist tradition as ‘social reproduction’. It is the work of (re)producing workers and society itself. It includes, but is not limited to, childbirth, caring, cooking, and cleaning. A focus on paid employment in workers’ struggles neglects the many hours of unpaid work disproportionately carried out by women. In order to reframe housework as work, anti-work feminists like Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James are now remembered for their radical demand for ‘wages for housework’ in the 1970s. However, the economic recognition they demanded was not meant as a simple advancement of the status of reproduction work to be on a par with paid work, it was much more radical: ‘calling domestic labor "work" was not meant to elevate it but was imagined rather as "the first step towards refusing to do it”’ (Silvia Federici in Weeks 2011: 124).

Focus on paid work also has the tendency to limit struggles for change to the physical spaces of the paid workplace (e.g. institutional reform and unionism), rather than opening up the possibility for change driven by those whose work is in the home, who are precariously employed, or who are unable to work. My definition of “work” must therefore include more than just paid employment. The refusal to make a distinction between the Marxist category of ‘labour’ on the one hand, and all work on the other, is a way of rooting understandings of power differentials in people’s everyday experiences (Weeks 2011: 18) – something very important in feminist study. This avoids the necessity of the assumption that people within a given social category (i.e. “working class”) have a unified positionality, while still recognising that they have common experiences and political interests. Work is a process and a dynamic activity which avoids the fixity of class categories (Weeks 2011: 16-19). I believe the “work” approach also has the effect enabling more dialogue between valuable insights from queer and feminist studies (for example the recent feminist theoretical turn back towards the focus on body and experiences) and the vital large-scale insights of anticapitalist theories. However, while work can be used as a more situated way of talking about issues often ascribed to class, Weeks seems to gloss over the fact that (social) class, like other intersections, is a strong determining factor in the division of labour: working class kids

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3 This study does not theoretically focus on cultural or aesthetic reproduction. These topics are expanded on for example by Theodor Adorno (1991) in the sense of Marxist cultural reproduction, and Rosemary Hennessy’s 1995 examination of queer visual culture and commodity fetishism. With hindsight this is unfortunate, given the number of activists and artists I interviewed. Further research into the topic could look at the work of reproducing and consuming queer spaces, aesthetics and cultures.
largely get working class jobs. Class background is conversely an intersection I focus on in my study.

**Anti-work**

From the very beginning I am approaching this from a work-critical perspective, which I see to be an important mode of anticalpitalist intervention which also deals with day to day experiences. These theorists are a diverse category, including: Marxist-inspired academics (such as Kathi Weeks, Antonio Negri, Nick Srnicek & Alex Williams, Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa & Selma James, Paul Lafargue, Stanley Aronowitz), political groups (such as Krisis-Gruppe in Germany, Plan C in the UK, various anarchist groups, and Italian autonomist groups) and critical disability activists and scholars (including Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Paul Abberly and Sunny Taylor).

Anti-work theorists are important as they de-naturalise productivity as an essential human trait, as the necessary precursor to the receipt of necessary material resources, and as the main way of achieving a subject status – to be seen as and to feel like a valid and worthwhile person. This is not the same as rejecting all work, or demonising the effects of all work in all contexts; indeed, in the current neoliberal context paid work is often experienced as liberating, as it provides – albeit constrained – material “freedoms”. Despite her anti-work stance, Weeks does not doubt the social necessity nor the transformatory power of work (2011: 38). This contradiction is something I also address in this study. Rather, this approach entails a strong intervention against the centrality of work to people’s internal and external lives, a consideration of the possibilities of social transformation that could occur with a reduction in work, and a future-oriented conception of freedom from work as freedom from capitalism. I am interested in the more general ways queerness intersects with working activity. Therefore, just as Weeks is not interested in the goal of women’s equality with men in work (2011: 22), I am not interested here in advancing queers’ rights at work, despite the importance of such an endeavour in a capitalist society. This insight is ultimately aimed at freedom from and transformation of the work relation rather than equality within it. Anti-work theory is discussed in more detail with specific reference to Kathi Weeks’ writing in the ‘Previous research’ section below.

**Queer?**

Queer is a contested and fluid concept by its very definition. I decided to leave its interpretation open to interviewees. It is therefore discussed more in the themes section below. While writers and interviewees alike talk about queer not as an identity but as a
process, and while I recognise that my use of ‘queer’ as a noun to describe a person risks fixing meanings, I have decided to mirror this common usage that I have heard in queer communities. I believe the use of ‘queer’ as a noun in these communities is often done with an awareness of this contradiction, sometimes slightly tongue-in-cheek, and overall, for convenience.

Nevertheless, I offer here a short theoretical background to my understandings of queer. Judith Butler’s key text *Gender Trouble* (1999) described gender and sexuality as the products of continually repeated acts and statements – *performativity* – rather than something inherent or essential to certain bodies. Queerness, or *queer-ing* as a course of action, could then intervene in these meanings by disrupting their repetition. I consider below how queer methodology and perspectives can help open up the problems of work, and also a focus on work can ensure that queer retains its ability to mount a challenge to the status quo.

Although not only meanings are at stake, physical bodies and the material world are always read through these meanings. There can be no “neutral” interpretation of them. Performativity as a concept can also help in understanding work, not only through examinations of gendered and gendering work, but also the broader subjectification effects of work activities. Much like the processes described by Butler, Kathi Weeks writes that the imposition of work as the only means of survival for the majority should not be understood as a finished process. It is rather ongoing, and the semantic and material conditions necessitating work must themselves be constantly reproduced (2011: 58).

Butler drew on the work of Michel Foucault. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault commented that “perverts” – homosexuals, masturbators, exhibitionists, and others – were grouped together in terms of the non-reproductive nature of their sexual behaviour (1976: 118). In an era obsessed with the emerging sciences of sex and heredity, they were anathema precisely because they were disruptive to, or “perverted” the course of (re)productive life.

‘Queer’ means ‘different’, ‘unusual’ from an etymological root meaning ‘perpendicular’ – in the sense of not going in the same direction. However, mainstream LGBT organisations have often rather striven for the same rights as heterosexual and cisgender people in the eyes of the state. While this seems like a good idea on the surface, in practice it often leads to three downsides. Firstly, this opens up queers for more surveillance and control by the state. Secondly, this often happens at the expense of less powerful and underrepresented queer people (for example queers of colour, those with non-standard kinship and partnership relations, nonbinary people and migrant queers) who cannot or will not participate in a
politics of assimilation. This pushes queers to conform to a new sort of normativity in order to be validated – no longer heteronormativity, but this time homonormativity (Duggan 2003). Thirdly, queer issues are often played off against the needs of other marginalised groups in society, which has the dual effect of harming those groups and of erasing the identities of those who live at the intersection of these groups. Jasbir Puar describes in *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007) how queers are accepted into the state and mobilised for racist and nationalist ends, for example via new narratives of queers as native and belonging (despite historical and ongoing state oppression) and further needing protection (by the state) from the intolerant Muslim and/or migrant Other, in a process she coined as homonationalism.

In summation, I am interested in the disruptive and transformatory potential of queerness, and for me this must always be intersectional and include the ability to challenge capitalist relations. However, given the above, I do not begin with the assumption that queers will be radical with relation to work. Queers might rather embrace work, in a new era of legal protections both of queer work and family life, and the neoliberal opportunity to achieve citizenship, material security, subjectivity and (sameness-)equality by participating in reproduction and consumption. Queers are perhaps in a contradictory and therefore interesting position of having the potential to challenge the dogmatic drive of production and reproduction, but increasingly to also reinforce it. But queers do not have a unified position by mere association with the term. Rather, we all occupy multiple intersecting and indivisible positions; just as important as the differences that distinguish queerness from heteronormativity are the differences within queer.

**Intersectionality**

Failing to take into account multiple identities means that analyses of social problems are more likely to be seriously be flawed, as are the proposed solutions to these problems. When Betty Friedan exposed the “unhappy housewife” in 1960s America in her renowned book *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 2001/1963) she offered the seemingly feminist solution of (paid) jobs for women. However, Black feminists have pointed out that in fact poor and Black women already had a long history of working outside the home, and at the same time as working within it (A Davis 1983: Chapter 9; hooks 2000: 1). The reality of waged work for her poor and Black contemporaries was often one of necessity rather than choice, and of exploitation rather than liberation (hooks 2000: 98). Only because Friedan universalised

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4 “Nonbinary”: a gender definition of being neither male nor female, or both.
white middle class women’s experience could she uncritically propose employment as a solution to gender inequalities.

Intersectionality is a term first defined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989), but the idea of overlapping or combining oppressions has a much longer history in political thought (Lykke 2010: 68, 76). Crenshaw described the entanglement and inseparability of different structural inequalities, with a particular focus on violence against women of colour. In Nina Lykke’s genealogy of intersectionality she follows intersectional ideas (by other names) back to political tensions in the mid 19th century in the USA, where women’s rights organisations did not recognise or advocate for enslaved women, sometimes even opposing anti-slavery movements to secure political gains for (white) women (Lykke 2010: 76; A Davis 1983: Chapter 2). Intersectionality has become a popular tool in social theory and has expanded to include many different axes of difference along which power imbalances are arranged within and between societies, including but not limited to sexuality, disability, and nationality.5 Capitalism and what is considered “queer” also share common origins. Decolonial gender theorist Maria Lugones (2007) examined the co-construction of capitalism and sex/gender systems. Colonial encounters resulted in the arrival to the West of new commodities like cotton, enabling the start of the capitalist mode of production. She describes that these encounters also shaped sexual norms both for colonisers and colonised. It was not the case that colonisers simply imposed their own moral codes, including heterosexuality and monogamy, on colonised societies. In fact, these norms were simultaneously created and normalised for white Europeans too. Creating a discourse of “immoral” sexual behaviour served to reinforce Europeans’ purported superiority to – and thereby of justify inhumane treatment of – colonised “others”. A decolonial approach can help to understand how gender and sexuality and economy are contingent, steeped in racist power, and bound together over time and national boundaries.

In recent years, the critique of capitalism which was central to original Black feminist intersectional analyses (and included critical discussion of work, as shown above) has diminished, perhaps mirroring trends Weeks notes in political theory (Weeks 2011:3). She

5 It is important to note that the form of this expansion is not without its critics. Many Black feminists have expressed frustration the appropriation of “intersectionality” with ignorance towards race (e.g. Tomlinson 2013). This is experienced as a harmful and colonising appropriation, as intersectionality is being taken, changed to have new meanings, celebrated in institutions, and often eventually used to erase the black women who created it. This is also something for me to be mindful of as a white researcher with a majority-white participant group.
notes that with the shift from second to third wave feminism, the topics of class and work have somewhat fallen out of favour (2011: 114-5). This may be linked to a shift towards poststructuralism and its need for agency and fluidity and therefore abandonment of categories (like class) that seem rigid and deterministic (Lykke 2010: 74-5). Many intersectional analyses rather present work simply as a source of empowerment to which equal access is required, at worst in need of reform via “equality and diversity” policies (e.g. Acker 2012), “mainstreaming” (e.g. Eveline, Bacchi, & Binns 2009), or “tempered radicals” in the workplace (Meyerson & Scully 1995), with no mention of work as also a site and manifestation of economic and social power differentials or as source of oppression in itself. Like the Black feminists who critiqued Friedan’s portrayal of employment, Weeks insists on the continued need to confront feminism’s idealised notion of work (2011: 12).

Despite what I see as the fertile ground for the combination of these topics, work’s significance has been under-discussed in intersectional studies in the same period in which queer studies have become more popular. I wish to begin to rectify what I see in recent intersectional gender studies as this lack of critical and anticapitalist engagement with work as a site of unequal relations.

**Previous research**

There is general lack of knowledge produced around queer and work. As discussed, class and capitalism have fallen out of favour as research topics in social sciences. The shape of the following literature review is defined by the lack of research on my topic from explicitly queer and work-critical theoretical perspectives. Thus I combine a variety of theoretical, political and research papers from different disciplines and movements which, together with the above theoretical views, overlap with and mark out the conceptual edges of my study. This also perhaps befits the nature of a gender studies thesis, due to the field’s transgression of disciplines (Lykke 2011: 127). These fall into three main sections: firstly, time use studies and statistical studies not only aim to report large-scale working behaviour, but also recognise uncounted work. Secondly, debates on queer and class help frame the place of queer work within capitalism. Thirdly, Kathi Weeks provides a basis for a critical approach to work as a site of oppression and resistance.

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6 In English, the language of my searches. I realise this may be a limitation, especially in studying a German context.
“Counting” queers: time use surveys and domestic labour division

Unlike my wider view of work including but not limited to the home and paid workplaces, most studies on queer work only focus on one arena of work at a time. Sociological studies tend to be quantitative studies of such variables as workforce participation and wages. These studies could give larger-scale empirical insights into queer work but leave meanings of queerness and work unexamined. Ethnographic studies tend to look into the gendering effects of work and experiences of discrimination in the workplace, while historical studies focus on queers in unions and the securing of various rights. However, such studies raise grave issues which are fundamental to how the topic of queer work is conceived. Firstly, they further foreground *paid* work at the expense of a more rounded and intersectionally-relevant view which, as I explain, must include reproduction and other work. Secondly, this sort of research tends to operate as if work is a given, rather than critiquing its position.

Other surveys try to revalue various work and activity in order to promote social justice (Fisher & Yiu-Tung, 2013). For example, Rebecca J Erickson studies the (heteronormative) division of emotional labour as part of household labour (2005) and Jooyeoun Suh & Nancy Folbre’s 2015 time use survey tries to revalue childcare work by counting it, with a focus on the unseen contribution of childcare to the economy. These studies focus not only on the lived realities of people’s lives, but also on the structural aspect of “personalised” work in the home. These attempts at revaluation, though important, are limited. Primarily, they still rest on a normative positive valuation of work. It does not necessarily challenge the valuation of people based on their work output; instead it could be seen to reinforce the primacy of paid work by expressing care work in economic terms, and perhaps implicitly bolster the normative value of work in general. Additionally, queers rarely ‘count’ in these surveys. A technical paper published by the Centre for Time Use Research examined the absence of queerness in time use data, entitled *A ‘queer’ omission: What time use surveys might gain from asking about sexuality* (Fisher & Yiu-Tung, 2013). This is not only a question of bias but also a methodological problem: the fixed category assumptions necessary for gathering statistical data causes selection bias towards normative respondents, posing a problem for queers (Browne 2010: 233). Studies on the division of household labour in same-sex couples are a prime example of this (see Kelly & Hauck 2015), only studying those who live and share work in the recognised arrangement of the cohabiting couple. The following two selections of previous academic work therefore broaden the analysis, focusing on ways to theoretically account for queers’ relation to capitalism, and on critical conceptions of work.
Class and queer

Here I briefly chart the theoretical debate emerging from an exchange of papers between Marxist feminist Nancy Fraser and queer theorist Judith Butler in the 1990s about the nature of the link between queerness and capitalism, including the empirical and theoretical addition to this debate offered by Mariam Fraser in her paper Classing Queer (1999). I wish to continue this discussion.

Nancy Fraser described what she saw in the new "post-socialist political life" as shifts away from ideas concerned with material inequalities and towards social movements coming to rather be defined by identity (1995: 69). Fraser posits that some strategies of achieving recognition (which Fraser defines as the remedy to “cultural” and “symbolic” injustice, and is thus, to her, the goal of identity politics), can conflict with those seeking redistribution (here meaning the goal of redressing economic inequalities) (1995: 69-70). Although she notes that this split between recognition and redistribution is provisional, a necessary abstraction to allow better understanding of the world (1995: 75), for me this is a major weakness in her argument; her reasoning does not attend to lived phenomena, rather, the theory seems to precede experience. This study, conversely, aims to explore the complex meanings and messy spaces that arise from talking about lives.

Fraser roots her theorising in the concept of division of labour, stating that since there is no queer division of labour in the same way that there is a (binary) gendered or raced one, it follows that queer issues are largely symbolic in nature and in terms of solutions. I find these categorisations problematic, and perhaps implicitly relying too heavily on a Marxist base-superstructure conception where cultural politics are always subordinate to economic ones, whereas I view them as entwined. However, I think her point about strategy is an important one: for example, politics based on visibility can quite often mask material differences – one reason that a focus on the everyday experience of queer work is important.

Butler’s response noted the inseparability of cultural and economic inequality and warned against the temptation to return to an orthodox Marxism which attempts to unify all material inequalities under the heading of “class” because this permits to arbitrarily decide which inequalities are "merely cultural" then cast them out of the sphere of “real” class politics (1998: 33-35). She explained how queers are in fact intrinsically linked to capitalist production via the policing of sexuality which defines and condemns homosexuality,

7 Fraser also provides no evidence for this assertion.
bisexuality and transgender in an attempt to exert social control on the reproduction of human beings as workers (1998: 39). Capitalist kinship reproduces gender in ways beneficial to capital. Thus the sexual division of labour cannot be understood as distinct from the production of gendered people.

Nancy Fraser’s distinction between distribution and recognition is one example of the difficulties in dealing with queerness and class together on equal terms, as it is hard make queer concerns, normally focused on identity, fit with the economistic frames often used to discuss class concerns. Butler’s implication that queerness in itself in the form of “non-normative and counter-normative sexual exchange” can destabilise heteronormative modes of biological reproduction and therefore capitalism, is in my view similarly reductive (1998: 43). This, especially given the new modes of subjectivity through participation in re/production offered to (some) queers in the frames of homonormativity and homonationalism (see above). Hence, this study also delves into the wider productive, reproductive, and non-productive activities of queer subjects and how they link to visions for change.

Mariam Fraser’s paper Classing Queer offers an intersectional analysis of class and queerness which draws on these debates. She notes the problems for identity-based solutions to injustice, when many working-class people, for example working class women, purposely disidentify with being working class (1999: 120-3). Resignification does not work in this instance in the same way that it does with “queer”, and furthermore, resignification and ‘outness’ are not a viable option for all queers (1999: 113-5). Again, she points to problems with queer politics based on logic of visibility, as well as how this plays out under neoliberal conditions, focusing on self-creation through commodities and signs, obscuring material conditions (1999: 117-8). As I will explore via Weeks in the next section, this is a reason to focus on working activity rather than just class identity. However, meanings are undeniably important, and this study therefore examines also the significations and resignifications of work and non-work by the queer subjects I interview.

The Problem with Work
The key text informing my approach to work is Kathi Weeks’ book The Problem with Work (2011). This book approaches work as key a component of capitalism, but also of people’s everyday lives, from an anti-work autonomist Marxist and feminist perspective. Weeks’ important contributions to my outlook fall under three main categories: first, a recognition
and revaluation of certain types of undervalued work; second, a challenge to the moral obligation to work; and finally, to imagine futures unconstrained by compulsory work.

First, a word to the text’s limitations. The book’s focus, though feminist, is not a queer or intersectional. It written from and about the US American context. However, despite the US-centrism which at times guides the way certain issues are discussed (for example, in a state where any reference to communism is taboo) many insights are transferable to my UK background and German research context. But although Weeks makes clear the limited geographical scope of her theorising, it causes theoretical problems for an economic analysis, considering that the US is part of a global economy. What would be the cost to workers in the global South of a US population liberated from work? It also falls short of factoring slavery into its analysis of US work and class history, despite its partial focus on the historicisation and contextualisation of work. Finally, like many other discussions of gendered work and social reproduction it relies on binary gendered conceptions, something which this thesis in particular attempts to respond to. Despite these limitations, the text draws together many ideas important to my investigation. I use it therefore as a conceptual basis for my work.

The book is a critical intervention into the primacy of work and builds on a variety of other theorists, charting both the history of the ideas and of political resistance on the topic. Similarly to Fraser’s above discussion of tactics which may conflict, in the chapter “Hours For What We Will”, Weeks examines thoroughly but then ultimately dismisses some strategies for the resistance of work as “too high a price to pay” for feminists (Weeks 2011: 161), for example making normative appeals against women working long hours in paid work on the basis that they are weaker or need to spend more time in the family.

Although not the book’s aim, I also know The Problem with Work as a kind of self-help book. My pilot interviewee Marlene had, unbeknownst to me, been recommended the book by a mutual friend and had part-read it before we met. Although on the one hand this could be seen as a biasing of my interview data, I rather found it interesting to hear what I thought were echoes of the text having been applied to Marlene’s own life with a sort of sense of revelation and excitement that I recognised from myself and friends when we’d previously read “Hours For What We Will” a few years ago in its previous form as a paper. Marlene eventually joined the small unofficial reading group I had formed with friends to complete and discuss the book.

8 See Angela Davis’ Women, Race and Class for a better account (1983: Chapter 1).
Weeks comments that feminism tends to idealise work in the course of both its attempts to revalue undervalued domestic labour frequently done by women, and in its pushing for the entry of women into all forms of paid work under the banner of equality (2011: 12-13, 25-26, 66). She rather draws on an autonomist tradition which has a strong anti-work history. Autonomist Marxism grew out of Italian social movements in the 1960s and 70s. Subjectivity and agency are important for autonomists: class is defined not by its economic status but by its active resistance to capital, and collective action rather than historical determinism is the driver of history (Weeks 2011: 92-3). Autonomism is a modernist perspective, meaning that is seeks to shape the future, not unilaterally, but via “a coalition that could encompass a plurality of participants with a variety of agendas” (Weeks 2011: 96) making it compatible with intersectional theories of change. This agency in the face of class oppression and the vital role of resistance mean that “workers are to be conceived not primarily as capital's victims but as its antagonists.” (Weeks 2011: 94) Rejection of work is one such antagonism.

Methodology

**Feminist research: transforming gendered lives**

Political movement must be informed by knowledge of lived lives. I understand research as a process of creating meaning and thereby helping to re-create the material world (Nina Lykke 2010: 155). The methodological implication of viewing research as constitutive and performative is then that I not do understand myself to be “uncovering” or reflecting a reality which already wholly exists, but rather that in researching I am also part of the process of creating this reality. Researchers always affect their own observations (the so-called “observer effect”). However, rather than see this as negative and “unscientific” as in positivist studies, I view (ethical) interaction and the co-creation of meaning with my participants as part of the goal of such a project (Davies 2008: 97-98). Feminist work must engage with a ‘politics of articulation’ in order to give shape the worlds we want to see (Haraway 1992: 311), and it is in this manner of thinking that I approached this work.

To produce empirical knowledge is not to say that it is impartial or universal. Knowledges are necessarily situated in experience, position, place and time (Haraway 1988, Rich 1986). For this reason, I chose to take work as a starting point of experience. It is also significant in terms of positioning that I am researching a community to which I belong. Meaning cannot be separated from its material circumstances, nor vice versa (Barad 2007), and it is important that my choice of methods supports this epistemological position (Ramazanoglu 2002: 149; Lykke 2011: 145). Oppression and inequality operate simultaneously on many interlinked
levels, e.g. structural, interpersonal, material, economic, representational (Yuval-Davis 2006: 198). While there is inevitably a certain amount of messiness that comes with tackling problems like work which are at once experiential and structural with interpersonal research methods such as ethnography, this study is open to the inclusion of knowledge gathered on these many levels.

**Queer methodology**

I found myself asking, what would a queer methodology be? If queer’s strengths are in fluidity and changeability, is it possible to find a methodology which reconciles these with the seemingly paradoxical task of researching and recording? It turns out that other more experienced queer researchers are asking the same question. In the edited volume *Queer Methods and Methodologies* (2010), I took insights from Mark Graham on queer ethnography and materiality, Yvette Taylor on class in queer research, Alison Rooke on the position and positioning of the ethnographer, and Stacy Holman Jones & Tony E. Adams on the queerness of autoethnography.

There is no such thing as an inherently queer method, but while all methods can be queer, not all can also adequately account for materiality (Graham 2010: 185). According to Yvette Taylor, class is side-lined in queer research (2010). Taylor describes how queer can fail at examining material conditions, amplifying the experience of the most privileged because they are the most (materially) able to (discursively) present themselves (ibid 69-70) and advocates a more material focus in queer studies. Feminist research theorist Caroline Ramazanoglu states that “the point of producing feminist knowledge is both to understand the realities of gendered lives, and to be able to transform them” (163, 2002) and I agree. This commitment to transformation begins with my tactical choice of anti-work as a theoretical departure, and continues in the use of queer and intersectional methodology and insights to help bolster the relevance and therefore the potential of an anti-work perspective.

**Change and futures**

For change to happen, people must be able to imagine it. Thus an important part of works such as this one is to enable others to imagine different futures. In other words, part of recreating the world via knowledge production is to re-frame problems in ways that disrupt people’s ideas of what is inevitable and what is possible (Srnicek & Williams 2015: 86; Weeks 2011 90, 96; Larner 2000: 21). Not only does my methodology aim to produce knowledge about attitudes towards work and non-work but it is also a sort of intervention, in encouraging both respondents and readers to conceptualise work differently and to imagine
its (partial) absence – something we are rarely invited to do. This also chimes with queer theorist Jack Halberstam’s concept of ‘unlearning’: using knowledge of everyday lives and looking to the future rather than the past to hold open space for change; that is, to remember “we are allowed to think of alternatives” (2012: 15). This imagination must however always be linked to material conditions and possibilities. Taylor contends, and I agree, that queer theories of change which rely exclusively on being “playful” and “fluid” are lacking because they ignore that not everybody is in the material position for such behaviour to open up possibilities (2010: 70).

Futures we can imagine are also shaped and limited by our current material conditions. This could pose a methodological problem when looking to the future. “The problem with work is not just that it monopolizes so much time and energy, but that it also dominates the social and political imaginaries.” (Weeks 2011: 36). For example, one question I ask the question of respondents is, “What would you do with a four-day weekend?” Rather than asking them to imagine a radically altered world, in which (queer, non-stable) subjects would presumably have radically different desires which are not yet knowable, this question instead seeks to draw a thread between the current material situation of people and an imagined future time. My research methods aim to examine how the discursive and material aspects of work in queer lives combine.

**Ethnography**

I chose to explore the themes of queer and work via ethnography due to its ability to combine the material and the discursive. Ethnography is a description of people or cultures and takes place in a particular setting. Ethnography has also undergone many changes since the times of European colonial anthropologists attempting to scientifically document and classify other cultures in “the field”. In order to unhinge the unequal relations of researcher/researched and lead to richer situated knowledges, researchers should come “home” from “the field” and study familiar settings (Visweswaran 1994: 102; Rooke 2010: 30). This is what I intend to do in researching queers in my own city.

The study of a community that the researcher belongs to can have positive and negative points. Researchers benefit from increased access to and understanding of their research context. Participants may talk more freely based on assumed commonality (Rooke 2010: 33). However, studying the familiar can also be difficult; we tend to ask more questions when we feel like we do not understand (Davies 2008: 97-98). Although it was evident that I shared
some kind of identity/community with participants, I also tried to not rely on assumed shared assumptions during interviews, and asked clarifying questions as much as possible.

I also tried to be aware of my position: how others place me and how I place myself.

“Significantly, the self-explanations offered to the ethnographer are offered on the basis of the informants’ understanding of the kind of person the ethnographer is.” (Rooke 2010: 33)

For example, as a member of the researched community, interviewees might be more willing to discuss negative sides of the community to me because of a level of trust. For example, when I informed Hannah of my study ethics, she responded to the effect that I was not a straight outsider studying queers out of curiosity so she trusted me to use my data well. Conversely interviewees might be more likely to respond in a way which preserves the assumed “shared ground” of queer belonging between us, avoiding potential conflicts.

A queer ethnography must furthermore account for a lack of stable subjects and identities. This brings both possibilities and problems. The rejection of stable identities can make political action difficult, in a history of organising around positive signification of markers such as ‘gay’ or ‘worker’ (Browne & Nash 2010: 6). However, as previously discussed, ‘worker’ as a stable political identity does not work due to a lack of identification with the category (M Fraser: 1999). Furthermore, any stable identity is ultimately fractured when taking into account intersectionality, fluidity and context. People are different in different settings and across time, but writing about them necessarily risks fixing them. “By considering autoethnography queer, we recognize that identities may not be singular, fixed or normal across all interactions” (Holman Jones & Adams 2010: 208-9). ‘Strategic essentialism’, in which identity categories are chosen for political action (Spivak 1987), or ‘queer identity-as-achievement’, which foregrounds the materiality of passing and context (Holman Jones & Adams 2010: 208), can be useful ways of recognising the realness of belonging to a group, but without fixing or re-essentialising it. It is from this view that my call-out for participants requested “queers”, while leaving the definition of this term to participants to avoid fixing meanings.

For Karen Barad, meaning and matter are only understood in moments of intra-action. In this process of “intra-action” (Barad 2007: 128) interviewees also changed me and the trajectory of this work. What we created together also impacted the theories used, how I interpreted them and the methodologies I was using – it was a two-way process. Not only this, it is also important to recognise in a larger sense, using the insights of ‘intra-action’, ‘performativity’
and ‘queer identity-as-achievement’, my interactions with interviewees also functioned to mutually construct each other as queer.

The experience of interviews can be rewarding for both parties. In my experience of having participated in an ethnographic study before, then in the position of researched queer activist and not the researcher (McMahon 2010), I know first-hand how the interactions that arise can provide a space for new connections and conversations. However, this reward is materially unequal: I will (hopefully) graduate with a Master’s degree, using their knowledge in part to do so. I also wanted to ensure that poorer queers could afford to participate, but I had no money to pay people. Thus I chose to exchange haircuts and English proofreading for respondents’ input. This also created a deeper material and emotional experience between us, especially in the case of haircutting, given the politicised aesthetics of queer haircuts, the close physical proximity required, the “hairdresser chat” which gave the chance for participants to ask me about myself and talk in a less formal setting.

Method and materials

For anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), ethnographic understanding centres around conversation and requires ‘thick description’ – an interpretation of what is happening and what it signifies. My questions reflected this by asking people what activity they did and what it meant to them. Interviews were semi-structured and I prepared a rough list of questions as a prompt, which I modified and added to throughout the interview. Some of these notes served as reminders during the interview, while some became permanent changes to future question sheets. My pilot interview with a queer friend made visible to me a few of my own research biases and assumptions, and showed that I needed to make these much clearer. For example, at the end of most interviews I asked interviewees what they had expected the study to be about; my pilot interviewee was surprised that I had not asked about careers, an omission which reflected my anti-work stance.

I made a blog post call-out for further participants in my study, to be shared online. This risked my only finding people who are somehow connected to me socially, but in such a community this is also hard to completely avoid. I tried to account for this somewhat by using Twitter and Facebook groups to publicise the study, asking people who I knew not to apply, and asking people to share the blog post further in their networks. At the beginning of each interview I also attempted to trace the chain of how the participant heard about the study in order to gauge how socially far removed they were from me. This ranged from one person who is a close friend of a person I live with, to acquaintances of friends, to one person who
saw the post via a tweet originating in Austria. I also wanted to avoid finding only people who already had politicised ideas about work and wanted to talk about them, so I avoided the word ‘work’ in my initial call-out.

I received 27 responses to my call-out, and used a chart to select the lowest number of respondents which would allow me to interview at least one person from each of the following groups: people who were disabled, people of colour, older, younger, of migration backgrounds outside of Western Europe, from a working-class background, or who were trans, non-binary, bisexual, parents, and women. This was eight people in total. However, it is important to state that I do not believe that members of certain social groups can or should be treated as “representatives” — I rather used this method to try and assure a certain level of variety of positions in my respondents while knowing nothing more about them. I had also written in my call-out that I encouraged applications from these underrepresented groups. This seemed to pay off:

One of the reasons I wanted to take part was because you mentioned bisexuality explicitly. And I thought that’s so nice. Because somehow it’s sad that we are also one of the biggest groups within the LGBTIAQ family but we’re so invisible. (So-Rim)

In your list of people particularly welcome [to apply,] I could see […] working class background. (Seth, initial email)

I carried out and recorded semi-structured individual interviews over a period of two weeks at locations of my interviewees’ choice. I made field notes about the encounters noting anything that seemed relevant to me at the time, as a way of capturing the wider materiality of the moment that would be lost to the audio recording. At the beginning of each interview I introduced myself and the study, told them what would happen with their quotes and my finished thesis, asked how they wanted to be anonymised (although after my interview with Tomka where he talked about the importance being able to own his own voice, I also decided to allow interviewees to use their real names if wanted), asked their pronouns (e.g. he, she or they9), and made sure they were aware that they did not have to answer all my questions, they could withdraw from the study at any time, and they could ask for all or part of what they said not to be used. Interviews ranged in length between 45 and 94 minutes, depending on the flow of the conversation, time constraints and how much the interviewees had to say. I recorded the interviews in high quality audio using a smartphone app.

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9 “They” is here a singular, gender-neutral pronoun replacing “he” or “she”. It is the pronoun used by Alex, Marlene and myself.
I used thematic analysis to look for patterns, meanings and conflicts in the interview material (Braun & Clarke 2006). After completing all the interviews, I transcribed the first three in full, and read them carefully to select topics that seemed important to both my research questions and to the interviewees’ descriptions of their worlds. I selectively transcribed the remaining interviews according to these topics, and adding more topics where necessary. I then removed certain data as required to protect anonymity.

Though thematic analysis is flexible, it important to be clear on what makes a topic “key” (Braun & Clarke 2006: 10). My decisions on what was relevant were based three main things: similarities in expression between interviewees, frequency of the topic being mentioned, or topics that represented a marginal view. I had already started to identify themes long before this stage, and this had partly influenced the development of my research questions which shifted as I wanted to gain the perspective of subsequent interviewees on topics raised by the previous. For example, I added explicit questions about the work ethic, the pressure to be productive and how much people felt defined by their work, after these were raised in interviews. I also dropped some themes early on which did not seem important to interviewees (e.g. time and the gendered/gendering effects of work), and added focus and did new analysis on some others that took up a bigger role in interviewees’ conceptions than I had imagined (especially the themes of the AIDS crisis, chosen family, and creative work). I then grouped the sub-themes into four main themes. This was done for the sake of clarity, though in practice it was a very long process subject to many changes as all sub-themes are intertwined. For example, discussions which one might normatively label “family” were in the end spread across the sub-themes of gender and relationships, homonormativity, housework, biological reproduction, care work, and chosen family and community. Thus, while I felt it important to include topics did not initially seem as relevant to me (Braun & Clarke 2006: 12), I also worked to categorise these topics in ways which complemented the theoretical basis of my research as this theory was selected purposely with an intention to challenge normative interpretations. Each theme was then discussed with reference to theory, but it also had an effect on other new types of theory I sought out, resulting a combination of what Braun & Clarke call “bottom up” and “top down” approaches (2006: 12).

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations already permeate the preceding methodological explanation, beginning with an initial commitment to produce work that makes change. However, I wish to bring together these and more ethical considerations here. I take my framework for this from
Holman Jones & Adams (2010: 213) and Judith Butler (2001). According to Holman Jones & Adams, the following could summarise an ethics of queer ethnography:

Making work that advocates for trouble, that takes a stand in and on the otherwise. Such work disrupts taken-for-granted, normalizing stories and posits more open, more free and more just ways of being in the world. (Holman Jones & Adams 2010: 213)

In making work that troubles, I include the unorthodox combination of perspectives, the rejection of pre-defined categories (e.g. of work and of queer), taking a departure point in lived experiences rather than theory, and a commitment to opening up a space for a future freed from the constraints of work under capitalism.

Making work that becomes, like a perpetual horizon, rather than an artifact of experience; making work that acts as if rather than says it is. Such work understands and emphasizes, the importance of being tentative, playful, and incomplete in equal measure with radical historicization, persistent questioning, and perpetual revision. (Holman Jones & Adams 2010: 213)

In making work that becomes, I include avoiding final answers and universal truth claims, as well as univocal utopian visions which claim to know the best direction of change for all, rejecting calls for unity and embracing plurality and opening up space for the unknown.

Making work that simultaneously imagines fluid, temporary, and radically connected identities and that creates and occupies recognizable identities. Such work views identities as relational achievements: manifestations of selves that shift and change, that must be negotiated and cared for and for which we are held personally, institutionally and ethically responsible. (Holman Jones & Adams 2010: 213)

In making work that conceives of identities as fluid but also really existing, I consider what it might mean to be queer and also strive to find intersectional views despite the problems of defining identities.

To this last point I add an adoption of Butler’s concept of “doing justice to someone”. She writes that “justice not only or exclusively is a matter of how persons are treated, how societies are constituted, but also emerges in quite consequential decisions about what a person is” (2001: 622). Despite the fluidity of queerness, I have been entrusted with the task of setting out in text who people are, and the way I do it is important. In making work that does justice to people, I include being aware of power dynamics between myself and interviewees (e.g. social and educational position, language), making a space for competing views, and making a commitment to represent participants fairly and give them control over their own representation (interviewees have viewed their transcripts and this text where requested, and corrections were made to transcripts and changes to my comments), but also to use my position and educational privilege to construct something worthwhile, understandable and academically sound from their inputs.
I would like to delve into an example of doing justice to people, in which my focus perhaps stems from my own work background in transcription, notetaking and proofreading. I was already aware that decisions about how to transcribe and the presentation of quotes are methodological as well as ethical issues (Davies 2008: 114). At one interview, the person asked me if they would be allowed to edit their contributions so that the ums and ahhs were taken out. They had read their own words in studies before and found that the inclusion of such speech particles made their ideas sound less coherent. The more I thought about their request the more it made sense, and I have respected it here. After all, the words of theorists are many-times refined, proof-read and edited before they are judged by an external audience. Although many ethnographers favour leaving in such particles to give a richer text which may convey more than just the meaning of the words themselves, I made the decision to in some cases remove them when it helps the ideas to be more easily understood. For me, not to do so would be to treat respondents as some sort of pure resource that can only be studied if faithfully recorded, which goes against feminist ethnographic principles of collaborative meaning making. Instead, I find it more ethical to use my position as researcher to present speakers’ words in the final text in way which conveys their intended meaning to the reader in the best possible way. This is also done to bring my interviewees’ ideas onto more of a par in the written medium with the texts alongside which I present them, given that texts do not suffer the fluency and structure problems associated with spontaneous answers given in natural speech, overwhelmingly in a non-native language. However, I attempt to avoid sanitising the transcripts too much by including evidence of emotion and tone by using markers like [laughs], hesitation by using ellipsis (…), and leaving words originally given in German intact (with translation).

Analytical themes
The following thematic analysis is arranged around topics that I assembled from my interviews. As mentioned above, I grouped these into five main themes: queer, paid work, social reproduction, subjectivity and self-worth, and finally, change and futures. These themes should not be understood as discrete or binding (for example I do not wish to unnecessarily reinforce the division between paid and unpaid work) but are simply constructed for the sake of a logical order that must exist in written text.

1. Queer
As discussed, I decided to leave the definition of queer to my interviewees. After all, there are many different definitions, not all of which might be relevant to the lives of my
interviewees. Therefore, I wanted know what queer might refer to in the context of these interviews, rather than trying to fix one meaning.

**Gender and relationships**

When I asked what queer meant to interviewees, their answers differed. Some focused on gender and sexuality:

- I guess what it means to me is I’m not cis and I’m not hetero. (Alex)
- It’s not fitting into that binary grid of gender. On one side the sexual orientation and on the other the self or how you see yourself. (Robin)
- I like the idea of having a term that describes the thing other than hetero-normal! (So-Rim)

For others, though queer did pertain to gendered identity and sexual attraction, it was also about something more in terms of behaviour and lifestyle choices:

- I’m both genderqueer and queer. For me in gender it’s not adhering to the, let’s say, what society expects of you in personal matters, so gender, sexuality, but also lifestyle, style in general maybe. [...] I’m sex-positive so I’m basically like, a proud slut. I’m pansexual as well so I like people of all genders. And I’m actually even more attracted to people whose gender identity is not binary, so, anything in the middle. (Mitzi)
- Queer... that's a broad topic. Well, it means to me that I don't identify 100% as a cis woman, so that already makes me queer, I guess, because my desire can't be put into a certain category: gay, lesbian, or whatever, or bisexual. And it also means to me that I don't believe that my desire and my sexuality can be put into certain boxes. And it also means that I, um, oppose certain concepts of this idea of monogamy, family, a certain kind of lifestyle where you end up living as a couple. (Marlene)

Being queer, then, meant to be critical of socially accepted views of interpersonal relationships. This had visible effects on how interviewees chose to live, the connections they chose to make, and the meanings they gave to those connections. However, as we see below, these connections and meanings were always in flux, and combined with other meanings and practices of queerness, as well with as other intersectional identities.

**Fluidity and change**

Queerness was not static. When speaking about the gender and sexuality aspects of queerness (and in the more radical-political-activist definitions of queer which will follow), change was already inherent in most interviewees’ definitions:

- The time I feel most comfortable with men, cis men, is when it’s a queer male-bodied person and we’re doing kind of like gay stuff, but not woman gay stuff, but like man gay stuff. So I discovered that there are some people who call themselves girlfaggots, and this sort of describes me a bit, but like I wouldn’t say that’s all… it changes, you know? (Hannah)

Most interviewees experienced queerness as fluidity and as practice rather than as fixed and as identity. When change is inherent in subjects’ understandings, it makes queerness an interesting category when looking at social change more broadly. In the words of Marlene:
I would say generally [queering is] a practice for me to question certain norms of behaviour, lifestyles, certain kinds of involvements in society and politics. (Marlene)

I think it’s helpful to draw attention to oppression. […] It challenges fixed categories, for me, without necessarily saying like, okay, we can achieve a world without any categories, because I don’t really think that’s possible. […] And even though there might still be always categories, it’s good to reflect that they are like not fixed, and I think queer can help in that by providing a kind of deconstructive perspective which is also juxtaposed against, you know, very fixed notions which are inherent in a heteronormative conceptualisation of the world. (Seth)

On an interpersonal level, change is something interviewees experience as residing in the fibre of queerness. As we will see below, this seems to translate into the political level, framing the work that people do. The next section broadens the scope of enquiry from queerness into other intersectional locations. These are not only fluid, but also operate differently in different contexts.

**Intersectional locations, identity and context**

Interviewees were not only queer but had other identities, backgrounds, roles and positions. These categories could not easily be separated from each other, especially by Hannah:

> I have some invisible disabilities […] and I also have scars on my face. […] I felt for a long time that I wasn’t really allowed to be a female. And I didn’t really know what I was because I didn’t feel like a girl or a woman and I felt much more comfortable in a male role and […] not dealing with feminine things like wearing a dress or wearing makeup or whatever. These days I’m a big femme. Sometimes. So I feel like really I don’t know if I would be queer if I didn’t have this background of disability. (Hannah)

Disability, then was even perhaps a contributing factor to Hannah becoming queer. This points to a constructionist rather than essentialist view of queerness, and also highlights the differences among queer experiences. When discussing these internal differences under the queer umbrella, Hannah also points to examples of how experiences of queers vary according to gender and wealth:

> Homophobia’s a very real thing but [if] you buy all your clothes at Diesel and you live in The Castro which is the very gay district in San Francisco […] you don’t really get to be this big oppressed homosexual when meanwhile there’s a lesbian family living in the mission that has to listen to gunshots every night. Because both of them have to listen to misogyny and street harassment every fucking day. (Hannah)

These differences within queer are important if we are to attend to the detail of everyday lives and improve them. Not all queers have the same problems.

Context is also important, and different aspects of ourselves are foregrounded in different situations. Aspects of people’s identity and identification changed based on context. For example, Alex’s Polishness was only salient in certain contexts. Descriptive words are also contextual: Seth and So-Rim mentioned how they would not describe themselves as “queer”
in certain contexts but would instead choose “gay” or “bisexual” to be better understood. The context of the interview situation itself is also something to consider in terms of the meanings and identities foregrounded. The interview contexts were by no means neutral in terms of physical and social locations. For example, talking variously in interviewees’ homes or paid workplaces might have foregrounded certain types for work for them. And despite my methodological approach of co-creating meaning I was nonetheless aware that my presence as someone perceived to be a) a gender researcher and b) part of a shared queer community would also mean certain things were foregrounded, which could lead me to miss important cues about people’s everyday lives and desires that did not seem relevant to the situation.

I particularly wanted to move away from self-description only in terms listing intersectional categories. This seems to me to be common in political and social scientific scenes, and for good reason, as people try to be aware of their social positioning when speaking. However, description by categories risks glossing over the actual and varied experiences that this research hopes to find out about. I therefore asked people to describe themselves more fully, using any terms they wanted. People reported a range of interesting self-descriptions, some related to intersectional positions and others not (and of course interviews subsequently went deeper into interviewees’ lives). I leave them here as a sort of self-introduction to my nine interviewees:

I’d position myself as an intellectual, as a musician, as a creative, as a femme. (Marlene)

[I’m] a white, cisgendered male, or male-identified person, […] I’m so German it’s disgusting. I come from a working-class background[…]. I would describe myself as a caretaker[…]. (Seth)

I’d describe myself as pansexual too. […] I’m, um, cis, male, white, um, yeah, and queer. (Robin)

[I would describe myself as] a father, as someone who’s a bit neurotic, as an academic, as someone who’s very politically active, as someone who’s, you know, I think very ethical. Open-minded, people often say about me. (Glen)

I use a lot of labels I guess, mostly because it’s really convenient when you want to connect with other people. And I would say I’m non-binary. And also I’m demisexual, so I don’t always feel attracted to people, or very rarely. […] I’d also say I have white privilege, it’s important for me to be aware of […] your privileges. […] I also would say that I’m weird [laughs]. It’s like a term, some people use different terms, but I have also mental health problems and I think it’s nothing I should be ashamed of saying. (Alex)
I try to be honest, I like to think that I am. I’m starting on a really abstract level, okay? I’m really interested in pattern. I think it’s a good source of entertainment and of understanding of the world, at the same time, to see patterns and make sense of the world that way. […] I like to think that I’m intelligent. [laughs] I was brought up thinking that I was intelligent but I think I started to grow out of it. (So-Rim)

I am a woman. I am a performer. I am a drag king. I am a clown. Um. I am a dramaturg. An artist. Armchair biologist. Someone who likes knowledge and learning. I am curious. I am a BDSM person. I am a sex educator. I am a person who knows how to teach consent. And I am a writer. And a wannabe scholar. That’s a lot of stuff.” (Hannah)

I’m bisexual but I’m also a girlfag. And I’m non-binary. Then I would say that I’m a thinker. I’m an intellectual. I think a lot about lot of things. I like understanding how things work. I’m slightly autistic but I’m also very social. […] I’m a scientist.” (Mitzi)

I’m a trans activist and artist. I’m white, German, 38 years old. … I’m really doing a lot of artwork and I’m aiming to cooperate with lots of people, and it’s working out well… and what else to describe? I have a small kid. And… I find for me it’s really important to have people I feel close to. (Tomka)

The different identities and contexts can give rise to not just possibilities but also some confusion around what it means to be queer, and who is queer for the purposes of any given discussion. The following section discusses in more depth my interviewees’ experience of some such disagreements over the meaning of queer.

Contestation

Although all my interviewees had a somewhat politicised view of what queer means (see in more detail below), they were aware that their political definition of queer was not always shared in more mainstream LGBT circles:

I like being able to talk about queerness but it makes it necessary to define that word every time, because everybody thinks it’s something different. I was socialised in a context where queer had this radical connotation. In my biography it was always connected to feminism and radical leftism. And that was something I liked about it. But as soon as I moved out of this context it didn’t make sense any more.” (So-Rim)

Both Marlene and Seth gave the example of Berlin’s free LGBT magazine Siegessäule as something which called itself queer and was very visible, but did not match their favoured descriptions. For them queer here was commercialised, depoliticised, and despite the inclusive mantra “We are queer Berlin”, mainly served to represent gay men.

Others also noted that queer was often used just to describe gay men, or gay men and lesbians, to the exclusion of others including bisexual people:

Everybody says that it’s an umbrella term for everything that does not fit the heteronormative box. But in everyday life, queer means gay and lesbian, I’d say. So yeah, it is supposed to mean more, but I think it’s used in a much narrower sense. (So-Rim)
In San Francisco, where I lived before here, queer basically meant gay. And I would say I was queer and I would get very challenged. (Hannah)

So-Rim experienced rejection of the word queer by people who might be otherwise be considered as part of – even founding members of – the “queer community”.¹⁰

I entered the space of people who have been fighting for gay civil rights for decades, they started at point zero. For them it was like, “[Queer] is a new trend, and we are not sure if it will help us or if it will harm, so we are not so quick in accepting it”. I couldn’t take it for granted any more that it is a good term that everyone wants to use. (So-Rim)

Queer is then not always fluid, radical, or perhaps even welcome. In the next section interviewees discuss further how queer is mobilised in less radical, more normative ways, and how they position themselves within and negotiate these multiple meanings.

**Homonormativity**

For many, queer is contrasted to a more mainstream way of being LGBT which mimics mainstream heterosexual desires and behaviours. Here, Seth refers directly to this normative mainstream homosexuality as “homonormativity”:

Gay to me is a very static thing. So in itself… um, it often implies a gender dichotomy, which I would like to deconstruct. It’s also very fixed and doesn’t really fulfil the openness of sexuality. And so I would usually refuse it as an identity. Even though it’s helpful quite often. […] One could argue nowadays [about whether] gay is really queer anymore because, at least in certain circles, it’s so integrated and partially became so… homonormative, heteronormative. (Seth)

The term homonormativity was coined by Lisa Duggan (2003) and describes how (some, often privileged) LGBT people can be assimilated into mainstream society on the basis of their normativity, of being “just like you”, where “you” is familial, productive, natal, law-abiding people, who now need no longer be only heterosexuals. Anti-assimilationism generally has been a guiding principle of many queer political groups in Europe and North America, including Queer Nation, the Gay Liberation Front, and the Lesbian Avengers, and my own former queer organising group in Manchester, Reclaim the Scene. In the words of former group member Alan, “What matters really is that we do not conform to heterosexist society and heterosexist ideals, assumptions about sexuality and gender, and that is the common link, and that is the source of our oppression, and do we need to be more detailed than that?” (McMachon 2010).

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¹⁰ I have had a similar experiences in the past when organising with older gay men in the UK. They had a strong disidentification with the word “queer” due to their experiences of it as a homophobic insult, despite resignification by younger generations. The same might not be true for German speakers, where “queer” is a newer import. I also received a comment on my blog call-out to similar effect: “Sorry, I don’t respond to that name, and it makes me FUCKING ANGRY after fighting for more than 30 years for respect in the workplace and society in general.” (Anonymous comment, 19th February 2016)
One “queer” political struggle often deemed homonormative or assimilative is the one for same-sex marriage. While he does not reject same-sex marriage campaigning, Tomka here talks about how this does not meet the criteria for more radical queer political demands because it does not seek to change the system, rather (for some) to participate in it:

You mentioned gay marriage as being insufficient, not very political. Can you say more about that?

No I mean it’s obviously very political. But it’s really not changing the world in the way that it’s discussed and how it’s aiming to bring a certain group of people to get their privileges. If that’s the aim – not social justice, but simply to have a certain group of people to achieve certain privileges – then it’s not what I would call revolutionary. But it’s nothing against it. It’s fine. It’s important. (Tomka)

In terms of work this is relevant because family structures are the site of much reproduction work. To be queer would be to overturn the system for the benefit of all, rather than to ask for equal access to it for a few. Tomka continues, however, referencing the relatively common practice among those on the radical left in Berlin (not only but often queers, and including people interviewed) of participating in “visa marriages” to allow residency rights to both partners and non-partners from outside the EU:

And it’s especially important regarding transnational marriages. I mean marriage gets so much more important if that’s an opportunity go get a different passport or to choose where you want to travel or choose where you want to live. (Tomka)

Marriage is then also a pragmatic tool used by queers in Berlin to circumvent some power structures. Some queers may also be better placed to marry non-partners if their rejection of traditional relationship roles means that they do not desire “real” marriages. This highlights the importance of an intersectional approach to queer topics, as well as an attention to actually existing power structures and how people may repurpose “normative” tools to resist them. The next section deals more with queer resistance to power structures, and what interviewees saw as the link between political awareness and queerness.

**Political awareness**

Interviewees seemed indeed to pursue change, and in a broader sense than just to their own or collective expressions of gender and sexuality. In fact, many of the people I spoke to understood queer as a political outlook more than only, or sometimes *rather* than, a gendered or sexual identity:

I would not use queer as a definition or as an identity, because […] queer, in my understanding, is not an identity but more a kind of, political perspective. (Seth)

I consider it as being leftish politically and activist, and I define the term for myself like this. So being queer for me means having a certain politics but it also means having a certain history in my life. (Tomka)
All of my respondents had carried out some form of political work. For many, queer politics also extended outside of just the queer community. Not only did people hold multifaceted intersectional positions, but the experience of being an outsider, for some, led to heightened awareness of other power differentials:

I do think that… having had the experience of not fulfilling certain standards of society, sensitises you hopefully for other standards, and how pressure is applied onto you to fulfil certain norms. Having the experience of not fitting into a heteronormative pattern, I had to cross certain boundaries and had to reflect on myself more than like, my straight, white, male, middle class buddy who never had to think about himself and his position in the world, and the position of other people in the world. And so I do think it’s a thing that kind of helps me to empathise with other people. (Seth)

I think once people start questioning things politically, they realise that it’s not just limited to their little bubble. I mean, a lot of people do just limit their lives to their own interest group. […] I think, because of the way that they live outside of the norm, a lot of queers become “politically activated”, as it were, and they see that the problems are way beyond just their bubble. So they often get involved with other things as well. (Glen)

Others cited other social locations they occupied as their root for political awareness, even of their queerness. As mentioned above, Hannah believed her queerness may be rooted in her disability. For Robin, my youngest interviewee, who did both paid and unpaid political work, his class background was a defining factor in both his being queer and doing political work. He describes how his anger at growing up poorer led him to see how “the personal is political”:

*Can you tell me why you decided to get involved in political work?*

That’s a good question… My mum had to raise me alone. And she was working in a kindergarten, and she was very very often busy and stressed. One day I just got angry because she was doing so much and we had so little money, and it didn’t seem fair to me. I always read the newspapers at my grandparents’ home, and one day I decided to visit a leftist party in Germany and see what they are doing. And I’m now a member of that party since three years, and I started working with them with their youth organisation, […] I could not see private things as non-political from then. And I saw that everything I’m doing is somehow a political statement, it’s politics. And then I thought, if everything I do is political, somehow, I should do the right thing […]. You start questioning society and you start questioning yourself too. I questioned my sexuality, like I questioned my background and family and how privileged I was as white, and how privileged others might be. And I think at some time I started questioning everything and that included my gender and sexuality. (Robin)

For Mitzi, queerness was not only linked to becoming political but also described an approach to being political, which for her meant a way of mixing certain politics in ways that did not follow dogmatic lines:

I used to be really politically active […] and this probably has something to do with being queer. […] Being a free thinker means that you see the way certain things work without prejudice and then you feel the need to change them or to protest them. So this was all these kind of classic things that people don’t think belong together. They could never grasp that
[my political group was made up of] Iranians and Israelis against both Iran and Israel. It just kind of really messed people up. So this was kind of a queer thing.

*In what way was it a queer thing? Can you say more about that?*

Erm, things that people don’t expect to find together in the same place. First of all people think that if you’re a Jew you have to be pro-Israeli. People think that if you are anti-Israeli that you’re for example – I mean we’re talking about Iran and Israel – that you’re pro-Iranian. [...] I think it’s just the essence of queerdom; doing what’s right regardless of whether it fits into a scheme, and accepting all sorts of possibilities. (Mitzi)

Mitzi’s idea of combining unusual things in order to “do what’s right” struck a chord with me, as I attempt unorthodox combinations of politics and theory in this thesis (see more above in the section Queer Methodology). This perhaps points to one way in which a queer approach has the potential to challenge the status quo. However, many interviewees did not believe being queer *necessarily* led to subversive understandings of other power structures:

> Oppressed people tend to want to be active for other oppressed people because you understand what they’re going through. So obviously, what always shocks me is right wing queer people or, you know, in Israel there’s this right wing gay guy in the parliament. [...] It’s like, how can you want to oppress other people when you know what oppression is? But I think he doesn’t actually know what oppression is. (Mitzi)

> Just because you are queer doesn’t mean you are not racist or sexist, or in some way homophobic. It doesn’t mean in any way that you really have any sort of regard for anyone but yourself. As I said before, the disabled are always the first to get thrown under the bus. (Hannah)

Many interviewees similarly complained about lack of political or intersectional awareness in their extended queer left-wing political communities. At least some of these problems and confusions seemed to be caused by the aforementioned different definitions of queer, especially as the term is increasingly used as a depoliticised umbrella term for LGBTI people:

> But some people who call themselves queer are really racist. And also now as the media gets very… as all the refugee topics are in the media, they are simply very mainstream, some people I assume would call themselves queer have very mainstream opinions. It turns out they are not leftish political people. (Tomka)

To negotiate and define their position in this contested space, Marlene qualified a more aware and active queer as “radical queer”:

> I think this is a common problem at the moment, so it's a kind of washed-out term. Or it becomes more and more a washed-out term. Which is why I like to use “radical queer”. [laughs] Yeah. (Marlene)

Queer, then, is undoubtedly a contested topic. However, at least one definition of queer, and one embraced by my respondents, was one of non-normative gender and sexuality, a way of thinking and acting that aims to embrace fluidity rather than fixed categories and to link to wider political change, but with varying degrees of practical success. Having examined the
contested status of queer as political and the competing drive for normativity, it is important
to recognise that on the one hand shared experience of oppression can lead to empathy and
solidarity, but on the other, I cannot make the assumption queers will necessarily be invested
in relieving the oppression of those in different intersectional positions, whether that be
outside of or within the “queer” category. The following themes of jobs and social
reproduction examine how these complex understandings of queerness and change interact
with interviewees’ own experiences of various kinds of work, including what this work
enables and limits in queer lives.

2. Jobs

Queer in the workplace and queer careers
Work and gender are entwined both by the way work is shared between people according to
gender, and by expectations of particular (gendered) performances in certain work roles,
whether paid or unpaid (Weeks 2011: 9). Though the link between certain jobs and genders is
arbitrary, it comes to appear as a natural facet of both work and gender (Weeks 2011: 10).
Weeks writes that work roles can help subjects fulfil their gendered identities (ibid) but does
not mention how this functions outside of a heteronormative gender model. Glen talked about
his and his partner’s queer challenge to the binary gendering of work, and how it was
important to pass this idea onto their young child:

[My kid’s mum is] not very typically feminine either, […] she does a very physical job. She’s
a diver, a commercial diver, works at universities as a scientific diver, used to work on oil rigs
and things, and doing underwater constructions. So she does really hardcore stuff. I do all the
bookish stuff, the cooking, the faggy kind of stuff… [laughs] So we’re trying to show this kid,
and will continue to do this as she grows, that there are alternatives which are just as good as
the ones which are usually pushed down your throat in Disney form, or whatever. So that’s
why I think it’s so important, to give her a sense of, how she can be in the world is really up
to her. (Glen)

Following Glen’s line of reasoning, chosen work roles may also serve to confirm queer
subjects’ gendered identities, and this may be done more or less consciously in order to
disrupt heteronormative scripts.

Many of the people I interviewed also did social or community jobs, where my definition of
jobs includes paid work, and unpaid work in a workplace. In other words, they sought change
through working in traditional structures. Many people, like Robin above, combined both
paid and unpaid jobs, and/or saw paid work as a way to fund political work. In many ways,
work was bound up with change for my interviewees. People also tended not to have a
traditional work schedule, and did not like regular schedules. To some extent this could be
seen as a rejection of productivist ideals (I discuss the themes of productivism and the work ethic in more detail below):

I really like being able to just sleep as much as I want to. I know when I was going to school that wasn’t possible. And I was really struggling to be in a good mood. (Alex)

As discussed, work has many other roles than just the work outcomes itself or the pay taken home. For example, it also fulfills a social role in people’s lives (Weeks 2011: 38). However, my interviewees often reported finding themselves isolated. Marlene and Glen had similar experiences of heteronormativity in academia:

Dealing with straight colleagues all day made me feel very isolated sometimes. And I felt like a lot of the discourses that I would like to talk about or that are important for me in my life were not mirrored in my working place. So it was extremely important to, you know, have other spaces to go to and to have other people to be connected with. (Marlene)

I don’t have any personal connection with [my colleagues]. I don’t really talk about my lifestyle at all with them. […] Do they talk about their lifestyle with you?

Oh! You can’t go to an academic dinner party without hearing about where people are going to send their kids to school, what they paid for their house […] So yeah. It’s very hetero. […] I know that they’re married, I know that they’ve got kids, you know, all those things they probably don’t think of as them telling me about their lifestyle. (Glen)

Both felt marginalised at work due to their queerness, which diminished the social role of jobs in their lives, and increased their drive to seek out other connections. So-Rim felt out of place even when working at an LGBT organisation because of homonormativity:

It’s also a context that I’m not too comfortable in, because it’s, I would say, homonormative, in a way. Because it’s – I find it hard to describe – it’s just very normal people! [laughs] Except for that they’re gay. They’re usually just a little conservative, a little mainstream-y. (So-Rim)

Mitzi was unsure of the reason for her isolation at one of her workplaces, despite her attempts to fit in, but guessed that it could be related to her gender performance, being Jewish, being a migrant, her politics, and/or not wearing the right clothes:

It’s horrendous. Very closed-minded people. They look at me like I’m an alien. […] I did something I never did before, well, practically never – I went into Esprit and bought all sorts of fancy clothes. […] I just thought maybe it would help. […] I don’t know even why. I don’t know if it’s because I’m queer or a foreigner or because I’m kind of a gender non-conforming woman, so I’m big and I’m loud and I’m, you know, I can be really feminine or I can be really not feminine. So maybe it really confuses them. Maybe it’s just because I’m a foreigner or a Jew or… you know, go figure! (Mitzi)

For Mitzi, her multiple identities complicated life at work, and queerness could, again, not be separated out from other traits, this time because it was unclear in this context which were having the effects she felt. For Alex, by comparison, being trans was the most salient identity
for them at work. As a trans person, the risks of not fitting in are severe; they reported fear, intrusive behaviour, and sexual harassment at work:

I totally don’t feel comfortable there, because there’s only one changing room and right now everyone thinks I’m a guy, and I don’t really plan on changing that because it would lead to really awkward things, but it also makes me feel so uncomfortable when I have to hide and turn away when I change my clothes, because it would not end well for me, I think. I can’t be open about how I am, and that does not make me feel super good. And when I look at how the other guys treat each other, I just hope they are not going to try and do it to me! Like this one guy who went up to the other one and grabbed his nipples for fun! I think the place where I work, it’s not a safe space, […] I got harassed also, sexually, I think, because it’s not normal for me that people touch my butt when they pass by. […] I got asked multiple times about my gender identity and my genitals there, and this is really weird and I don’t like that. (Alex)

While cisgender LGB people can suffer erasure from being unintentionally read as heterosexual, people who are visibly trans face different issues. Trans people in particular may find it difficult to get jobs in the first place, as Marlene explains:

[A] lot of trans people have trouble finding secure jobs and have all kinds of problems actually surrounding that. My girlfriend is a trans woman, and she’s currently looking for a job, but she does not have the possibility to change her legal name […] so that when she potentially gets invited to an interview that already might be a problem, that people don’t get that she’s trans. (Marlene)

This again highlights the importance of looking at difference within “queer”. In summary, despite my observation that many people seek to effect change through or at work, it is also clear that the workplace is also often an environment that limits the free expression of queerness, sometimes violently, and can even be closed off to some people. In answer to my research question of what effect queerness has on people’s lives, it is clear that queerness often frames my interviewees’ choice of jobs and experiences in the workplace. For example, while queers can use job roles as a way of confirming gendered and political identities, the social role function of work may not be as accessible to queers, which may be a contributing factor to them seeking out other structures (as discussed below in the section on queer communities). But different jobs are qualitatively different, which creates problems for talking about “jobs” generally. I explore these differences in the next section.

“Good jobs” and “bad jobs”

Whether they complained about work or talked about its good sides, most people I interviewed had middle-class jobs and were keen to point out that their experience of working would be very different from people who did not. So-Rim, for example, qualifies her complaints with a recognition of her relative good fortune:

I don’t like the fact that I have two jobs because it makes things very complicated. Every job comes with an amount of organising and for me it’s pretty hard to do that. I’m happy that I
have a smartphone because it helps me a lot. … Compared to other people that I know, it’s not something to complain about, the downsides to my job. (So-Rim)

It is important to attend to the classed differences in jobs. However, it is notable here that, like many other interviewees, despite having a “good job” that she both enjoyed and valued, So-Rim found work disagreeable. This implies a general problem with work, rather than with a particular kind of “bad” employment. Though critical of work in general, Glen and Seth also qualified criticism of their current employment situations with comparisons to their previous jobs in factories. This was interesting in terms of their class background and mobility, and a reminder of how social status and identities change over time. Seth never expected to do a PhD because of his background:

It was never really something imaginable for me. Because already studying was quite a big deal. […] People doing their doctorates, for a really long time to me it was like, well, these must be the top-notch, extremely smart people. And I did not really see myself as being capable enough of doing that.

And I mean it’s also a question of how to fund that. Because I don’t come from a rich family, you know. Some people I know get their doctorates, you know, they get funded for years, all of their research, from family wealth. But I have to scrape money together to make a living.

So… yeah, so it was, for a long time it was not really… something I could imagine myself doing, but […] I had feedback from my professors who were like, “You know, you’re kinda smart and we would really like you to get a PhD, and we think you would really be good at that.” (Seth)

Alex, meanwhile, hoped to study and was trying to save the money but still worked in a catering job with poor and stressful conditions:

They don’t pay well, and the working hours are kind of long. And I feel also not so good after I work there because I have to stand a lot and I’m only allowed to sit for 30 minutes, that’s my break, and besides of that I have to stand for the rest of the eight hours. […] And I don’t like that the person who is responsible for supervision the shift, he’s so aggressive. And he was screaming at me when I was eating a bread outside of my break time.” (Alex)

Queers are not only victims of poorly paid jobs but according to Marlene may also choose them in order to pursue political change, or to avoid certain work structures:

A lot of queer people seem to do more precarious work. And I think that is also connected to being politically active, but also to not being interested in more traditional lifestyles. Because if you don’t want to, you know, get married at a certain point, own an apartment or a house, and have a child, you also don’t have to submit to a 40-hour working week[…] But also what I’m also asking myself is, how will that play out in twenty or thirty years, when people are older and they might not be able to live in- and just do part-time work, freelancing, or stuff like that? (Marlene)

Hannah’s experience and choices echo this:

I’m constantly wondering, should I get a job-job, or not? I’ve had many, many years of what I call “jobbing” and it is no longer an option for me. It feels incredibly degrading to me to think about getting a job in café or a bar or like to be an employee with a boss. It’s not that way for
everyone. Some people would be like, “Sex work, oh my god, I would feel so degraded.” Actually I love it, it’s great. I’m my own boss, I make my own rules, nobody can tell me I’m doing my job wrong. (Hannah)

However, as Glen explains, people’s practical ability to choose their work depends very much on their social location:

Because of course it’s not just up to people’s volition, saying, go and get the job you want. Obviously there’s a huge amount of privilege involved in getting particular jobs” (Glen)

Money was an important factor in why people worked, but the importance placed on it seemed to vary according to interviewees’ status. Though many interviewees did unpaid work outside the home by choice, for Alex, state money was the driving factor behind them beginning their unpaid social internship:

I originally did this internship because I kind of had to, to keep getting money from the government. (Alex)

Those from poorer backgrounds or who do not have a good relationship with parents who might otherwise provide a financial safety net have a greater need for paid work in whatever form. Unlike his richer friends mentioned above, Seth also needed to work illegally to fund his queer studies. Alex also explains how not wanting to go home to unaccepting parents affected their choices:

I think there was also some kind of pressure [to work] from my parents. They would keep saying, oh, you didn’t get into your studies so don’t you want to come back to us and live with us again? And I was like, “No! Not really!” Because my parents were the main reason I moved away […]. (Alex)

Queers are sometimes able to pursue change through their work, and in attempting to answer the question of what work people do and why, I found that interviewees often attempted to choose jobs which allowed them to do so, whether via doing community work for pay, unpaid social internships, or wage working to fund activism. This seemed to be strongly linked to the above findings that political thought and action were strong parts of queer identity for those interviewed. However, in answer to my research question of what meanings queer subjects give to work, most felt negative about the restrictions of having a job, even if this job helped them fulfil (political) goals which were important to their sense of self. A class perspective also makes it clear that using the route of employment to act on queer political awareness is not open to everybody; working-class queers may rely on wages more or lack access to jobs where they have agency. This section only dealt with more traditional definitions of work, however, much work happens outside of jobs, whether or not it is
typically recognised or paid as such. The next theme for analysis is therefore social
reproduction, broadening our vision into the work interviewees do in their lives.

3. Social reproduction
Extending the anti-work logic to care and reproduction work is more complicated (Weeks 2011: 110). However, this must come alongside the critique of productive work to avoid simply contrasting one form of work to the other (Weeks 2011: 161). For example, one
rhetorical strategy to justify a call for less employed work has been to make normative claims that the time would be better spent in the home. However, for Weeks, the price of this trade-off is too high for feminists, as large amounts of women’s work occurs in the home (2011:167). But where do queer homes and families fit into assessments of social
reproduction work?

Housework
Some interviewees even used the word “reproduction” to describe their work in the home. Sometimes this surprised me. I asked Tomka about it. At first he was unsure of himself but we reached an understanding through dialogue of reproduction as continually repeated work:

You used the word reproduction to refer to... Well, when you say reproduction, what do you
mean, first of all?

I used the word reproduction work because… Maybe I’m not so well informed about what that actually means?

It’s not because you used it wrong. I’m just interested why you used it, what you mean by that word. And then, where you learned that word. Where it comes from.

Now that I think about it, maybe in my head it was mixing with “repetitive”. [both laugh] But it has nothing to do with that word, right? Reproduction and repetitive?

It has a “re-” in it, I guess, so it means you do it again?

But that’s what it is! I… maybe for me it’s explaining itself in… If I’m productive, if I make a product, it’s usually made to last, but reproduction work, all these works, they are not made to last. And you should not be frustrated if you do the same thing two hours later. Exactly the same, washing up. And it’s not a product. So repeating acts. It’s, um, something that needs to be done well, but you will never see the product.

[...]It is used in German, Reproduktionsarbeit, so I guess, I mean I guess it’s common to use. I don’t know if it’s only common to use in the leftish scene, or… (Tomka)

Others echoed similar ideas, implying queers in left-wing circles in Berlin may be more familiar with the idea of reproduction work, and that it is work. The 1970s Wages for
Housework campaign demanded that work in the home was recognised financially, so that it could be recognised as work. They wanted to destabilise the essentialist link between
women’s “caring nature” and domestic work (Weeks 2011: 129). Queer’s challenge to gender norms also seemed to have an impact on the way interviewees perceived domestic work.

Like many of my other interviewees Hannah would rather do most things than housework, but was not sure how much her rejection of this work (which she identified as gendered) was linked to her queerness or how much of it was “just that I’m a slob”. Mitzi also had to find strategies and tricks to make sure her own cleaning work got done:

I actually once used to follow the rule of not having more than six of anything. Then you never had to wash more than six of everything. […] I hate the vacuum cleaner and I don’t have one. I wash the floors only after I throw parties and I do that twice a year. (Mitzi)

The heteronormative division of household labour in family units is a big topic for Marxist feminists. However, most of the queers I interviewed did not live in simple family units. many shared houses with non-partners (Alex, Seth, Tomka, Robin), and this affected the way housework was shared out. For those who lived alone (Hannah, Mitzi and Marlene) this was intentional, and linked to the rejection of traditional relationship and family expectations and structures. Rather than following what one interviewee referred to as the “relationship escalator”, Mitzi and her partner agreed not to live together because of their needs and desires, while Marlene rejected the couple-form entirely as a mode of organising her life, identifying as solo-poly\(^{11}\). Here, Hannah explains her queer rejection of family life. Like with many of the others, this analysis is already bound up with discussion of paid work:

You can be gay or lesbian and not queer. You get together. You think, okay, we’re having a relationship now. Uh, now were moving in together. Now we are buying a home together. Let’s get a dog. Let’s have a baby. Let’s have another baby. You both have jobs, maybe only one of you has a job, but it’s 9-5. And you live this kind of like normal structured life, whether you’re male-male, male-female, female-female, in-between-in-between, whatever the combination, but you […] want to be like the Cleavers – like these American perfect families from the 1950s. And I think that the divorce from this idea and the ability to imagine more – different family structures, different… ways of moving through the world in terms of gender and sexuality, and community – I think it sometimes a part of [being queer]. (Hannah)

Queerness, therefore, was strongly linked to interviewees’ organisation of housework. In answer to the question of how work was shared, most people’s living situations mainly meant that it was not shared in a heteronormative way, or even within a family unit. In terms of the meanings queers give to this kind of work, not only was rejecting traditional family structures was an important factor, but in the Berlin context, housework was very much recognised as work, which in the case of German speakers may be linked to a more normalised native

\(^{11}\) Solo-poly describes a sort of polyamory, or consensual non-monogamy, where romantic/sexual relationships do not centre around a partnership model, and which people may still consider themselves single.
language usage of “reproduction work”, or more generally to certain left-wing political background. Finally, subjects could be seen to resist this kind of work, largely normatively through statements of displeasure, and sometimes also practically. These last discussions all touched upon how biological reproduction and relationships linked to people’s work and living situations. I deal with childrearing next as a special kind of reproduction, while relationships are dealt with below. Some of my interviewees rejected having children, while three were parents. I wanted to know how different queers negotiated the different meanings and practicalities of having children.

**Biological reproduction**

The family is traditionally the site of childbearing. Biological reproduction is highly valued in a heteronormative society, but only for those at privileged intersections, while other, less “desirable” reproduction is demonised (A Davis 1983: 182). However, childbearing is also becoming increasingly possible and normative for LGB people. So how do queer parents and non-parents negotiate the conflicting possibilities offered by participation in childrearing and rejection of it?

As mentioned in the above discussions of homonormativity, queer anti assimilationist work has often criticised modes of queer subjectification based on equal participation in capitalism and the family. Furthermore, Lee Edelman’s polemical queer critique of the child as the focus of the future, *No Future* (2004) argues that queer’s advantage in creating change is its positioning firmly in opposition to the reproductive drive. I had the impression that, for whatever reason, childbearing was in fact much less common in some radical queer circles than in mainstream straight and even gay society. My interviewees shared this impression, and some of them saw a decision not to have children as part of a queer approach to family and relationships. For Mitzi, her decision to be “non-natal” was also linked to her more general rejection of caring work (discussed later in more depth):

> I used to want kids for most of my life [and] later I realised that for many reasons I don’t want to have kids at all. […] The deepest psychological reason is I really can’t be bothered to take care of someone 24/7. I mean like, it’s not for me. (Mitzi)

However, taking care of children was considered important work. Even Mitzi’s firm non-natalism cannot be understood as a rejection of the value of the work of bringing up children; she confirms that this is indeed important work, mentioning fostering and volunteering of alternative ways of caring for children outside of traditional and full-time structures. Glen, though critical of traditional family structures, cited the lack of children in his queer
community as one of the reasons he wanted to have a child. He also put childcare work on a
par with the importance of his academic career, and took time out of his job to do this work:

One of the reasons that I wanted to have a kid, although not the only one obviously, was that
within the queer community there aren’t very many kids. So I think it’s important to have
them and to keep them within that community and raise them. So she’s got like hundreds of
gay uncles in Sydney, basically. [Both laugh] And um, her dad’s a drag queen. (Glen)

An intersectional analysis can then perhaps find a more radical view of the family than one of
merely a site of the reproduction of heteronormativity and capitalism. For example, in
Women, Race and Class, (1983) Angela Davis troubles a singular notion of “the family”
through her historical account of how the Black American family not only differed to the
assumed norm of the white family, but has also served a foundation for resistance to racist
oppression (1983: 7). Valerie Lehr in Queer Family Values (1999) similarly points out the
possibility of a queer family distinct from heteronormative family structures, which defines
its own terms rather than simply being defined by capital (in Weeks 2011: 167). All the
parents I interviewed viewed their childrearing as potentially transformative, especially, as
mentioned in terms of passing on better gendered norms to a future generation. Tomka
nonetheless described his day-to-day experience of being a parent very directly as one of very
hard work:

*How does it make you feel looking after a kid, having a kid in your life?*

Especially in the beginning it was one of the biggest challenges. And the whole day was
totally focused on the kid. […] Yeah, it’s beautiful. It’s very intense. Um. It’s reproduction
work. It’s very tiring, I wish somebody else would do it. It’s annoying; I don’t like washing
up, I don’t like… I mean I like washing clothing, sometimes, but it doesn’t need to be every
day and not if at the same time a kid is trying to pull down all the things if you’re hanging up
washing. You know, like, it’s very multi-tasking. (Tomka)

This sentiment was echoed by So-Rim, who also lamented her lack of time, energy, and
opportunity to pursue creative activities since becoming a parent. Childrearing had a complex
relationship to queers and work. Similarly to other housework, the rejection of traditional
family structures was a strong factor influencing interviewees’ relation to this kind of work.
Many rejected this work either practically, in the case of those choosing not to have children
for political reasons, or normatively, in refusing to view parenting as solely a labour of love,
but also as an inconvenience, as labour. However, this work was also important in relation to
queers as change agents as it also had an important role in creating the future through raising
children in non-normative ways. Unpaid care work is a complex topic which, like
employment, but through different mechanisms, has potential both for transformation and for
limitation. Care work also means more than caring for children; the next section explores the themes of care work and emotional labour more broadly.

**Care work and emotional labour**

Also outside of family structures, caring for others was a feature of interviewees’ lives. Much of this I might categorise this as emotional labour, but I did not do so in interviews in order to avoid leading questions. Marlene nevertheless wondered aloud whether to view caring as work:

> What exactly is emotional care, as opposed to just emotional…? I don’t want to call it “work”… just, um… regular things you do in human relationships? (Marlene)

Regardless of definitions as work or otherwise, emotional caring was something that took up a lot of interviewees’ time and energy. Arlie Hochschild coined the term emotional labour in 1983 in *The Managed Heart*, and the concept has recently re-emerged in various feminist discussions. It often describes unequal patterns of care based which benefit those in positions of relative societal power, for example a woman taking the weight of being the sole emotional support for a male partner, or employees being required to bring emotions to their job to the benefit of their bosses, for example in Hochschild’s example of a sign hung in the back hall of a restaurant for waiting staff: "Know Your Prices. Keep Smiling." (1983: 137)

Traditionally female coded roles came with more of an expectation for emotional work, whether paid or unpaid.

However, analysis of queer emotional labour is lacking. For example, Rebecca J Erickson’s empirical study into the division of household labour by sex (2005) adds what she says is a much-needed analysis of emotional labour to such investigations. She brings up the importance of gendered performances via emotional work and vice versa. However, the study is heteronormative in nature, leaving readers to assume that working married working couples are binary mixed-gender, thereby glossing over queer emotional work. Similarly to above discussions of gendered and gendering work, I wanted to know if and how emotional work is taken up by those I interview, and how it might relate to their queer roles or intersectional locations.

Emotional labour can refer to various related phenomena, including increased expectations for an emotional component to paid work, emotional support given in the course of reproduction work, or unequal patterns of care in interpersonal relationships in general, including the work of maintaining these relationships (Erickson 2005; Hochschild 1983).

Seth’s reflection on his PhD work shows how these can also become intertwined:
I do it because I’m motivated to do it because I think it’s important, and I find it extremely interesting. And I also have the feeling like, coming back to this thing of calling myself a caretaker, when I did my first interviews for my Master’s thesis, people would sometimes send emails, like, “Hey, that was actually really great. I haven’t thought about all of these experiences in a really long time, and it was really painful, but it kind of helped me to process the whole thing.” (Seth)

The outsider status of queers has led to a special sort of care in queer communities, according to many interviewees, including Glen:

Because a lot of people have had traumatic backgrounds and because a lot of people have been rejected by their families, people are […] quite happy to offer more care, because they’re aware that some people really need this. So yeah, that’s a very open and caring community there. (Glen)

Conversely, social isolation may also be a factor in how much unwanted emotional labour queers might end up doing, as was the case for Alex:

A good friend of mine was going through a lot of trouble in her life at a certain point and was feeling depressed and sad and suicidal. I felt really responsible for her for some reason, and I guess it was because she was the only friend I had when I came here to Berlin. So I guess I kind of owed her. (Alex)

Some queers I interviewed adopted caring roles at odds with their binary gendered upbringings. For example, some interviewees raised as girls rejected emotional and caring labour to different extents. Meanwhile, Seth agreed that having been an outsider led to caring communities, but also felt that being able to both give and receive care was more common for gay men than straight, and he linked this to not fitting into traditional straight masculine roles which do not encourage care:

In traditional masculine roles, caretaking is [not] emphasised. […] For traditional masculinity, like, straight masculinity, the only care you’re socialised into is “provide for your family” and “bring home money”. But emotional care is not emphasised in the traditional masculinity. When you’re gay socialised, and traditional masculinity does not really work well for you, because you fall out of this pattern, I think you become more sensitive towards support and emotional care. So, I have a feeling that at least when I look around the people I know, a lot of them are more supportive of other people and do more emotional care, and are more open also towards receiving emotional care. Because I mean it’s not just about giving it, but also being able to receive it and accept it, which is also something that I think traditional masculinity does not really allow you to.

There are also specifically queer gendered caring roles: with Seth I brought up the trope of the “gay best friend” as a specifically gay gendered figure of emotional labour:

Yes, yes! I mean it’s also implied in a lot of the stereotypes of being like you know, the gay guy is the hairdresser who knows a lot about interior design and who can counsel you in like fashion or whatever, where there’s this kind of expectation of like, oh, so you are gay, so you can help me with this and this and this!

The sort of emotional labour that people took on was linked not only to gender and sexuality, but also other aspects of their backgrounds:
Another kind of emotional labour is, so my parents are both alcoholics, and I think since I was 14 or something like this whole parent-child relationship kind of like transformed, and I was like taking more care of my parents than they did of me. (Seth)

Intersectional identities also give rise to different capacities for emotional care, even when the will to provide it exists. Mitzi, who identifies as a person with autistic traits, told me:

I’m not empathic. I would say. I have trouble understanding what other people are feeling, but when I do, I really like helping and supporting other people. (Mitzi)

Glen’s conception of intergenerational care also included a material aspect of care - that of physically looking after people. Glen, the oldest person I interviewed, also felt he had a responsibility to care for younger members of the community because of his age:

I’m constantly like making sure that my younger friends aren’t overdoing it with drugs. I mean they’re pretty good [...] in terms of safe sex practices, [...] there’s a lot less shame around what they do. But I suppose some things, to be paternalistic about it, I guess they need a little bit of guidance from some people, so like, “How are you getting home tonight? You’re fucking trashed, what are you doing?” You know, often people just end up coming back to my place, just so that they’re going to be safe, so we’ve always got you know some young queer waking up in a bit of a messy state on the sofa and I’m like, okay, I’m going to work, here’s your stuff, or whatever. [laughs] (Glen)

This included educating younger queers about queer history, especially the history of queer struggles, in a wider society where such history is not taught. This was care work not only because it created queer community, but also because it better enabled younger queers to better understand present struggles in context and equip them to deal with the future. Change was an important element of much of the care work interviewees did.

But a lot of our younger friends, a lot of them are fighting for things like, you know, they want to go to rallies for gay marriage or whatever, but it’s like, that’s the first step in the political story [laughs] as far as I’m concerned! That’s just letting yourself become normal. [laughs] You know, do you really want that? Think about Tetris: when you fit in, you disappear. [laughs]. Yeah. So I think age is important in those kinds of ways because it gives you a sense of this sort of continuity of existence. And helps people remember that things haven’t always been like this. So talking to older people in the community myself is great, but passing on that stuff also is important. (Glen)

Education and being aware of history were important in order to create change, and the right kind of change.

Seth noted how not only capacities for queer care but also needs differ according to location:

I think for instance for me coming from a working class background, it’s different to what some of my more affluent friends experience, because for me if a friend of mine says “Hey, I got this job and they need another person to help them and so you can earn a couple of bucks”, that would also be care taking for me, which is important for me [...]. While, if you have the money you don’t need that, um, so... It’s depending on your positionality. You have different needs of emotional care. (Seth)
This highlights also the more material-economic aspects of care; working class queers may require support in terms of wealth and resources. An intersectional view of queer care work must therefore include different kinds of care.

We have seen how some interviewees saw care and emotional work as defining parts of queer communities. The sorts of care offered and required depended on intersectional locations. Some saw caring activities as work, but unlike other kinds of work, none rejected it. Rather, my interviewees appeared to embrace care work, and some even saw it as ingrained in their queer histories. The main example from queer history talked about in relation to social reproduction in queer communities was the AIDS crisis, which I discuss next.

**A history of queer care: The AIDS crisis**

Both Glen and Seth thought that queer communities were caring communities, and linked the current queer embrace of care work back to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. Queer people’s collective history of needing to self-organise care as social outsiders is a long one, and having needed to do so in response to a lethal disaster in living memory may have wider lasting impacts on queer social and political life:

“[A] lot of the older people in the queer community lived through the AIDS period. Right? So they’ve learned to care for their friends who were dying, or were sick, or other people in the community that they didn’t know, for the same sorts of reasons. So, I think older people have gone through that in a way that younger people haven’t. […] And they’ve had to politically fight for their space.” (Glen)

I also find the gay movement interesting. I mean I research on AIDS. The whole AIDS crisis was a movement of care taking. […] In the 80s and 90s when in the US the government was paying no attention to the AIDS crisis and everybody around you was dying, and all of a sudden people had to set up care for other people who became sick, who were grieving, who were angry. And all of a sudden, gay people as well as a lot of the people around them, especially lesbians and other women, not that much straight guys, had to give care, had to organise care, had to give emotional care, because everybody around you was dying so you needed to give care. I think to a very different extent in the US where the AIDS crisis hit much harder than [Germany], but here too […]. There was a certain urgency and they took care. (Seth)

The picture of care work painted here contrasts sharply with the visibility-based AIDS politics noted by Mariam Fraser for their aestheticisation, performance, and an emphasis on the commodity as fetish, obscuring material social relations (1999: 115-116). Queer care is material and political. Seth continued, however, that he believes this sort of queer care community was now disappearing for those at privileged intersections, because the crisis is less present in mainstream consciousness, which is presumably linked to the fact certain queers are now more accepted and less excluded from systems like healthcare. However, it
was still alive in Black queer communities because it is still very much needed, as it was in the past:

I think when it comes to emotional care, the 80s and early 90s were much more intense for a lot of gay-socialised men. But you see [this care still] in other communities of gay queers who are not white middle class […] My American ex-boyfriend is Black, and what I know through him and through my research of Black gay communities, is there’s a lot of caretaking. Because people are suffering, not just from being gay in a straight world, but there’s also a lot of issues of poverty and racism, etc. And I think the kind of solidarity and emotional caretaking there is a much bigger topic than among obnoxious white gay middle-class people.

So would you say to a certain extent people are creating their own care structures because they’re lacking…?

Yes, because they don’t have access to other supporting structures. I mean it’s a very often-used word but I think intersectionality is a very important thing in here. (Seth)

The link between queer and care being made here is a deep historical one and a political one. Not only do individual queers understand the need for care, and therefore provide it, based on their outsider status – there is also a collective memory of care in queer communities which, although being forgotten and eroded over time, still affects queer care work now. Queer care work is also linked to wider ideas of positive social change. The next section adds more interviewee reflections on the ideas of the current status of queer community and what is sometimes referred to as “chosen family” and its relation to work. The term “chosen family” used in contrast to traditional biological family, is not insignificant given the above discussions of home and family in relation to work and queerness.

“A space where I can be”: Chosen family and queer community

The community aspect of queerness was an important an important defining feature of being queer for Tomka; a welcome relief from not feeling comfortable as a trans person growing up in a rural community:

I grew up in the German countryside, and that’s different for me than it was for my cis straight friends back then. That also means queer. […] But it also means to have a community. Queer scenes are the scenes I feel at home in so I identify strongly with other queers. (Tomka)

Glen echoed this contrast between his background and his current community, referring to them both as “family”:

My biological family, like my parents and so, […] we’re not in contact at all. They don’t approve of my lifestyle. […] I keep in touch with one of my two sisters, because she’s the only one who’s basically accepting of how I live my life. So I think I put all of the effort that a lot of people put into the nuclear family into my broader community, and specifically into my quite large number of very close friends. Uh, which is great, because, you know, I treat them like my family, basically. (Glen)
For Lehr (1999) “queer family values” may not be limited to biological or coupled relationships. These new intentional structures necessarily involve a commitment to shorter employment hours, not least because Lehr further conceives of non-work time as relationship time: time for making and sustaining connections (in Weeks 2011: 167-169). This theme was raised by respondents, who often reported that social time would take precedent if their work time were reduced.

Creating a community was recognised as valuable work for people who are different from the norm. This exchange came out of Tomka trying to define what was and what was not work:

So keeping up friendships is work. And you thought work was maybe to do with production or reproduction. So for example with keeping up friendships, is there something that you’re producing or reproducing there?

[Pause] …Producing a space where I can be. (Tomka)

However, not everybody felt the same strength of community: Hannah, did not feel part of a queer community in Berlin, or did not feel comfortable in it, because she found it youth-focused and exclusionary. For all the supposed political awareness, she also found disability largely ignored. Alex also did not receive emotional support from queer communities due to them not being sufficiently intersectional, finding that their problems never quite fit with one particular group:

I tried to get some support when I was in an abusive relationship for example, and I went to this one, it was like a polyamory meet-up, and I tried to talk to them about it. I also mentioned that not everybody experiences love in the same way, you know, if they have mental health problems, and I didn’t get any good feedback. […] It just doesn’t feel like I can talk about everything. I mean, if it’s only from the perspective of a healthy person [who] is cis. […] I still haven’t found a really supportive community and I don’t know what I’m supposed to, or can, ask for. (Alex)

Alex’s access to queer communities was even limited by being poorer:

I think that also contributes to feeling a bit excluded. Because there’s not always money and I cannot always afford to go to things. (Alex)

Queer communities, then, are not necessarily a space where everyone can “be” when intersectional considerations are not taken into account.

For those I interviewed, chosen families and communities fulfil many of the roles of biological families, including care work. This necessarily affects the way this work is shared out, in comparison to the biological family, though it was beyond the scope of this study to see patterns in how this manifests in people’s lives. However, queer communities are also political communities, self-chosen communities and leisure communities – exactly the kind of spaces that anti-work theorists like Weeks would like to see developed in the absence of
work. Thus queer chosen families and communities are contradictory in nature with regards to work. Creating and maintaining queer communities is work in itself, and more work needs to be done so that they become more accessible and intersectional. Material concerns including disability and illness still pose limits to queer sites of transformation in Berlin. These are discussed next in relation to work.

**Health and self-care**

Not only looking after other people but also looking after ourselves is work. Those who are ill and disabled often work a lot harder to maintain themselves, as do people facing daily oppression. Some people needed regular access to healthcare services. Alex experienced this as hard work, partly especially due to professionals’ ignorance of trans issues:

> I have some health problems, and also because I’m trans I have to do things that I would normally not want to do, like going to doctors and explaining stuff. And also you hope that they give you the medicine that you need. Also I’ve had a couple of health problems the last week and it really stressed me out. Because I have one doctor and he’s really good and he also knows about trans people, but it’s like one doctor in the whole of Berlin and he’s 40 minutes away. So it also takes a lot of my time if I would go there. And I know if I want to have an appointment with him I need to wait for two weeks. So then I was trying to find a different doctor closer to me, and it’s always so stressful because I never know how the doctor’s going to react to me being trans. So then I have to explain stuff, or maybe I have to hear weird stuff. […] I have to go back to the doctors again because I changed my name and now the name on the papers is wrong. So it takes up time and I don’t really want it to. And also I have a couple of health problems, because I’m taking hormones and my body changed, and then I had to go to the gyno, and the gyno also said really transphobic stuff to me and that made me not want to go there again. He was saying stuff like, “I look at your genitals and they look like from an old woman.” […] I’m forced to give out loads of private details so I can be accepted as an individual, with the name I want. (Alex)

As with my friends (and one of my motivations for carrying out this project), work made people ill:

> I got panic attacks when I tried to work on [my PhD]. So at the moment I’m pausing and I’m actually considering not finishing it. (Marlene)

> So it’s really challenging, also because I used to have back problems. At the moment I’m thinking if I can do it much longer because of just how exhausting it is. (Alex)

Self-care was raised by many interviewees as something they would like to do more of. In the words of Black lesbian writer and activist Aurdre Lorde (1988) “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” Modern queer feminism has taken up Lorde’s idea that for marginalised people, taking steps to be able to exist and be can radical in itself, and many of my interviewees used the term “self-care”.

Trying to recover from illness by taking sick days had mixed results for Alex. On the one had
they felt better for having taken control of their health and rested, but on the other hand they felt guilt for not being productive:

I was taking some days off work because I was sick. And I was so surprised how it made me feel. Because I felt bad. I felt bad right away. I felt like I’m not supposed to do it, and I’m not allowed to take off days. And that made me feel awful, but at the same time I felt good about taking off the days because I realised, okay, I admit that my health is not good and that I’m doing something about it. (Alex)

However, under neoliberalism, workers are also made to feel individually responsible for their own health, which often translates into us being made to feel to blame when we are sick.

In my former workplace, I remember that a condition of signing off sickness absences was to detail the steps we would take to get better. As Emma Dowling, researcher of gender, reproduction, capitalism, and social change explains, neoliberal narratives of individual responsibility and blame can therefore pose a problem for self-care as a radical strategy (2006). Furthermore, in the current economic climate, much like during the AIDS crisis, a turn away from care work is often neither desirable nor possible:

Today we are told to take care of ourselves. For a long time, however, women have been expected to provide love and care, attending to the needs of others. So focusing on ourselves – what it is that we want, what it is that gives us pleasure – is part of a path towards greater agency and liberation. The double-bind is how this path gets refracted through the prism of neoliberal individualism and the imperative to accumulate. […] Where personal growth and wellbeing are mapped onto the logic of capital accumulation, self-realisation means maximising our capacity to be productive, to accrue social, cultural and sexual capital. Moreover, against the backdrop of austerity and plunging job or social security, we have to take care of ourselves because no-one else will. We are our most important asset. (Dowling 2016)

The tension between self-care and the drive to be (seen to be) productive also often came up. So-Rim explained the difficulties in seeing rest time as wasted time, struggling to draw a firm distinction, but eventually affirming her own right to be lazy:

When I had the time I just laid on my sofa or my bed and wasted the time. So yeah, I don’t know. Maybe the concept of self-care explains it a bit better. But I think I should make more time for self-care, just to take care of myself, of like my health or my soul, my mental health. Just more time where I just enjoy myself, reload my batteries, recharge my batteries.

What’s the difference between wasted time and self-care?

Um, you can waste time by not caring for yourself and doing nothing productive, not even caring for yourself, so that the time is over and you think back and think oh I did nothing and I was bored and I didn’t feel good. If you feel good then I think it’s fine. If you enjoy yourself then it’s always a kind of self-care. But then there’s times when you don’t enjoy yourself or you lay around feeling bad doing nothing about it. […]

When I think about it I’m not a big fan of using every single minute for efficient self-optimising or anything. It doesn’t sound human. It sounds like a robot.

Do you think that you feel bad because you do nothing or you do nothing because you feel bad?
Both. […] It’s hard to find the balance. But I think I’m better off on the lazy side.

Why?

It’s more relaxed. It’s more forgiving.

Forgiving of yourself?

Yes. It’s more forgiving of one’s flaws. (So-Rim)

In embracing self-care, then, interviewees reject work on the one hand but also risk falling into the work-reinforcing neoliberal traps of self-sufficiency and self-optimisation. However, like So-Rim above, most interviewees also seemed to have a healthy scepticism towards such trends. In the next theme of subjectivity and self-worth, I explore further the concepts of neoliberalism, rest and laziness and how they relate to how people see themselves.

To sum up the theme of queer social reproduction in my interviews, I note that while queerness sometimes led to a rejection of the home-based forms of social reproduction, it also seemed inextricably linked to care work, which for my interviewees notably often happened outside of the home and biological family. Conflict also arose in thinking using the category of work, because the social reproduction work that sustains capitalism is also sometimes the same as that which sustains queer communities, and even when the work of creating community or looking after oneself is radical, it is also work, and can still feed into harmful productivist tendencies.

The interviews really underlined for me in real terms the contradictory nature of these kinds of work in terms of their roles in both reproducing, but also importantly challenging, oppressive and normative systems. This dual nature of reproduction work is encapsulated by Silvia Federici:

When we speak of ‘refusal of work’ we have to be careful. We need to see that the work of reproducing human beings is a peculiar type of work, and it has a double character. It reproduces us for capital, for the labour market, as labour power, but it also reproduces our lives and potentially it reproduces our revolt against being reduced to labour power. In fact, reproductive labour is important for the continuation of working class struggle and, of course, for our capacity to reproduce ourselves. This is why we need to understand the double character of this work, so that we refuse that part of the work that reproduces us for capital; whereas we cannot refuse this work as a whole, because labour-power lives in the individual, and if we refuse it completely we risk destroying ourselves and the people we care for. (In interview with Vishmidt, 2013)

The work queers do has effects not just on the world around them, their futures, and their present day communities, but also on their understandings of themselves. The next section explores in more depth the links between queerness, work and subjectivity.
4. Subjectivity and self-worth

Queer theory is no stranger to discussion of subject formation. Foucault (1972) discussed how we come to understand ourselves through certain discourses where discourses are ways describing that help us frame and discern the world around us but are also bound up with power, and tend to lock us into certain ways of perceiving conducive to power. Judith Butler builds on this in part in her writing about gendered subject intelligibility: how performing certain roles correctly is a requisite part of claiming subjectivity (2001). A “politics of truth” controls how and what we can be and still be considered valid people, which presents challenges for those living outside of norms:

What counts as a person? What counts as a coherent gender? What qualifies as a citizen? Whose world is legitimated as real? Subjectively, we ask: Who can I become in such a world where the meanings and limits of the subject are set out in advance for me? By what norms am I constrained as I begin to ask what I may become? And what happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place within the given regime of truth? (Butler 2001: 621)

When dealing with the normative power of the work ethic, queer conceptions of how we understand ourselves overlap with a Marxist conception of a subject mediated through work and neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism has a strong impact on the way people relate to work and perceive themselves, so is important to the discussion of queer worker subjectivities. Wendy Larner describes neoliberalism as a system of governmentality focused on individual freedom and individual responsibility:

Neo-liberal strategies of rule […] encourage people to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well being. This conception of the “active society” can also be linked to a particular politics of self in which we are all encouraged to "work on ourselves" in a range of domains, including the "counter cultural movements" outside the purview of traditional conceptions of the political. (Larner 2000: 13)

Not only do these tendencies exist in traditional institutions, writes Larner, but they can spill over into other areas of life, including those which are supposedly radical.

The word neoliberalism appeared a few times in my interviews. This interested me, as theorists of neoliberalism describe its subjectification effects, but rarely in relation to queer subjects outside of homonormative contexts. Marlene discussed how changes in work under neoliberalism affected how people see themselves, putting them under more pressure to be not only productive but also constantly improving:

I mean it’s kind of like this neoliberal promise: that your work is so fulfilling that it will not feel like work anymore. But I think that’s a very dangerous discourse because it can make you work all the fucking time. And it can produce exactly this problem that you can’t separate
work from your identity, or work form your life and more. So it’s just like a constant factor, and a constant pressure too. Because you could always work more. And you could always read more. You could always do more and go to more conferences. Because, you know, it’s your identity and not something you’re paid for. (Marlene)

A compelling argument against the reform of work, and a reason I pursue a work-critical approach, is that better jobs in reality often just force us to become better workers under neoliberalism, investing more of ourselves into work (Weeks 2011: 106). Scholars of neoliberalism have posited that the link between selfhood and work has grown even stronger in the last few decades, even despite the decline in traditional industries and “jobs for life” which might traditionally have defined people. This is seen in phenomena such as the increased amounts of emotional labour required at work, and the pressure to “do what you love” for your job in order to be satisfied in your life. Also, according to Seth, work is becoming more intensive:

So work changed a lot and I think a couple of decades ago people did not have that much… um- There’s this Arbeitsverdichtung (work intensification) […S]ay you worked an office job three decades ago and you had a certain task. And nowadays you can have the same position but you have so much more to do because the requirements increased.” (Seth)

Not only are we productive subjects under capitalism, but also competitive and self-improving subjects under neoliberalism (Srnicek & Williams 2015: 90). This has effects both in and outside of paid work. The next section examines the work ethic and the desire to be productive.

Productivity and work ethic

Work is of course important as a means of gaining resources to survive. But it also important as a source of recognition, a sense of selfhood, and social positioning (Weeks 2011: 38). In other words, work is also a major source of people’s subjectivity and identity – that is, their ability to understand themselves and feel part of society – even though to function, economies rely on some people being unemployed some of the time (Weeks 2011: 8). Work produces a particular kind of subjectivity itself suitable for the maintenance of the system of work: “disciplined individuals, governable subjects, worthy citizens, and responsible family members.” (Weeks 2011: 8) I wanted to know how interviewees defined themselves in

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12 It is also important to note, in a globalised economy and production chain, that this is not a global vision of work. The sorts of neoliberal jobs that require workers to bring their emotions into the workplace and live their job are restricted to a very small minority of people outside of the richest national economies, meaning most people are still faced with the often harsh physical realities of production work. In fact, the global division of labour ensures that these neoliberalised jobs are dependent on production jobs which do not require the same investment of self.
relation to work and productivity, and whether and how these ideas spilled over into other areas of interviewees’ lives outside of paid work.

Interviewees identified that work was a source self-worth, but were also very often critical of this. Marlene, for example, discussed the pressures to have a career:

I think it’s also a general pressure that society created because you are only someone when you have a good job, when you earn a certain amount of money. (Marlene)

Just being should be enough sometimes. But... I feel like that’s something that is almost impossible to kind of defend. Because we automatically get the assumption, at least from other people, like parents, for example, that you are lazy and that you don’t want to work and that just not doing something automatically makes you less valid. (Marlene)

I don’t feel like I want to have a “career” in the sense that I’m constantly working for something... (Marlene)

Marlene’s recent reflections on anti-work politics combined with the negative effects work had on their health perhaps combined to lead them to reflect on and challenge productivist tendencies in their own life. Glen argued for the importance of being able to feel productive, but rejected it as a means to define people or measure their worth:

I think it’s good for people for be productive, but I don’t think that that should be their sole factor in their self-definition. You know. You see people who get locked into their jobs. Yep. You meet boring people and they say, “What do you do?” and the answer’s always their job, not, “I go clubbing and I read books and I write reviews of techno albums, [laughs] and I look after a baby, I garden.” I do all sorts of things, not just, you know, I don’t get paid for them all. But I also think leisure time is extremely important. (Glen)

For Glen, to be defined by one’s job was “boring”, but he instead placed emphasis on unpaid and leisure activities important. This could be seen as a speech act of revaluing undervalued reproductive labour but also emphasising the equal importance of non-work activity.

However, at the same time it maintains a focus on activity.

Mitzi had a strong work ethic, with pressures coming not just from an internalised need to be busy, but also sometimes from the sense of urgency of the situations in which she was doing activist work:

So I think I have internal pressure to be productive. If I just don’t do anything for a day, well for a day it’s nice, for two days it’s nice, maybe for a week it’s nice. But longer is not nice any more, it’s just depressing. And for things that aren’t work, the politics, for example, just seeing all the shit that’s going on and just feeling like I need to be active. It’s not like anyone is expecting me though I sometimes wonder if people ask themselves what I do, why I didn’t go to that or the other demonstration or action or whatever, or... Normally I just feel I should be more active but I just don’t have time to. So it’s just like pressure. And I guess like these days, like I used to organised benefit concerts for medications to Gaza, and you know when we do that it’s when something is going on, and like Israel is bombing Gaza all of a sudden, so you know that this is the time to raise a lot of money, so we do that, so like, we basically drop everything else and do that so there’s this kind of a pressure of like something is happening, you have to react to it now. (Mitzi)
She also worried somewhat that other people were judging her by levels of activity. Furthermore, many interviewees claimed not to be political or activists, in spite of the activities they told me about. This seemed to reinforce what I’d felt before in political communities: a feeling of never doing enough political work, which is perhaps in part an indicator of the presence of the societal valuation of productive activity, even when the activity is not productive to capital.

Glen felt that productivity could be positive in people’s lives, when productivity meant having an active role in creating the world around them:

I think that people have- people benefit somehow psychologically by helping produce the world that they are living in, by helping take part in it, by being actively involved in it. So making things that help that community or you know making things so that they can sell them and survive. That kind of work I think’s good for people’s mental health and good for their sense of self. Makes them feel useful. It makes them feel like they are doing something for themselves, for their family, for their community, you know, for their greater society. (Glen)

Even though many interviewees rejected the work ethic in theory, it was nevertheless important for them to work on particular things in order to create the world they wanted. The artists I interviewed were very strongly drawn to the work they did, paid or otherwise. Tomka explains his drive to do art work, despite problems getting paid for it:

*How do you feel when you do art?*

Very good. It feels like this is what I should do. But also very desperate when it comes to money things sometimes[…] I mean I’m getting really tired, but I know what I’m doing and I know how to do it and I’ve got good ideas and I feel like I should do that all the time. […] Because it’s what I should do. And I think also because I’m good at it, it’s like that. Because I know it’s going to be good results […]

*Why is it important for you to have good results?*

Because art is a form of communication. I want people to understand me and to understand what I’m talking about, and good art is a good result, so if it’s good, it’s understood. If it’s bad, it’s bad communication. People don’t understand it. It’s like my mumbling. I want to communicate clearly so that the right thing is understood, and by the people that I want to understand it.” (Tomka)

Process and results were, then, both important. The importance for clear communication for Tomka was linked to the content of his art, which centred around trans issues. Both Tomka and Hannah strongly expressed doing art as a need:

It’s this kind of work that I *need* to do. And that I wish to do. It’s different to the work that I do in the gallery in Copenhagen. Which I also like, but I get paid for, that’s why I do it. This kind of photo shooting or installation art, it’s work, but it’s not at the same time; it’s a need.” (Tomka)
You have to do what you have to do to keep yourself sane and to survive. You go crazy if you can’t do it. You can’t function if you don’t do it. Like Vincent van Gogh, you know? Never sold a painting in his life. Couldn’t stop doing it. (Hannah)

Hannah was driven to create art because it was a way of surviving, a feat made more difficult for marginalised people, and surviving is key to creating one’s future. Creativity was a common topic among interviewees, and it always seemed to be linked to transformation. Robin thought that creativity was needed to change society for the better, and work was a barrier to it:

I think basic income can help people to find that creativity and free themselves for a bit. They don’t have to but everyone could.

What would you say to people who would say that work is what brings people creativity?

It might bring creativity to some people but I don’t feel like… I don’t feel it for myself, that work brings me more creativity. It’s the possibility to do what I want to do and to act politically somehow and to change something in society. (Robin)

Work was then stifling because of its compulsory status and the lack of control it gives to people. Creative and artistic work seemed to me to be an important type of work involved in creating people’s worlds. Marlene, for example, explicitly conjured up queer utopias in their band’s lyrics:

All the members of the band are queer. And we have this whole imaginary about how we’re basically sexless aliens from another planet. [laughs] I wrote most of the lyrics by myself, and most of the lyrics are about queer experiences… There’s one song about like queer utopias. […] there’s no discrimination any more, in any way, also no racism or ableism or lookism. It’s kind of like just this idea of everyone being able to connect and being able to have sex with each other and being able to have bodily connections without any boundaries. There’s this one line where it imagines all these bodies fused together to like a sculpture. Yeah. [laughs] (Marlene)

They were also excited to form a new band of queer femmes playing doom metal, as they believed this was important for representation in what is usually a very straight, masculine dominated genre. Seth, meanwhile, addressed political issues like labour and class politics in his performances as a Tunte:

A Tunte is a German… tradition. A German gay tradition. Which is something of a mixture of a drag queen, a political drag queen, a radical fairy, and a social justice activist. In the sense that, in the seventies, you know, there were gay guys who were very much resisting this kind of heteronormative… mainstreaming and becoming more like all of the other, straight people, and trying to emulate straight society, and they were like, “Yeah, I own my femininity!” And so they put themselves in dresses and tried to trouble ideas of gender and sexuality and whatever. And I think I follow this tradition. I sometimes perform, and I wear dresses, […] but I also do it while having a beard. And you know, like, in Berlin Tunten are often TrümmerTunten so they’re like “trashy queens”. […] It’s not like American drag queens who are fabulous and over the top and be beautiful and blah blah blah. […] To me a Tunte is

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13 “Lookism”: discrimination based on someone’s appearance.
always inherently political, while drag queens are not necessarily political. And I mean, when I in the past performed as a *Tunte* on stage, it was at least with some kind of political message, you know?

*What kind of political message, for example?*

Hmm. Labour politics stuff, […] talking about international solidarity and how it’s fine to kind of to have a great queer world where everybody can have whatever gender they have and they can have whatever the sexuality they have, but if they are still poor, that’s nice, but you know, there’s still a lot of different liberations which have to go on. (Seth)

Queerness was linked to Seth’s political performances, but queer performance was not necessarily political. *Tunten* were special in that they had a long history of both overt engagement with political issues but also of a rejection of homonormativity as well as normative male and female binary gender presentation. For Hannah, disability more than queerness was a driving force behind finding creative ways to do things, as she was forced to find her own solutions day-to-day from an early age:

> I grew up disabled which means that people would say, “You do it this way.” And I would try to do it that way, whatever it was, whether it was walking or hopping or running or doing a math problem or using a pair of scissors. They would say, “You do it this way.” And I would try to do it that way, and I wouldn’t be able to do it that way. And no-one would be able to show me another way to do it, so I would figure it out myself. So I don’t know if it’s related so much to queerness as to disability, because as we said, in my particular case the two relate, but I feel like with disability you have to learn to be creative just to move through the world. Just to do a simple thing like get from point A to point B, or get the result you want. So many disabled people are their own individual pioneers. But we never get recognised. You’ve figured out a different way to do that. […] I don’t feel like doing it differently was ever a choice for me, it was just a necessity. (Hannah)

But is that creativity or is that just survival? When you’re different, you have to be creative in order to survive. (Hannah)

However, doing work that they loved and work that they felt essential contributed to interviewees feeling overworked. Alex, for example, found it hard to stop working and/or felt pressure to do more in their internship:

> I really like the projects. And I want to do everything at once. And at the same time I feel bad because there’s always this thought that I shouldn’t be doing this much. Other people are not so involved and they’re being paid for this. But at the same time I see, when other people need help, and if people need help I’m going to help them. (Alex)

Pressure to work hard and/or productive was both internal and external. Hannah reported needing productive work and end products to feel good, and also not only in the arena of paid work:

> I finished my [project]. And then I didn’t have anything to do.

*And how did you feel then?*

> I was so depressed. And I continued being really depressed. And then […] all of a sudden I had these three projects I was working all at once, and then I was feeling terrible unless I was
working on one of these projects. I don’t think of anything else when I’m working on a project. I just think about that project. And yesterday I completed the art porn and I feel good because I actually completed something, and it makes me feel like I can complete more things. (Hannah)

Others like Alex felt satisfaction in, or even a need for, completing tasks:

> I know if I start doing something then I need to finish it. [...] It’s really boring if I can’t do anything. [...] Usually if I can find a task it makes me feel good if I can finish it on the same day. (Alex)

Meanwhile, it was important for So-Rim and Robin to feel capable and needed through work:

> I think it’s the feeling of competence that I like. I’m always very happy when I see I did something well. (So-Rim)

> It’s important to feel like I’m needed, [...] I found out. And I feel like they are glad that I’m there. (Robin)

Because of the way work forms subjects, work comes to be seen as not only desirable, but also as natural, morally good and even compulsory. According to Weeks:

> Work is the primary means by which individuals are integrated not only into the economic system, but also into social, political, and familial modes of cooperation. [Working] is part of what is supposed to transform subjects into the independent individuals of the liberal imaginary, and for that reason, is treated as a basic obligation of citizenship. (Weeks 2011: 8)

However, Seth shared his experiences of his work ethic in different situations which he directly linked to his working-class background:

> I kinda have this pressure internalised. I have a very internalised work ethic. [...] Because… I am quite often quite insecure about myself. So there’s also a certain kind of… having a feeling of having to prove myself. And this can be through a work ethic but also, I mean I’ve been socialised very much into, you know, you do work, and you do it properly, and there’s high expectations. (Seth)

Here we can see how internalised work ethic and productivity can be bound up with class location, either through expectations instilled through upbringing, not having the class capital to know how hard it is acceptable to work, or coming from a perceived need to prove oneself.

As raised above by Hannah, disability is another example of the difficulty in separating material concerns from productive subjectivities. The social model of disability views disability as caused by society (rather than just impairments) through a systematic ignorance of the access needs of sick, disabled, and/or mentally ill people. However, disability and productivity share a special link, as in capitalist society disability is mostly defined in relation to work and the capacity to be productive. Disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s “misfits”, for example, are in part those not “fit” to work (2011: 592). This poses a problem for work-based subjectivity, as certain disabled people will never be able to be productive,
but they must still be able to be considered valid people. As Sunny Taylor writes in her piece _The Right Not to Work: Power and Disability_:

> Capitalism has at its root the idea of an individual’s worth being intrinsically linked to their production value. Many, though by no means all, disabled people will never be good workers in the capitalist sense. (S Taylor 2004: 5)

Insights from critical disability writing are therefore vital to the whole anti-work project, offering new modes of subjectification and valorisation explicitly uncoupled from the idea of productivity. Social disability scholar Paul Abberley writes that the special status of disability leads him to question the tactic of “the full integration into social production” for disabled people’s liberation. (1999: 15).

This is also an area where Weeks’ and other nondisabled anti-work theorists’ work falters. For example, Weeks advocates campaigning for a 30-hour working week (including social reproduction) as a tactical move with broad appeal to different groups of people, in order to free up time to create the future. However, this does not attend to the difficulty in accounting for different capabilities of bodies and the empirical differences of navigating work for those at different intersectional locations.¹⁴ Re/work production comes at very different time and energy costs to differently positioned people, and this must always form part of an analysis of productivity.

Most interviewees, then, reported a need to be productive. On the one hand this general tendency did not particularly seem to be related to queerness, but rather to wider societal values that place an emphasis on productive activity. On the other hand, the types of political and creative work queers chose was not only experienced as directly linked to their queerness or other intersectional positioning, but could make them susceptible to overwork. There was often a tension experienced by interviewees between being too busy and feeling like they did not do enough, and between normatively rejecting the valuation of people based on their productivity but also needing to be productive in order to feel valid. An intersectional analysis of the work ethic must instead into account for the different amounts of work required by differently-positioned people. To complement this, I propose more of a focus on non-work, including rest, leisure, and laziness, as radical responses to the normative imperative to work. This is also not without its problems of definition, as discussed in the next section.

¹⁴ Due, in my view, to Weeks’ reliance on the Marxist concept of “socially necessary labour time” and over-extending its usage to social reproduction despite the very different levels of self-care, for example, required by different bodies, and the lack of consideration of how this work could or could not be socialised (2011: 72).
Leisure, non-work and laziness

Free time is a major tenet of Weeks’ anti-work perspective, both as a short strategy and long term goal for change. Weeks advocates “time for what we will” – non-work time – to give space for the possibility to effect collective change (2009: 112). However, queer subjects under neoliberalism may find distinguishing between work and non-work difficult. Even leisure itself, inasmuch as it sustains workers, could be viewed as reproduction and constitutive of capital – not least because as a concept it is only defined in relation to work (Adorno 2001: 178).

I asked all my interviewees how they distinguished between what felt like work and non-work. They indeed largely found it difficult to know where they would draw the line, often answering in contradictory terms and thinking out loud to test out answers to the question:

It’s very hard to draw that distinction! And I think this is why I tended to do too much work in academia because I was always also somehow personally involved or personally interested in the topics. Especially when I was still studying, I mean when I was doing my Bachelor and my Master. When I got the job it was a little bit easier to distinguish it, just because I got paid. […] I draw this boundary, between work and music. Um… nevertheless, it takes up a lot of space in my life. And I do think, for example, that political activism and music can go together. (Marlene)

This lack of clarity seemed to be intensified by the fact that the people I interviewed work on things that were politically and/or creatively important to them. When social reproduction is understood as part of work and includes creating and sustaining friendship networks, when neoliberal modes of personal responsibility include taking responsibility for one’s own wellbeing, with increased pressure to blur the line between private and work life, it seems little wonder the boundary was unclear.

Work and leisure were often experienced as coinciding in the same spaces and activities.

Hannah’s work and non-work were very mixed together also in terms of time:

See, this whole idea of weekend, I don’t really understand weekend. I’m a freelancer and I’m an artist. So I’m not seeing any clients. But what if I get a really cool phone call, and I’m like, that sounds really interesting? It’s not… because the sex work, it’s about money, I wouldn’t do it without the money, but it’s not just about money. It’s like, sometimes you’re given an opportunity to make people feel comfortable with themselves. (Hannah)

For Hannah, her lack of distinct work time and leisure time seemed to be largely positive, allowing her the freedom to do what she wanted when she wanted. However, when work and non-work coincided in the physical space of her small home, it was more stressful. For So-Rim, work and non-work were often mixed in together within the same childcare tasks:

If I have fun at work and I enjoy it, I don’t feel like I’m working. I feel like I get to do amazing things, exciting things. And if it’s hard and if I have to make myself do it, if I have to
discipline myself to do it, then it feels like work. It’s the same with care work. You can enjoy
five minutes with your child and then he poops in his diapers and you have to change his
nappies and oh, and then it’s work again! [laughs] (So-Rim)

Despite this mixing, she noted that activity could nevertheless be separated into the two
categories depending on whether it was pleasurable or not. This attitude was interesting as it
rejected the idea of child time as leisure time or even a “labour of love” (Weeks 2011: 68),
but rather recognised its complex status and the difficulties of applying a work-critical logic
to social reproduction. Fun was also a defining factor of non-work for Alex. While they noted
that paid work could hypothetically be fun, they had never personally experienced this.

Mitzi found it easier to distinguish. Despite enjoying and excelling in her work as a scientist,
it was definitely “work”, defined as such by it being the activity that paid her:

Yeah for me it’s very clear. I work to survive. I mean, I love my work, but if I got money out
of nowhere, or there was like no need for money, or whatever, then I would probably work
less. Much less. (Mitzi)

Mitzi “worked to survive” but in a purely economic sense, in contrast with Hannah’s more
encompassing need for creative activity in order to survive. This could be read as a rejection
of neoliberal tendencies to define oneself by and through work. Glen’s definition of work
rejected the defining characteristic of pay, but his definition of work hinged on processes of
production and reproduction:

I’m very much committed to the idea that work isn’t just what you get paid for. I know that
looking after kids is a lot of work. I know that organising a protest is a lot of work. I know
that, you know, writing an academic article is a lot of work. But I’ve also worked in factories.
So I know that physical labour is a lot of work. And I grew up on a farm like I said, so I’m
used to lots of different forms of working, not all of which are paid. No. It’s more putting
your energy into- ultimately producing something. Whether or not that production is, you
know, the community that you’re a part of, or some academic output, or a chicken nugget in a
factory or, you know, or anything. It’s doing something that has a product. And that might be,
you know, maintaining a household is still doing something that produ-
for a particular end.

(Glen)

Glen’s conception very much ties work back into the recognisable frame of social
reproduction described by Federici above. In a similar frame, some interviewees also
described true leisure activities as those which were totally “unproductive”.

However, for Seth, neither pay, fun nor productivity were useful concepts in defining work
and non-work:

It’s always a really big question what you mean when you say work, because right now what
I’m doing at this exact moment is work for which I get paid. Although it’s also kind of
confusing, because I sit here and I don’t do anything. […] But I was really tired from
yesterday; it was really hard to get myself to go to the laundromat. So it […] really felt like
work. But you know, it was not paid. I actually even paid money to, to the laundromat, to,
you know, wash my clothes, do my laundry. Or when I do political stuff. I know it can be
really satisfying, I did a lot of student activism, and of course it’s work. […] I found it very satisfying, but it was also work and took a lot of time. So, I can’t really differentiate. (Seth)

One thing that did help Seth discern what counted as work was the different amount of effort involved in tasks, bringing the focus firmly into the realm of bodily experience.

While attempting to come up with a unified definition, Robin mused that “work” perhaps encompassed paid work, work that structured his time, and also the work of changing and recreating the world:

Hmm. I think, I could say that work is what I get paid for, but that’s not right, because there’s so much stuff I don’t get paid for that’s a bit like work to me, but, um, it’s hard. Work is what’s in my work calendar in my calendar app. [laughs] Somehow. Work is meetings. It’s a really interesting question. …Work is not what makes me get up in the morning. But it’s also not what I get paid for. Hmm. I think in general work is what we’re doing to change or to… hm. What is work? … It’s what I get paid for, plus what I want to … do, somehow? [laughs] […] Let’s say that work is what I do in the office. And maybe on the streets too. I have no idea. It’s hard to define work in 21st century society. (Robin)

Robin’s definition particularly perhaps sums up the tensions of queer work, combining a lot of the other interviewees’ definitions, and again highlighting the complications in applying an anti-work perspective.

Due to the strong mutually reinforcing effects of work on subjectivity, Weeks also sees a transformatory value in resisting the work ethic (2011: 38), writing of a history of “bad subjects” who resisted being defined through their productivity (2011: 79-80). I wondered if any of my interviewees could be such bad subjects, potentially disrupting the drive to be productive by rejecting it. I also wanted to know how this interplayed with the complex, politically engaged and queer notions of work they shared with me. Robin and So-Rim both embraced being lazy in their own way, seeming to make a sort of peace with at least the concept – despite in practice both being very busy:

I’m a bit lazy.

_Do you think that’s a bad thing?_

It’s not bad as long as I’m okay with it. (Robin)

I think I have a very strong desire to do the right thing. But I also learned not to be too hard on myself. Which is easier because I’m also a bit lazy in doing the things the hard way. So I cut myself some slack. (So-Rim)

This attempt to be “okay with” being lazy, despite his working-class background, could be likened to Paul Lafargue’s advocating of the “right to be lazy” and rediscovering laziness as a “virtue” through rejecting work (in Weeks 2011: 98). Marlene, who spoke to me of their
previous strong drives to have a career, was indeed already happily adjusting to not currently needing to work:

I am officially jobless and I still get welfare from the state. So I'm in this position where I don't have to work right now, which is nice. (Marlene)

In saying things like this, interviewees appeared to justify their lack of productive activity to themselves. I see this as a resignification of inactivity: in the same way Butler described people reclaiming queer to be no longer a slur but a positive and constructive ideal, so non-work can become no longer a site of shame but instead of possibility, maybe even “virtue”. Importantly for the queer subjects I interviewed, this rejection of work can be positive even when the work they do is political and important to their queer self-conceptions. This is why it is important to make visible the manifestations of the work ethic and normative productivity-based valuation of people in all arenas, including “radical” work, in order to better resist it. In the following theme Changes and Futures, I build on discussions of how the people I interviewed negotiate their futures desires to slow down, connect more with other people, and rest. The section delves deeper into imaginations of what a queer intersectional post-work future might look like.

5. Change and futures: Getting a life

Post-work politics is by definition a politics of the future. However, the direction of change is not clear. We have seen how in lived experience is it hard to delineate work, which therefore also complicates the idea of non-work. Therefore, I find useful Weeks’ employment of the concept “getting a life” (2011: 230-2). She asks, “What kinds of conceptual frameworks and political discourses might serve to generate new ways of thinking about the nature, value, and meaning of work relative to other practices and in relation to the rest of life?” (2011: 35, emphasis added) In this study, the distinction between work and non-work was unclear, and Weeks also points out the problems of drawing the distinction between work and life, and therefore the creation of a “life against work”, especially when the idea of living one’s own life and “being yourself” chimes with neoliberal capitalist discourse (2011: 232).

But in positioning work against life, Weeks does not pose them as a binary pair. One is within the other, and there is no “pure life” to be “rescued” from the evils of work. Rather, the anti-work project is to work towards a life of potentials, to share in but not be identical to others’ lives (ibid). This echoes the idea of queer family time as social time, as well as being

15 drawn from "The Post-Work Manifesto" by Stanley Aronowitz et al. (1998)
an interesting way of framing queers’ work on various political issues in a post-work context. Action on injustices which do not directly affect you is an important aspect of solidarity and is a good foundation from which to build a post-work future, because, like Weeks’ demands of less work and basic income, it increases the potential of other people to have a say in that future. Care is especially important in this frame, in that present survival is the basic prerequisite for having a say in the future.

Another aid to survival is basic income. Basic income is one of Weeks’ transitional demands, a campaign issue with broad appeal and the potential to free up time from work for collectively deciding the future. I had not originally planned to discuss basic income in this thesis, but the topic in fact arose in interviews. Robin worked in an organisation which uses a lottery to promote unconditional basic income in Germany:

We give 12000 € to people for one year, every month 1000 €, and then we document what they are doing with the money. If they want to. […]

So you ask people what they would do with it, but you don’t use that information to decide on who gets the funding?

No, it’s unconditional basic income. So even kids can win a basic income, and old people. Everyone can win it. Even billionaires. But I think they won’t participate. Yeah, it’s quite cool because we think that people with a basic income do what they really want to do; what they think is right. And we really think that when someone doesn’t have to think about his future and doesn’t have this, how do you say it… people are more free with the basic income, we think, and people do something for society when they have time for it. (Robin)

Robin was excited about the possibilities basic income could offer, and thought that opportunities people would get through free time could not only make individual lives better but also offered real potential for collective societal change. Robin’s focus on access to resources carried over into his other job, which aimed to help people access their welfare benefits. Meanwhile, by chance, Alex had engaged with the same basic income campaign Robin worked for and found it a positive experience. They felt there was a lot of value in asking people what they would do with their life if they did not have to work:

I was thinking about this idea of what I would do if I didn’t have to work. There were these people who started this project where they want to establish some kind of basic income where you get like 1000 € a month and they ask the people, what would you do with it? What would you do if you had the money and didn’t have to pay your rent? I think it’s a really good question because it’s really basic that people work so that they can just afford living and eating food. So I was thinking about it then too, and I tried a couple of times to get it, but it’s really a lottery so it’s very unlikely that you get it. […] I was just interested in reading what

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16 The basic income Weeks describes, and perhaps the only kind viable as a demand, is a national one. This is insufficient or perhaps even harmful in a global economy and when borders are strictly policed according to nationality. However, I discuss it here in relation to its value to future imagining and its recognition of the material prerequisites for non-work.
the other people said that they would do if they would get it. Some people said, oh I would quit my terrible job and do what I always wanted to do. And it made me feel like, sad, because, you know, people might not get the chance to do what they want to because they have to continue doing it and they don’t have the means to do it, like, the financial means. (Alex)

Alex continued, talking about the importance of being able to imagine in order to create change:

I think imagining things can be really powerful. It can give you some sort of feeling of purpose, of what you would want to change. And, you know, how to achieve it. And I think it’s totally possible that you can do things when you’re thinking they’re not possible. (Alex)

Imagining is therefore important to working towards a better future. Material and ideological factors combine in the basic income project, allowing people to imagine practically what they might do without needing to work to survive, but without having to imagining a complete societal change in order to do so.

Following the same line of reasoning, I asked interviewees what they would do with a four-day weekend (also including reproduction work and any tasks they personally considered work) assuming no financial loss. Most met my question with a similar look of joy, excitement and bewilderment (with the notable exception of Hannah, to whom, as already mentioned, the concept of weekends was irrelevant). So-Rim even took the question to the next room with her after the interview to have the conversation with her friend and partner. Parents did not at first include childcare in their conceptions of work in answering this question, in spite of the preceding conversations where we had just discussed it as such. They were especially excited when I told them that in this hypothetical scenario there would also be childcare. It was also important to qualify for people that they would not be the only ones with this free time; others would have it too, and they would be able to share it. Here I let interviewees speak about their imaginations for their free time.

Oh. Oh my god. To be honest, for it to be a really, for it to be a vacation I would need my baby to be taken care of. So that would mean my baby’s at the grandparents’ house. Yep, we’ve got that covered. There’s childcare.

Oh! Wonderful! I would sleep a lot and not sleep a lot. I would like, stay awake forever and just sleep as long as I want. I would sleep in. As long as I want. Next day. I’d go out. Take a lot of drugs. No. Maybe MDMA and weed. To be specific. I would go out with all my friends, have a good time. Stay out till, I don’t know, till it’s light outside, and then sleep in and not feel guilty about my hangover and coming down. [laughs] And enjoy the coming down phase with a little more drugs. And my friends around. And consume a lot of music. Maybe not too much TV because I can have that when baby’s here. Yeah. I would try to avoid anything that’s not fun or comfortable or relaxing. I would have sex. I’d try to do things that I don’t get to do usually. Yeah mainly going out. If I had enough money then I would take all my friends to Norway because one of my best friends moved there and I couldn’t visit him for three years
and he always comes here and I feel bad about it. [...] It has to involve karaoke as well. That would be perfect.” (So-Rim)

Oh wow. I mean, to be honest this is really hard! This is really hard to imagine. And so it’s also really hard to think about what to do. Because it seems so unimaginable for me… to have this kind of carefree life, for me and the others. Um. I think, I mean mostly then time would be spend with socialising, um, and doing interesting stuff, I mean, go to events maybe. Check out the nice new place. I mean I also sometimes like to go to museums. Or sit in the park and read books. Or go to a concert or organise an event myself which is fun. [...] A lot of pleasure and play with friends. I would probably try to have a lot of sex to be honest! Erm. So like you know there would be the orgy day. [laughs] (Seth)

Pleasure was very much key in So-Rim and Seth’s imagined future lives. Similarly important was the choice to do a variety of activities, including doing nothing.

That’s a really interesting question! I think right now, I feel like I really want to travel more. I want to meet people, and I feel I can’t do this right now […]. I would have time to finish all the books! I have so many books I got and I still didn’t get around to reading them. And I guess if I had done that, I would finally start cooking more because I have really cool cooking books and I don’t get round to trying all the recipes because I’m so stressed and I don’t have all the time to make things. If I got bored by doing that I’d probably continue doing more knitting and crocheting and… I don’t know, if I was done with that, I would probably find something else! And I would make more zines! I don’t know. And maybe then if I felt like I needed to see more people, then I would also go to […] lectures and workshops and learn things and create things and that’s probably what I would do.

Cool. You wouldn’t get bored?

No, I wouldn’t get bored. I could start maybe like a hitchhiking trip again. I could hitchhike to Scandinavia. I really like hitchhiking. I used to do it when I was done with school and had a lot of time. I would spontaneously decide I want to go somewhere today and I would arrive on the same day. It was a really good feeling. I felt so accomplished in my life! [laughs] (Alex)

It’s a good question. I would cuddle more. I’d do more work I don’t get paid for at the moment. I mean I’m also just a member of a queer working group in my party but we just meet once a month and try to organise things but it doesn’t work really. I would try to be a bit more active on the streets and in the party. […] More creativity, somehow. But first I would travel and take photos. (Robin)

Travel was raised on many occasions, not usually in the context of tourist holidays, but rather to visit friends, maintaining and creating aforementioned community connections. Not only would partying and political projects fulfil a central role in Marlene’s imagined future, but also learning to think about activity and themself differently:

I would also try to not be productive all the time, which is something that I’m learning more and more. Also to judge myself not by productivity. Which is hard! Because I feel like… I’ve been judging myself under those terms for a very, very long time. And to just be like, “Okay, I didn’t do anything valid today, but it was nice.” That would be cool if I could have… If I could just do that sometimes. [laughs] (Marlene)

Tomka also wanted to slow down and think:
I used to be slow. I would get in the slow mode again. I would get very slow. Just lie in bed very long in the morning. Get up. Make coffee maybe. Walk around. Maybe just ride the bus. Top floor. […]

Wouldn’t you get bored?
No. definitely not.

Why not?
No because I would think about something new then. Would you get bored?
No.

I think being bored is if you’re very unrelaxed, and if you have time you’re relaxed. Getting bored needs a mind that is very full and has no time to think. (Tomka)

Here, Tomka contrasts being bored but busy with being relaxed and having more time to think, making me think again to Weeks’ interim demand of “time for what we will” – not just to do what we already enjoy, but to think of new alternatives.

Important goals in interviewees’ imagined non-work time were then varied and mixed together: socialising, pleasure, doing activities that interest them, having sex, cuddling, going clubbing, having the time to connect to people personally and politically, spending time with people without work as a time pressure or childcare pressures, unlearning the need to be productive, slowing down, having time to think, relaxing, doing aimless or unproductive activities, sleeping, resting, travelling and visiting friends, cooking more, and also doing more creative and political projects.

As seems evident from these quotes, however, even those who were critical of work had difficulty imagining their lives without productive activity, with most saying that they would probably fill the time with more creative and political projects. For example, I asked Tomka what he would do with more free time. Although he had lots of ideas, not all of them productive, he ended by saying:

I would fill the time again with other projects, so that’s a problem. (Tomka)

While Tomka described the desire to fill up time with activity as a problem, Mitzi saw productivity as ingrained in her, but did not seem to find it a problem:

I think I have an internal need to be productive, so if I wasn’t working I would probably still be doing something; it would be one of the other things that we mentioned. (Mitzi)

I’d do different things. Currently I really want to have time to volunteer with refugees because of the situation that’s happening right now, […] there’s the music that I have neglected so much that I didn’t mention it. I sing a little and a play the trombone a little but I haven’t done any of those for the last couple of years, not seriously, because, no time. So that would be one thing that I might get back to. My [book] translation. And there are two projects I’m thinking I might do. One is a community and one is an app. (Mitzi)
For many, it was perhaps rather the ability to choose to participate in projects and activities and to combine them with non-productive activity that was important. Having a genuinely free choice of activity for everyone complicates the boundary between work and non-work, but in a more positive way than the individualised neoliberal modes of work that claim to offer this choice. Many participants already tried to organise their lives in ways which prioritised non-work, despite current constraints. For example, having stopped working on their PhD was having an effect on how Marlene thought about what to do with their future:

*And how do you feel about having stopped?*

At the moment it's great! 'Cause [laughs] I, yeah, it's what I want to do. I want to do different things. I want to work in different fields. And with work I don't necessarily mean waged work. I want to do more activism. I want to do more... what actually is *ehrenamtliche Arbeit*? I don't know, um, volunteering. And, um, yeah, I've just kind of gotten tired of academia[...] because what I actually want to talk about is, what do I live like? What do I want to live like? What possibilities are the society offering me? And it's not only about me, you know. (Marlene)

I want all kinds of aspects to play a role in my life and, um, things that I need time and space for are: intellectual work, music, creativity, care, in a sense that I wanna, you know like, be there for other people and not only from my community but also, for example, I want to continue working in this refugee home… and, um, I think for me it’s also really important to have enough space also for people that I care about, to... not only to build a network, not only in this like practical sense of having a network of other radical queer people, which is important to have, but also just to have enough time to, you know, um, be there for other people for whatever they need you for, or don’t need you for, just to, you know, make valid connections. (Marlene)

Marlene, like others, was already beginning to organise their life in a way which mirrored the world they wanted to see, both for themself and for others. On the one hand, people’s imaginations of what they might do with little work are bounded by how their lives are now, and how they currently find an identity and subjectivity. On the other hand, as we saw in the preceding analysis, interviews indicated that people already chose to work less in jobs, chose to be creative, chose to share reproduction work in different ways, and chose to spend both paid and unpaid work time for social good. As we have seen, problems of class and accessibility (and doubtless many more not yet examined) still hinder collective efforts towards “getting a life” through resisting work, and it is dangerous to frame work as a choice, especially given the material necessity and subjectification effects of work already discussed. However, interviewees showed agency within these constraints, not only in defining their own lives but also in supporting others to do the same.
Conclusion

Work is important. Although capitalism may not be the totality of our historical context, it is certainly the backdrop, and the mechanism driving production. Therefore work, as a daily experience and as capitalism’s most basic element, is vital to examine. Paid and unpaid work not only enables the continuation of the profit system, but also creates and recreates the world around us. I have examined how work and queerness are bound together in the lives of my interviewees, and with reference to other intersectional positions, and found that this was often reported to be profoundly linked to the desire to create change. Marxist-inspired critiques of work could benefit from a more intersectional view to ensure their relevance, while intersectional studies dealing with multiple sites of equality can gain from adopting a work-critical stance; this study came out of a desire to begin to bridge this gap.

Radical work was understood to be a part of being queer, but not queer identity, rather queer practice. Although I found diverse meanings of queer, for most interviewees, inherent to their identification with queerness was some element of political and social work. My interviewees were all involved in various activities that seek to bring about social change, whether that is in art, activism, jobs or in their interpersonal relations. They did this transformatory work not just for themselves, or for other queers within a group or extended community, but also for other marginalised groups.

This link between work and queer practice affirms an anti-work focus on the distinction between work as a process and class as a social position and/or identity. This study presents a picture of how queers are involved in creating and recreating the world around them. This active effort to bring about radical intersectional change is in stark contrast to Butler’s view of queers as threatening to capitalism mainly due to their abject status or unconventional non-heteronormative lifestyles. Here I return to how Kathi Weeks upheld and carried forward Marx’s notion of the connection between work and agency. Workers have “the capacity not only to make commodities but to remake a world. In this way, the focus on laboring practices, on the labor process and the relations of labor, can register the workers’ power to act” (2011: 19). Weeks then also sees work, especially reproduction work, as potentially part of a transformatory process, noting that “feminized modes of labor marginalized by, but nonetheless fundamental to, capitalist valorization processes could provide points of critical leverage and sites of alternative possibility” (2011: 26). While Weeks and her Marxist feminist predecessors focused on women’s labour, I have extended this idea in my study with a partial exploration of queer labour and its transformatory potential. Queer care ethics
emerged as one mechanism by which solidarity and survival could be achieved in the face of various difficulties, but they were not always successful in doing so. Further work could be done into the potential of queer care work to resist oppression and effect social transformation.

Political work, creativity, activity, and inactivity were all parts of people’s visions for the future. Interviewees were positive about the prospect of less work. On the one hand, they wanted this time for rest and leisure, and on the other hand wanted time to pursue more creative and political activities. The line between the two was however not clear, and in particular the desire to connect more to other people and build community spanned conceptions of work and rest. Some were already actively pursuing lives where work played a lesser role in their lives, and attempting to make sense of this in new and positive ways contrary to the pressure to be productive. The finding that interviewees wanted to learn not to always need to be productive signalled perhaps further potential for the resignification of non-productivity and new modes of queer subjectivity which, while they cannot be entirely divorced from their neoliberal context, can help put less valuation on productivity for ourselves and in our communities.

This is just a beginning in exploring the potential for broader queer anti-work perspectives. Difference and intersectionality are important here. While queer care opened up practical possibilities for the reduction of work through sharing work in a community, or even just the all-important option for marginalised people to survive, and while queers attempted new non-work based valuations of themselves, these projects do not work along single-identity lines. The differences even within “queer” will affect what anti-work solutions can be useful and how they should be applied. To avoid simply reproducing the same inequalities on which the unequal work society is based, we must stay mindful of variances in experiences of and capacities for work. This means in part to demand the equal right to wealth irrespective of work, and to reject the normative valuation of people through productive output, regardless of whether what they (re)produce is factory goods, radical spaces or just themselves. Only then can we succeed in working to disrupt social and moral drives to be productive, so that production is no longer the standard against which we measure ourselves.

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