



Being out of Time: Life Narratives by and about Queer Youth

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Abstract

This paper examines the life narratives by and about queer youth in Sweden and Switzerland through the lens of scholarship on queer temporality. The analysis focuses on two questions: Firstly, how do queer youth narrate their childhood (past) and adolescence (present), and how do they imagine their adulthood (future)? Secondly, how do these narratives stick to or challenge heteronormative modes of narration such as progress, linearity, and teleology? We therefore analyzed interviews with queer youth in Sweden (N = 27), conducted between 2022 and 2023, and texts from the queer youth magazine *Milchbüechli* (N = 22) in Switzerland, published between 2017 and 2023. The results from the analysis of the queer youth magazine *Milchbüechli* reveal that queer youth subcultures use their own shared tropes and stages to construct life narratives from childhood to adolescence. These queer life narratives begin with the experience of being “out of time,” and are followed by a turning point that leads to the “death of the straight life” and end in pride. The coming-out narratives from the interviews suggest greater complexity than the linear trajectory from repression to pride found in issues of the magazine *Milchbüechli*: Coming-out is narrated as a lifelong process, as unnecessary, or as impossible. The visions of the future articulated in the interviews often stick to the “straight line” (marriage, a stable job, a family). However, given contemporary anti-gender backlash, “heteronormative” futures can also be understood as a radical act, while linear narratives that end in pride may encourage queer youth to change their futures in the present. Nevertheless, we argue for the necessity of queer life narratives that imagine new and different futures beyond the straight line.

Keywords: Temporality, Queer youth, Coming out, Life narratives, Chrononormativity, LGBTIQ+



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Introduction

In recent years, the rise of right-wing parties and anti-gender movements across Europe (Kováts 2017, Dahl & Kennedy-Macfoy 2020, Martinsson 2020) has undermined the achievements of the LGBTIQ+ communities (Nuñez-Mietz 2019, Roots 2022). This backlash is often rationalized in the name of protecting the “innocent child” (Butler 2024). At the same time, many European countries have increased legal equality for homosexual and bisexual people via same-sex marriage legalization, and there have been gradual improvements for trans* and intersex people. For example, when the ICD-11 (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 11th Revision) took effect in January 2022, trans* diagnoses were removed from the “personality disorders” section, while some countries have legalized a third gender and adopted self-determination laws for trans* people (ILGA-Europe 2025). Therefore, the situation for LGBTIQ+ people in contemporary Europe is ambiguous and complex—it may appear to be simultaneously moving forward and backward. In the light of the current situation, this paper focuses on LGBTIQ+ youth from two European contexts, Sweden and Switzerland, to explore how queer youth are positioned and position themselves in relation to the past, present, and future.

Research on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ youth in both the Nordic and German-speaking countries shows that they still experience many challenges despite the countries’ reputations for inclusivity. We found similar patterns across both contexts, even though the Nordic countries are often described as progressive in terms of gender and sexual diversity (Kjaran 2017, Kjaran & Lehtonen 2018). Growing up in heteronormative social institutions (e.g., family, school), LGBTIQ+ youth face the challenge of recognizing and accepting their own wishes and desires despite the heterosexual demands placed on them. They deal with self-doubt and shame and are confronted with fears of marginalization and rejection, as well as homophobic and transphobic attitudes in their environments (Kleiner 2016, Boll 2018, Oldemeier 2018, Hofmann et al. 2019). They often experience bullying and discrimination, especially at school, where they are exposed to threats and physical violence, yet receive little to no support from their teachers (Van der Star, Pachankis, & Bränström 2018, Weber & Greding 2018, Bomolo et al. 2022). For example, students at Swedish secondary schools expressed that teachers ignored or downplayed the seriousness of the verbal abuse toward LGBTIQ+ people there (Cederved et al. 2021). In particular, trans*, inter*, and nonbinary youth feel unsafe, invisible, and silenced at school (Schmitt 2023, Busche & Fütty 2023, Enzendorfer 2024). At the same time, trans* youth frequently face long wait times for gender-affirming medical care. Linander and Alm (2022) explore how trans* youth in Sweden describe their lives being put on hold and that they “lose time” by passing their teenage years waiting and longing for life to truly begin.

The authors (2022: 9) further describe a timeline that LGBTIQ+ youth feel they are not following: “The feeling of being left behind seems related to a feeling of being out of sync with time, not on the same timeline as other youth.” Hence, LGBTIQ+ youth in the Nordic and German-speaking contexts experience more psychological discomfort, anxiety, and higher suicide rates than youth who identify as heterosexual and cisgender (Prasse 2020, Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020, 2021, Nuñez et al. 2022). However, research also emphasizes that many LGBTIQ+ youth have their own strategies for gaining agency (Kleiner 2016, Enzendorfer 2024) and that peer networks and LGBTIQ+ subcultures serve as crucial sites of mutual support, exchange, and empowerment (Sotevik & Stretmo 2025, Sotevik, 2024; Vogler 2021, 2022).

Our paper extends these findings to elaborate on how queer youth navigate a cis-heteronormative world that regulates and disciplines queer lives through temporality. We revisited two bodies of material that were produced during separate research projects: interviews with queer youth in Sweden (see Sotevik, 2024) and a discourse analysis of magazines published by Switzerland’s largest youth-led queer organization, *Milchjugend* (see Vogler 2021, 2024). The projects had no previous connection, and their combination arose from the authors’ shared interest in how temporalities emerge in narratives by and about queer youth. We therefore re-analyzed our material through the lens of scholarship on queer temporality. We use this lens to uncover how queer youth relate to time: What temporal narratives emerge in queer youth culture and how are they challenged in queer young people’s descriptions of their past, present, and future lives?

Queer Temporalities and Queer Life Narratives

In the past 20 years, there has been a growing body of queer theory literature that addresses temporality. This “temporal turn” in queer theory marks a shift from primarily dismantling the “state’s naming apparatus” to focusing on the pressure from states and markets as a “periodising apparatus” (Freeman 2005: 58). Freeman (2010) calls this normative and linear temporality “chrononormativity.” From a biopolitical perspective, heteronormative temporalities regulate and discipline bodies to be both productive and reproductive. Dana Luciano (2007) shows how biopolitics and normative temporalities, described as “chronobiopolitics”, regulate bodies and affect in relation to time and the nation-state. Heteronormative temporalities, therefore, fit within the rationality of capital, Western epistemology, and the nation-state, which is deeply connected to sexuality, gender, race, ableism, and age (Dinshaw et al. 2007). The concept of queer temporality describes ruptures in chrononormative temporality and is particularly influential in the field of queer cultural studies and queer

history. Lee Edelman's (2004) monograph *No Future* was groundbreaking for queer-theoretical thinking about temporality: He argued in favor of a queer negativity that rejects the future, which is connected to the image of the child (Matz 2015). Queer of Color scholar Muñoz (2009) critiques this rejection of the future for being embedded in a white, middle-class narrative of queers who can live safely and be relatively unharmed by violence, racism or poverty, for example, and instead advocates for imagining alternative futures. In queer history and narrative theory, scholarship on queer temporality has notably criticized teleological metanarratives that assume a linear relation among past, present, and future (Dinshaw et al. 2007). In contrast to linear metanarratives, queer (historical) narratives emphasize the circularity, discontinuities, and nonlinear movements of time (Doan 2017).

Analyses from film and literary studies show that queer life narratives have their own shared tropes and consecutive stages, which often remain within the logic of linearity, progressivity, and teleology (Mulhall 2020). Jay Prosser (1998: 101), for example, identified the following stages in trans* life narratives: "[...] suffering and confusion; the epiphany of self-discovery; corporeal and social transformation/conversion; and finally, the arrival 'home'—the reassignment." Similarly, Kathryn Stockton (2009:7) shows how queer childhood narratives retrospectively construct the queer child as an "afterwardness" or "gravestone marker" that only acquires meaning through its future consequences. Like Prosser (1998), she also points to shared tropes and stages in these narratives like "growing toward a question mark" (4), the "death of the straight life" (7), and the happy newborn queer. Another dominant queer life narrative is the "coming-out teleology," which has been critiqued for its "homonormative" (Duggan 2004) inclusion of "queers" into the white, Western paradigm of finding happiness and success in love and marriage (Mulhall 2020: 145). These narratives imply that queer success and happiness begin with coming out and culminates in marriage and family. Furthermore, another well-known example is the "It Gets Better" campaign, which was launched on YouTube in 2010 (Ciszek 2014, Mason 2012, Dyer 2017). It depicts older LGBTIQ+ individuals who share their life stories, which often begin with experiences of bullying and discrimination and end with finding happiness in a stable, long-term relationship (Ciszek 2014). On the one hand, scholars argue that this campaign "promises" a happy future that not every queer person can attain (Halberstam 2011, Mulhall 2020). On the other hand, the campaign is recognized as a queer pedagogy that teaches LGBTIQ+ youth to change their future right now (Matz 2015). Nevertheless, there are also queer life narratives that challenge teleological and progressive narratives, such as Dorothy Allison's *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1996), Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie* (2013) and Billy-Ray Belcourt's *History of My Brief Body* (2020).

Elsewhere, queer scholars have reflected on how queers who do not follow the rationality of reproduction, marriage, and family experience time and space differently. Halberstam (2005), for example, shows how queers who enjoy participating in subcultural life beyond adulthood are cut off from the temporal rhythms of family life (e.g., school, work, shopping). Those who do not follow the heteronormative temporality of “childhood—early adulthood—marriage—reproduction—child” are perceived as childish and immature because they do not fulfill adulthood correctly (Dinshaw et al. 2007). They are constantly “in question” and “marked by questions” (Ahmed 2017: 120), as they do not fulfil childhood and puberty correctly. Getting married or having a long-term romantic relationship is a crucial part of what is perceived as a successful adulthood, even for queer people (Duggan 2004, Halberstam 2005, Jackson 2014). Sara Ahmed (2010:112) emphasizes that the prospect of including certain forms of queerness into the contemporary image of a successful and happy life simultaneously excludes other queer people, that cannot participate. According to her (2010, 2017), the “promise of happiness” is linked to a life course that includes marriage, family, a job, and a house, which puts pressure on queers, queer migrants, and queer people of Color, who do not fit into this “straight line.” Chrononormativity can therefore mean both: how the day is organized by institutions and family life (Halberstam 2005) and how life is organized according to a life course (Ahmed 2006).

Materials and Method

This paper analyzes the life narratives of queer young people who are part of queer subcultures in Sweden and Switzerland through the lens of scholarship on queer temporality. We re-analyzed materials that were initially produced in two separate projects: interviews with queer youth in Sweden and discourse analysis of a queer youth magazine in Switzerland. Rather than comparing or contrasting the different materials and their contexts (interviews vs. magazines or Switzerland vs. Sweden), we analyzed them separately before bringing each project’s results into a dialogue with each other. In doing so, we hope to find overlaps where the materials complement each other and together contribute to a broader analysis. We are interested in how the queer life narratives by and about queer youth first position themselves in relation to chrononormativity: How do queer youth narrate their childhood (past) and adolescence (present), and how do they imagine their adulthood (future)? Secondly, we elaborate on how the narratives follow or overcome “straight” forms of narration such as progressiveness, linearity, and teleology. We understand life narrative as “a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present” (Smith & Watson 2010: 1). In line with Michel Foucault’s (1972) discourse-theoretical thinking, we consider

the life narratives of queer youth to be embedded in a larger queer discourse rather than existing in isolation. While the broader queer discourse seeks to challenge heteronormativity (Butler 1993), it also risks, as we have already noted with respect to queer futures and happiness, being centered on a white, middle-class perspective, that excludes queers that do not fit its promises (e.g. Ahmed 2010, Muñoz 1999, 2006). We applied Siegfried Jäger's (2015) methodological tools of critical discourse analysis to our material. This approach is based on Foucault's thinking. First, we read and analyzed all relevant texts (magazines N=22 and interviews N=27) while focusing on the research question. This gave us an overview of the material and showed us which topics, statements, and patterns were typical for the material. Second, we performed detailed analyses of the topoi, patterns, and statements that had a temporal dimension (Jäger 2015: 80-97). Our analysis also considered that our materials' text types—magazines and interviews—worked differently: The life narratives in the Swiss magazines were written by queer young people who “came out and are proud” to retrospectively share their past struggles with other queer young people, to give them hope for their future. The texts are orientated toward the specific purpose of giving hope, and when writing an article, there is time to reflect on what has been written. On the other hand, interview responses are more spontaneous, influenced by the situation, and affective. However, both text types are understood as interpretive and meaningful constructions of one's own life, which also have the implicit purpose of constructing oneself as a coherent and successful queer subject (Woltersdorf 2005).

Milchjugend: Milchbüechli Magazine

We analyzed material from a queer magazine called *Milchbüechli*, published by the Swiss queer youth organization, Milchjugend, which is the largest youth-led LGBTIQ+ organization in the German-speaking world. It is a network that connects LGBTIQ+ youth across the country—in both urban and rural areas. *Milchbüechli* has been published four times per year since Milchjugend's foundation in 2012, and has a current circulation of 5000 copies per issue. Besides its typical LGBTIQ+ youth subscribers, it is also available at counselling centers, bookstores, community centers, AIDS centers¹, youth work facilities, and several schools. The magazine focuses on local activism, identity issues, LGBTIQ+ politics, popular culture, and sexuality. It is written, edited, and published by a (constantly changing) group of queer young people (ages 16-28) from different parts of Switzerland (see Vogler 2022). Because the interviews with queer youth in Sweden were conducted in 2022 and 2023, we analysed the most recent *Milchbüechli* issues (20–45, from

¹ Under the umbrella organisation Aids Hilfe Schweiz, there are cantonal and regional Aids Hilfe organisations operating across Switzerland, with a focus on HIV and sexual health more broadly. The name dates back to their establishment in the mid-1980s in response to the AIDS crisis.

2017 to 2023) to cover a similar period as the Swedish interviews. We selected texts that contain life narratives, which were primarily found in experience reports. Unlike the Swedish interviews, the articles in *Milchbüechli* contain only a few narratives about the future.

Interviews With Queer Youth

Interviews were conducted in 2022 and 2023 with participants from both larger cities and rural areas in Sweden. Participants were between 16 and 27 years old and recruited through various activist groups and organizations.²

The interviews, which lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Using a semi-structured approach allowed for follow-up questions and enabled participants to bring up themes they found important (Elliott 2005, Brinkmann 2020). The research project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority; given that the participants were both young and shared potentially sensitive details about their lives, it was essential to make ethical considerations while creating a respectful and trusting atmosphere. Participants were given written information about the research project, including information that participation was voluntary. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher went through the information verbally and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions. To ensure privacy, participants were assigned pseudonyms, while other personally identifying information like city names was removed.

Analysis

Drawing on scholarship on queer temporality, we analyzed the two types of material to examine how queer young people narrate their lives in relation to time. The first section, *Stages of Queer Life Narratives*, analyzes shared tropes and life stages in the life narratives within queer youth discourse depicted in *Milchbüechli*. Next, the *Being out of Time* section analyzes temporalities of coming-out narratives using interviews. Finally, *Happy Futures* takes a closer look at how the interview participants spoke about their personal visions for the future. We conclude by discussing similarities and differences between the two bodies of material and how they represent temporality and life narratives for or by queer youth.

² The interviews were made for a study that focused on young LGBTIQ+ people's self-organization in Sweden (Forte 2021-01981). The interviews focused on their experiences in activism and organizing meeting places; participants were asked about the needs and benefits of queer spaces and the challenges they encountered while organizing (see Sotevik 2024). In this article, we have selected parts of the interviews that align with our interest in temporalities and queer life narratives.

Stages of Queer Life Narratives

The analysis of *Milchbüechli* reveals that queer youth construct life narratives with their own “shared tropes” and “consecutive stages” (Mulhall 2020). The life narratives depicted in the magazine begin with queer youth being “lost in time”, are followed by a transformation that leads to “death of the straight/cis life”, and end with the happy, proud queer. We drew on four representative examples to show how these typical “consecutive stages” work. The first example, published in Issue 25, is titled “How I found out I was polyamorous” (Milchbüechli 2018b). The second example, from Issue 30, is titled “First straight—then bi—now lesbian” (Milchbüechli 2019). The third example, from Issue 39, focuses on bisexuality and is titled “Am I in the right place? My path to safety” (Milchbüechli 2021). The final example—published in Issue 23 (Milchbüechli 2018a)—is by a trans woman and is titled “Puberty 2.0.”

The (queer) youth lost in time

The four life narratives of queer youth from *Milchbüechli* share a common beginning that features a story of “being in question” —being lost in time or being out of time—due to not fitting into heteronormative temporality (Ahmed 2017: 115). The queer youth describe how, at the beginning of their lives, they felt stuck—moving sideways and backward rather than forward (Stockton, 2009).

The text titled “How I found out I was polyamorous” begins by describing a feeling of loss and being in question: Lou³ recounts how their dating experiences were overshadowed by the difficulty of navigating and understanding their pansexual and polyamorous feelings:

I didn’t know that I was also attracted to women, and I had no intention of telling her. I was too afraid of coming out and of what others would think of me. I didn’t know what to do anymore until I happened to meet a man I liked, and after a short time we became a couple. We were very happy, but I still couldn’t get that woman out of my head. [...] I had found a new love—how could I be in love with someone else at the same time? (Milchbüechli 2018b: 14).

Lou’s story begins with Lou being overwhelmed by feelings for another girl. They were not able to act on these feelings because they were afraid to come out. Lou describes themselves as a question (“How could I be in love with someone else at the same time?”) because their simultaneous love for more than one person does

3 All names are pseudonyms. In some articles, the authors’ pronouns are specified; if not, I use they/ them.

not fit into heteronormative temporality, which assumes that people fall in love with only one person at a time. Not fitting into a heteronormative expectation leaves them feeling stuck (“I didn’t know what to do anymore.”).

Clara, a lesbian youth, begins her life narrative, “First Heterosexual—Then Bisexual—Now Lesbian,” with a recollection of years spent dating a boyfriend while also having crushes on girls—a tension that ultimately led her to question her sexual orientation:

Over the next few years, I increasingly realized that I was probably bisexual. [...] On the one hand, it tore me apart not to know exactly where I stood with myself; on the other hand, I pushed it away to some extent, until I broke up with my boyfriend after eight years together. At that time, I was still repressing my bisexual identity to some degree. [...] Again and again, I felt caught in a whirlpool. I didn’t know: is this still bisexuality? Or would I feel more comfortable labeling myself as lesbian? (Milchbuechli 2019 :17).

Clara describes this phase as being a question (“not to know exactly where I stood with myself”). She uses the image of a whirlpool to convey her confusion and ongoing self-questioning. Clara also characterizes it as a period of being stuck, during which she was at times unable to move forward. She avoided dealing with her feelings—“pushed it away”—and repressed her bisexual identity. For Clara, this uncertainty and sense of being stuck lasted for ten years.

The life narrative “Am I in the right place? my path to safety” narrates the story of Emma a bisexual young person. The title of the article, “Am I in the Right Place?,” already poses a question that stands for all the times Emma has been in question because of her bisexuality. Unlike the first two stories, Emma explains that she did not have trouble with her bisexuality or her (inner) coming-out. Emma’s challenges began when family, friends, and the queer community started questioning her and her bisexuality:

Even though I was completely at peace with my bisexuality, I increasingly noticed criticism, incomprehension, or even anger from the outside. From ‘so are you more into women or into men?’ to ‘you’re basically a lesbian, you just don’t want to admit it,’ I had to listen to all kinds of things. Apparently, this ‘both’ was simply not accepted.” [...] “My family dismissed it as a trend. Like: ‘it’s just a phase. You’re trying it out, and then it will pass.’ [...] What hurt me most was the lack of understanding from lesbian friends. They gave me the impression that I didn’t belong, that I hadn’t quite found myself yet, or that I just wasn’t as right as they

were. I noticed how I felt increasingly insecure. I had the impression that I was wrong. I tried to compensate for this inner restlessness. So if I was in a relationship with a woman, I identified as lesbian. When I was with a man, I was back to being straight. My environment seemed okay with that. I was not. For me, it just wasn't right. (Milchbuechli 2021: 10).

Emma recounts how others questioned her bisexuality suggesting that a person can desire only either/or and not both genders at the same time ("So are you more into women or into men?"). Her family questioned her "true" feelings by labeling them a trend or a phase that would soon end. They thus situate her within a heteronormative developmental model of sexual maturity that presumes a temporary "homosexual phase" in early adulthood. Her lesbian friends, in turn, questioned whether she had "found herself" yet, assuming bisexuality is merely a phase for those not yet ready to admit their lesbianism. Emma describes that this state of being in question made her feel "insecure" and "restless". She recounts that she coped by passing as either heterosexual or lesbian—a strategy that pleased others but made her feel "wrong."

Likewise, in "Puberty 2.0," Carmen, a trans woman describes how her happy childhood ended with the unwanted onset of becoming a man, beginning at puberty:

Born in 1975, I try to put myself in the shoes of a younger teenager and figure out how this small difference, which never seemed to matter in the happy childhood school years, caused my Puberty 1.0 to go horribly wrong. The 24/7 struggle against the unwanted becoming-a-man of a happy child began, which, after around 27 years, would culminate in a striking emotional and physical pile of shards. Fear and ignorance repressed the trans identity, postponed coming-out. Every day I stood in front of my nicely filled wardrobe and had nothing left to wear outside, because I no longer wanted to play the man. (Milchbuechli 2018a: 7)

Carmen narrates that her happy childhood ended during puberty, when a gap opened between the bodily changes society reads as "becoming a man" and her refusal to identify as a man. Feeling out of time with respect to normative cisgender development led to a "24/7 fight against manhood." She describes a sense of being stuck that lasted twenty-seven years: fear and uncertainty delayed her coming out. The image of standing before her closet day after day, unsure what to wear, captures this sense of immobility—the difficulty of knowing where and how to stop "playing the man."

The death of the straight/cis life

The second stage of queer life narratives in the magazine *Milchbüechli* was the “death of the straight life” (Stockton 2009: 7), which marked the beginning of a transformation that allowed queer youth to move forward.

Lou narrates a transformation from a straight life to a polyamorous, pansexual life, which begins with a crisis and the recognition that it was OK to love more than one person at a time:

Then a new person entered my life with a force that nearly knocked me over. I was totally in love with her, and the drama started all over again. [...] I still loved my boyfriend. That couldn't/shouldn't be. [...] For a long time, I repressed my feelings until I couldn't take it anymore and, in tears, tried to explain the situation to my boyfriend. That was it—everything was over, I thought; I'm ruining everything. He reacted with surprising understanding and was there for me, drying my tears. [...] I thus discovered that I could have romantic feelings for several people at the same time—and that this was OK. (Milchbüechli 2018b: 14)

The death of Lou's straight/monogamous life begins with them falling in love again with a girl while still in a relationship with their boyfriend. This situation brings them into a crisis—“drama”—that culminates when they “couldn't take it anymore.” Lou tells their boyfriend, in tears, expecting to ruin their relationship, even though Lou still loves him. Instead, the situation opens up the possibility of questioning monogamy and heteronormativity. The death of the straight life begins with Lou's recognition that it was OK to be out of time—“to feel romantic love for several people at the same time.” It marks a transformation from the self being in question to questioning heteronormative temporality—namely the assumption that one can love only one person at a time (Ahmed 2017: 27).

In Clara's life narrative the turning point that led to the death of her straight/bisexual life was her discovery of her own lesbian desire when she fell in love with a work colleague: “In 2016, I fell head over heels in love with a work colleague and she fell in love with me. Our relationship did not last long, but after that relationship, I was sure that I was a lesbian (Milchbüechli 2019: 17).” Falling in love—and being able to experience that desire in a relationship—ended Clara's self-questioning and gave her certainty about her desire.

Emma explains that her transformation began with a decision to stand up for herself—regardless of what others might say:

I made the decision to stay true to myself—no matter what anyone says. I stand by it: I am and will remain bi, no matter whom I'm in a relationship

with. I'm not more into women than men, or vice versa. I don't have to pin myself down or choose. (Milchbuechli 2021: 10).

In Emma's narrative, it is not the "straight girl" who dies, but the girl who tries to survive people's need for unambiguity by squeezing herself into either a heterosexual or a lesbian identity. However, Emma is privileged in that she can stand up for herself without being exhausted—an option not available to every queer young person (Ahmed 2010: 112). In the life narrative of Carmen, the trans woman, the transformation began with her urgent need to survive a complete "emotional and physical breakdown" (Milchbuechli 2018a: 7).

The happy, proud queer

The final stage of queer life narratives in *Milchbuechli* is the happy life of the newly born queer (Stockton 2009) or the "arrival home" (Prosser 1998: 110). The queer youth narrate that, at the endpoint, they no longer need to hide their sexuality and can accept themselves and enjoy their queer relationships or their puberty.

Lou explains that they can now be themselves and is in a happy partnership with their boyfriend while also sustaining other relationships: "I realized I didn't have to repress anything and could fully be myself—pansexual and polyamorous. I've been with my boyfriend for eight and a half years; I have other relationships as well, and we're happy with that" (Milchbuechli 2018b: 14). Clara describes how she finally felt she had arrived, sure that she is a lesbian: "Our relationship didn't last long, but after it ended, I was sure that I am a lesbian. I needed that short but intense time to know where I stand with myself. [...] I felt I had arrived. Not with her, but with my sexuality." (Milchbuechli 2019:17). Clara uses the metaphor of "arrival" to express how she found herself. This metaphor refers to the endpoint of a journey from a heterosexual, through a bisexual, to a lesbian life. This long and often exhausting journey described in queer life narratives—marks a contrast to cis-heterosexual young people who usually do not have to question their desire or gender identity. Their temporality is one of having already arrived at their identity. Similarly, Emma concludes by saying she has made peace with herself—and with being questioned: "Today I can stand by it firmly and even smile when someone questions my bisexuality. I am fine the way I am and the way I feel" (Milchbuechli 2021: 10). While most life narratives culminate in arriving at themselves and their sexuality and therefore tell a linear, progressive story—from being in question, to becoming themselves or standing in for themselves—Carmen's life narrative is less linear. She describes being in her thirties, still in puberty, still naive, still experiencing becoming a woman, and in no hurry to finish this process:

Right now I feel like I'm fourteen—rather inexperienced, somehow young, and in the midst of a still unfamiliar, at times confusing rush of hormones. A cheeky pageboy cut, after pink now turquoise-blue hair; people address me with the informal “du”⁴. [...] Only for a few months have I been able to explore my new sexual organs myself. My conclusion so far: definitely a woman, and I love people. That sounds fantastic (and it is!), and, banally enough, it feels exactly the way I always imagined it and experienced it in my dreams. [...] I'm now enjoying my puberty to the full. Long may it continue. (Milchbüechli 2018a :7)

Carmen also frames her story as having a happy ending. It feels fantastic—like in her dreams—to have and to explore her new body. In terms of normative developmental stages, her narrative marks a step backward: feeling fourteen and undergoing a second puberty at forty. She enjoys this second puberty and hopes it will continue for a long time, thereby resisting the urgency of the “rush of chrononormativity” (Israeli-Nevo 2017: 42). She is also cautious about claiming a stable, final identity; instead, she speaks of “my conclusion so far,” signaling that her self-understanding may change and that there is no need to arrive at a definitive endpoint.

Being Out of Time

This section shows how queer young people positioned themselves in their life narratives relative to heteronormative temporalities as well as to queer life narratives. The narrative of coming out as a part of the queer life course is often reduced to a linear process—from hiding to being proud of who you are (Liinason 2020, Mulhall 2020). Compared to the *Milchbüechli* magazine narratives, the interviews contained more complex descriptions of how young people thought about and dealt with the process of coming out. For example, 24-year-old Lee said: “I'm not open, but I'm not closed either, so it's like I haven't come out, but I talk about going to gay clubs and Pride parades.” Likewise, Nelly, aged 18, stated, “I feel like I CAN talk about it, but I don't” regarding whether she could be open with her friends and family. Others, like 25-year-old Jessica, did not feel the need to “come out” in the traditional manner because of the accepting environment where she was raised:

I've always had a supportive family, and my sister has always taken the debate before I started thinking about sexuality. She was into gender and

4 In German-language contexts, adults and people higher in the hierarchy are addressed with the formal “Sie,” whereas young people are addressed with the informal “du.”

sexuality and politics and things like that, so it's always been open. I've never felt that I've needed to have a coming-out story, it's just flowed on.

Jessica's description illustrates what is sometimes referred to as the "post-closet generation" (Murphy 2017), i.e., young people do not come out because they have never been in the closet. However, this was not a frequent narrative among the young participants.

In many ways, 21-year-old Lisa's experience aligned with the common queer life narrative from repression to pride (Mulhall 2020): "In the beginning it was very difficult, I had a huge longing to just be able to accept it at once." However, she also described how this was not a linear, temporal, one-time event, but more ongoing or repetitive: "Getting out is not a one-time thing, you have to do it over and over again. For everyone you meet for the first time, and also people you meet after you've kind of taken the step yourself." Lisa's description interrupted the linear narrative where "coming out" becomes a step forward in queer life. An interview with 25-year-old Mona depicted another example of not following the temporality of the queer life narrative. Because she knew that her parents had negative attitudes toward homosexuality, she chose not to disclose her sexuality to them. Mona described how people sometimes got upset when they learned that she was not being open about her lesbian identity to her parents. For example, she referred to how a school counselor responded when she shared her situation:

I would say that the majority understand but still do not understand, for example counselors at school: "-God, I can't understand that you need to go through this, it's 2022. Do you really think your family would not be able to accept you?—I thought that was a hundred years ago."

The counselor referred to the present year (of that conversation) as an era where not being accepted as a lesbian is almost incomprehensible. She also positioned this as something far in the past—from a hundred years ago—and not something that still happens today. Not coming out or living openly is therefore interpreted by others as being out of time or experiencing a delay (Ahmed 2006, Stockton 2009, Freeman 2010). Mona also experienced being told that because she was now of legal age, she no longer needed her parents and should cut off contact with them if they did not accept her. Here, too, there is a temporal reference to the expected life course where a young adult will act independently in relation to their parents. Mona said that in some ways, she appreciated these reactions because they made her feel validated in her right to be queer, but she also felt questioned and alienated. In relation to the image of Swedish society as modern and progressive, Mona's

experience was positioned by others as untimely, and as *being out of time* regarding her own life course. Ahmed (2006) describes an expected way of living that follows the straight line that we are expected to live by. It is “straight” in both the sense of moving in a straightforward direction and heterosexual living. Deviating from the straight line—not doing anticipated things (for example, getting married and having children) in the expected order or time of your life—can be perceived as being out of line or out of time. Mona’s story shows how deviating from the expected queer life narrative also created a sense of being out of time (Ahmed 2006). In many of these interviews, the temporality of coming out flowed back and forth, rather than moving forward in a chrononormative sense (Dinshaw et al. 2007, Freeman 2010, Doan 2017). This contrasts with the more linear, progressive narrative produced in the magazine *Milchbüechli*, where one stage seemed to follow another. Conversely, the narrative presented by the interview participants brought more messiness into how context, relationships to others, and individual feelings could challenge heteronormative temporality. Paradoxically, the act of not coming out—and thus remaining invisible to the outside world in one’s queerness—serves as an example of a queer temporality that disrupts the chrononormative narrative.

Happy Futures

During the interviews, queer youth described their future plans and wishes. A recurring narrative was about finding a long-term partner and getting married. Alice, a 20-year-old trans woman, described how this makes her happy and gives the future a positive note:

I have plans to get married in the future to my girlfriend, that’s what we’ve both talked about and it’s very nice, it makes me very happy to have it, to share that future plan with someone else and it feels really very positive.

For Alice, this future plan was perceived as within reach, while others expressed more uncertainty about getting married. Miro, a 20-year-old nonbinary youth said:

I hope that I will be able to have a partner that I’ll be able to be open with no matter who this is, that I’ll be able to live a happy life. But, like this idea of getting married, it’s still a bit like ... it still feels a bit scary to have a wedding. There are many of my relatives that I have no idea what they would think about it.

Miro was hoping for a happy life and a partner but stated that their relatives were a potential obstacle to getting married. Here, not getting married reflects more a consequence of negative attitudes than an active choice made by the queer subject themselves. Although few youths discussed marriage during the interviews, it was not explicitly criticized as a normative choice. Instead, some youth stated that

their dreams for the future were “ordinary” and just like everybody else’s. Nelly, an 18-year-old lesbian, said that her vision for the future was “like many others, family, a small house maybe. I haven’t thought so much about it, but I want the same as many other people I think.” Likewise, Jessica, a 25-year-old lesbian, stated that her picture of the future was ordinary:

I hope, the way I feel today, that I would have a stable job where I would thrive, and that I might have a partner and we have a good everyday life and that we might even be able to have children. That’s my picture of how I would like to have my future. Very ordinary.

It was not particularly surprising that queer youth described their futures in terms of relationships and family life. Halberstam (2005) and Ahmed (2010) point out that when queer people now have marriage rights in many countries, their demands to live a happy family life are more present. In these cases, queerness does not challenge what happiness can be or what it can look like, but is adapted to existing happiness narratives where marriage, financial stability, and whiteness are rewarded. However, “queer happiness” will not be available to everyone, according to Ahmed (2010). One strong discourse about the future for LGBTIQ+ is that it can be hard to be a young person but that a better future lies ahead. For example, many of the videos from the “It Gets Better” campaign have narratives where happiness equals finding a stable and long-term relationship (Ciszek 2014) and present a linear and progressive movement toward a future that promises something different from their past and present. This is also how the queer young people in the interviews envision their (happy) future: They have quite “ordinary” hopes for their future such as marriage, a job, children, and a house. On the one hand, desiring such futures can be a way of avoiding exhaustion: “We also learn: the desire for a normal life does not necessarily mean identification with norms but can be a desire to avoid the exhaustion of having to insist just to exist” (Ahmed 2017: 122). On the other hand, “normative” promises of the future might not always be available for those who are struggling to survive, because they cannot live safely and unharmed (Muñoz 1999, 2006). According to Halberstam (2010), the “it gets better” promises are a “sad lie” of adulthood as a “safe harbor” for everyone. It only gets better for a few privileged queers; for others, it gets worse—or maybe it gets different (*ibid.*), which the interviews also point to. Miro, for example, would like to imagine a future in which they get married, but they are also scared of it, because they are not sure whether marriage is an option for them. Unlike the narrative produced in the magazines, the interviews provide more insight into how young LGBTQIA+ imagined, or hoped for, their future. The orientation toward a happy future from the magazines was here embodied in narratives of romantic love and family life. This emphasis on romantic relationships being crucial parts of young queer people’s life courses can be understood as the same chrononormative (Freeman 2010)

temporalities as those existing on the straight line are also reproduced in queer life narratives.

Conclusion: It Gets Different

From the perspective of queer temporality, our analysis elaborated on how life narratives of queer youth worked on and against heteronormative temporalities and might therefore be able to offer alternative paths to happiness for queer youth who continue to struggle with cisnormativity and heteronormativity. The analysis of the *Milchbüechli* magazine discourses showed that queer youth subcultures create their own life narratives. Except for the trans narrative, they followed their own linear and progressive (queer) timeline, which begins with “repression” and ends with “pride.” The first stage of the queer life narratives reveals the pressure placed on queer young people by their non-conformity with hetero- and cisnormative temporality (the queer youth lost in time). However, queer life narratives suggest that queer youth do not have to be stuck in a repressed life but can take a different path that begins with the death of the straight life. Therefore, the narratives offer queer youth a new path (e.g. finding and accepting themselves, questioning heteronormativity, coming out to others, standing up for themselves) that allows them to escape repression (repressing identity, hiding identity, feeling lost or out of place). On the one hand this can be understood as a queer pedagogy that encourages queer young people to change their future, which has not yet begun, right now (in the present) (Matz 2015: 234). However, coming out—or, as in Emma’s case, standing up for oneself—is not available to everyone and does not necessarily lead to a happy life (Ahmed 2010, 2017, Halberstam 2010). The interviews uncovered more complexity in how queer young people position themselves and revealed that queer time is more complicated and less straightforward than the queer life narratives suggest. Compared to the progressive queer youth narrative discourses, the interviews characterized the positions of queer young people by simultaneity, forward, backward and sideways movements: They may choose not to come out to their parents, they are neither open nor closed, they come out in some spaces and not in others, they don’t have to come out or they have to come out throughout their lives. This messiness compared to the magazines can also be partly explained by the different materials. The interview responses are more spontaneous and affective than the life narratives in the magazines, which allow for time to reflect on how a life story is told. In doing so, authors unconsciously tend to constitute themselves as successful subjects. However, a successful/progressive life story also serves the goal of encouraging queer young people to change their future right now. The narrative of trans life in the magazine is an exception. It reveals sideways and backward movements. The trans life narrative ends with enjoying the experience of

becoming, thus interrupting both the “rush” of chrononormativity and the linearity of the identity paradigm (Israeli-Nevo 2017: 42).

The queer life narratives not only encourage young people to change their future right now, but also promise them a better future with the happy proud queer as an endpoint. The visions of the future in our material also point to a lack of queer youth discourses and queer life narratives. There are no alternative visions of the future that aim to redefine the social order, nor is “failure” (Halberstam 2011) part of these visions. Instead, the narratives often conclude with a “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2020), which suggests that changing the future now will lead to the happy, proud queer. But striving to offer hope while maintaining a critical perspective on what constitutes a desirable future is not a contradiction. When we think of the shame, fear, silence, bullying, and discrimination that many queer youths still experience, it is important to create life stories that offer opportunities to escape these repressions by starting to change the future now (Matz 2015). Queer youth narratives could provide the opportunity to reject the normative notion of what a “better” life entails and claim that it can be different. Future research should address the question of which alternative nonlinear visions of the future can be offered to queer young people.

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