Care and Career in the Life Scripts of Young People—
Gendered Cases from The Czech Republic and Norway

Haldis Haukanesa and Gry Hegglib

aDepartment of Health Promotion and Development, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway; bDepartment of Education, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

ABSTRACT
Based on a qualitative study of young people's visions of their future, this article explores tensions emerging between care work and professional success in the life-scripts of young girls and boys in the Czech Republic and Norway. The two countries both have a high level of female labour market participation but have developed distinctively different welfare policies as concerns the emphasis placed on family vs. institutional care. In Norway, there has been a strong increase in subsidized public child care, and simultaneously fathers' roles as caretakers have been stressed both in public policies and discourse. The Czech Republic has experienced an opposite trend; maternity leave has been extended, public crèches have almost vanished and public discourse has focused on the superiority of motherly care over public care. Framing our discussion within debates around naturalization, gendered subject positions and balance, we ask how – or to what extent – such distinct discourses and policies influence the ways that young people come to envision their future life. Two different models of balance are applied: one which sees the individual as the balancing unit and the other taking relational dimensions into account. Some expected differences between the young Czechs and Norwegians are found, for example, with regards to articulations of male involvement in care work and female economic independence. Through the relational model of balance, we are also able to discover striking similarities between the two contexts, which demonstrate enduring gendered inequalities in perceived divisions of work-care responsibilities. Firstly, the girl career seeker – one who gives priority to career over family – does not appear as an imaginable position neither among girls nor among boys. Moreover, there is a striking silence around the particularities of care-work as performed by women, something which suggests that aspects of care are still naturalized as female.

Introduction
With women's expanding participation in the labour market during the last decades of the twentieth century, a key challenge for European policy-makers and families alike has been how to juggle parents' participation in the labour force with unpaid care work. In today's
Europe, where many countries experience high unemployment rates combined with withdrawal of state-provided welfare services, the challenge seems even more acute as people struggle to take care of their children, elderly and other vulnerable people, and at the same time earn an income sufficient to tackle the daily needs of the family. The Czech Republic and Norway are two countries which have managed to keep unemployment rates at reasonable levels and at the same time retain relatively generous and universal social benefits for families, in contrast to the general European tendency towards cuts in state welfare budgets and/or more market-liberal, targeted policies. However, the profiles of and the discursive contexts for the two countries’ policies have been distinctly different regarding the emphasis placed on family care versus institutional care, something which in turn may affect the gendered organization of families. The question is: How—or to what extent—do such distinct discourses and policies influence the ways that young people come to envision their future life? Which scenarios for the gendered distribution of paid labour and care work in families appear as possible, desirable, or unwanted among young people living in the two settings?

Based on a study of young people’s visions of their future, this article will explore cross-country and cross-gender similarities and differences in young Czechs’ and Norwegians’ narratives of their future families, emerging tensions between paid labour and care work as narrated by the youth, and solutions presented to these. Framed within debates around “balance”, naturalized gender roles, and social change, gendered inequalities in perceived divisions of responsibilities appear, we argue, in both contexts. However, we also see the emergence of new gendered patterns and roles, most strongly vocalized among the Norwegian youth but also found in the Czech context.

Today’s debates in the social sciences around the topic of care work versus paid employment are indebted to pioneer feminist scholars who put women’s unpaid domestic labour on the research agenda from the early 1970s on (Grenness, 1978; Holter, 1971; see also Daly & Lewis, 2000; Christensen & Syltevik, 2013). While the first attempts to theorize care focused primarily on conceptualizing women’s unpaid labour in the family, its characteristics and relational dynamics (Daly & Lewis, 2000), and its exploitative nature (Read & Thelen, 2007), later scholarship broadened the concept to encompass also institutional care and included strong efforts to deconstruct the public–private divide (Haukanes, 2007a; Read & Thelen, 2007; Wærness, 2000). A recurrent theme in care-related research has been the social organization of work, in particular the ways families manage the relationship between reproductive work and paid labour. Much of this research has focused on women’s lived experiences, their commitments to care work in and for the family, their struggles to combine care with paid labour (Haukanes, 2007b; Hochschild, 1989; Thompson, 1991), and the ways that state policies facilitate or hinder women’s participation in the labour market (Fraser, 1994; Haukanes & Pine, 2005; Hernes, 1985; Keck & Saraceno, 2013). In Scandinavia in particular, following the trends towards a more “involved fatherhood”, we have seen a new field of interest emerging, where both state policies directed towards increasing paternal involvement (Annfelt, 2008; Ellingsæter, 2014) and fathers’ dilemmas in balancing care for children with paid labour are put under scrutiny (Brandth & Kvande, 2009; Halrynjo, 2009; Johansson, 2011).

The vast majority of research has focused on adults living in heterosexual, nuclear families. Our contribution takes a different approach as it looks into young boys’ and girls’ future narratives; the ways that they place themselves within an imagined family and profession; and the extent to which “career” versus “care” dilemmas surface in the accounts. We will
mainly focus on care in the sense of unpaid reproductive work in families (Esquivel, 2014), although institutional provision of childcare in the two contexts forms a (silent) backdrop for the narratives.

In the literature analysing the relation between the domains of paid work and family life, discussions around the notion of balance commonly appears, often entailing “not having work–family conflicts or negative spillovers between the two life domains and a more or less equitable time distribution between the very distinct activities” (Eby et al. 2005, quoted in Santos, 2015, p. 2; see also Clark, 2000). Based on her study of the interface between work and family life among Portuguese academics, Santos (2015) rightly points out that such a definition of balance does not problematize the notion of “equitable time distribution between activities” (p. 2). She argues that the perception and experience of balance is dependent on the meanings individuals ascribe to family and work, and might therefore “be determined by the concept of self-identity” (Santos, 2015, p. 2).

With reference to the above-mentioned feminist elaborations of the concept of care, we would like to add one element to Santos’s understanding of balance. Like Santos we find it crucial to focus on the meanings that people attribute to the two domains of work and family respectively. To understand these meanings fully, we need to expand the concept of balance beyond the perspective of the individual. An individually focused model implies that the subject makes an effort to find balance between paid work and family life within her/his own horizon. Balance should in our view be extended to include a relational dimension, where balance is sought by distribution of different kinds of labour between family members (e.g. between husband and wife, between generations). Such a perspective on balance allows us fully to explore the cultural dimensions of work-care arrangements, taking into account the cultural contingencies of life scripts (Haldar, 2013; Kåks, 2007). These life scripts often operate at a “taken-for-granted” and unarticulated level, and are, among others, informed by existing gender norms and ideas about gendered paid and unpaid work (Sevón, 2011).

In line with this culturally informed perspective on balance, it is useful to consider Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney’s (1995) conceptualization of naturalization, which offers a productive perspective on gendered domains and social change. They explain naturalization as a process through which unequal relations come to be seen as “natural, inevitable, even God-given” (1995, p. 1), i.e. beyond human influence, and/or immoral to try and change. Naturalization also implies that domains are merged. For example, biological “facts” of reproduction are linked directly to the gendered division of labour, providing ideological arguments for the male breadwinner model (Fraser, 1994), for the construction of women’s labour market participation as “extra” or “exceptional” (Ødegaard, 2010), and so forth. De-naturalization on the other hand points to processes where naturalized social orders are challenged, resisted, and, in some cases, changed. As discussed by the Norwegian anthropologist Kathinka Frøystad (2015), in her attempt to reinvigorate Yanagisako and Delaney’s concept of naturalization and bring it up to date, the inclusion of a diachronic dimension is crucial in analysis of things being made inevitable: naturalization and de-naturalization are historical processes unfolding under the impact of many different sources such as political movements, state politics, and science (the feminist scholarship mentioned above being a good example of social science’s contribution to and de-naturalizing the work-care divide). Moreover, they are incomplete, complex, and contradictory processes, and also often involve a third level: re-naturalization. Re-naturalization means ways in which de-naturalizing discourses and policies are counterworked in order to restore what is seen as the natural order
of things (Jacobsen & Fagertun, 2013). In complex societies in particular, established and “naturalized” truths are constantly challenged, leading to attempts to nullify the challenges and restore the original order of things (Jacobsen & Fagertun, 2013). One important domain where such dynamics can commonly be observed is the politics of family and reproduction, where one or several of the parties in a political dispute will resort to re-naturalizing arguments to forward their claims. But processes of de- and re-naturalization of family and gender relations are also unfolding as part of people’s daily life, in exchanges of opinions on what women and men “are made for”, what their natural roles in the family are, and hence which work they should be doing.

In this article, we will explore aspects of naturalization and de-naturalization of gendered work and divisions of labour through an examination of tensions emerging between care work and professional success in the life scripts of young women and men. We compare young Czechs’ and Norwegians’ narratives about their future lives against the backdrop of a historical overview of care-work models and policies in the two contexts, the Czech Republic and Norway being two countries with high levels of female labour market participation but with distinctively different welfare policies and thus care-work regimes.

Care-work models and policies in the Czech Republic and Norway

With industrialization in Western Europe, the household moved from being “a total form of life” to becoming a domain of reproduction, subordinated to the industrial sphere of production. The male breadwinner ideal—although never fully realized—spread gradually from the middle and upper classes in society and implied a sharp and gendered division of the public and the private (Christensen & Syltevik, 2013).

Looking historically at employment and welfare policies in Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic and Norway since the 1950s—the peak of the male breadwinner model in Western Europe—we find interesting differences and similarities. In communist Czechoslovakia the challenges to the male breadwinner model came shortly after the Second World War; ideas about emancipation of women were strongly voiced in the 1950s through a discourse proposing that working women should be released from domestic duties by the help of the state (Hašková & Klenner, 2010; Maříková, Křížková, & Vohlídalová, 2012). Already from the 1960s onwards (but accelerating in the 1970s and 1980s) the discourse of emancipation weakened, and the so-called working mother became the ideal. The combined focus on female paid employment and women’s roles as mothers has been coined the “interrupted dual earner model”, as it relied on increasingly lengthy maternity leaves while still keeping women as important contributors to the workforce (Hašková & Klenner, 2010). After the fall of communism we have seen a re-enforcement of this tendency: maternity leave has increased to four years, and we have had a near extinction of crèches, leading Czech sociologists to talk about a re-familialization of care responsibilities for children (especially for young children aged 0–3 years). The combination of extended maternity leave and a public discourse focusing on the necessity of young (pre-school) children to be cared for in their homes, preferably by their mothers, has thus led to a more pronounced decrease in young women’s labour market participation; the impact of childbirth on women’s employment is greater in the Czech Republic than in almost any other European country (Hašková, 2011). Moreover, the gendered division of labour in the family seems to be challenged
only minimally, leaving the brunt of the housework to women (Hašková & Klenner, 2010; Maříková et al., 2012).

In Norway, as in most of Western Europe, we find that the male breadwinner model reached its peak in the 1950s and was being challenged only from the 1970s on. From the 1980s focus was on women's participation in the labour market, moving gradually towards a focus not only on gender equality in the labour market but also towards men's increased participation in care work—what Nancy Fraser has called the universal caregiver model (Fraser, 1994), encouraging both parents to combine work and family obligations (Ellingsæter, 2007, 2014). In addition to the strong increase in subsidized public care for children from the age of one and older, there has been an increased focus on the male role in the family—as fathers and caretakers. Already in 1978 the leave arrangement was changed from maternal to parental leave, based on gender equality ideals. In 1993 an individual right of four weeks was bound up to the father (in 2005 and 2006 prolonged to five and six weeks, respectively). In 2008 a governmental commission suggested a three-part arrangement where a third of the parental leave should be reserved for the father. A heated debate followed, where fathers’ rights as caregivers/children's rights to paternal care were held against mothers' rights/need to breast-feed and children's presumed biological needs (Ellingsæter, 2014). After 2008 several changes have occurred in paternity leave regulations. From a gradual expansion of the “father's quota” to 14 weeks in July 2013, the right-wing government that had been elected in the autumn of the same year proposed a reduction to 10 weeks, which was implemented from 2014 and still applies (Solhøy, Mæland, & Godal, 2015). In any case, for more than two decades Norwegian family policies have been strongly focused on gender equality, and on changing the position of the father in the family and giving him more space and more responsibilities for care work (Annfelt, 2008; Wærness, 2015). Current analysis demonstrates that the policies have had impact on families' behaviour in general and on fatherhood in particular. Kitterød and Rønsen (2014), in their research based on data on time use from the period of 1980 to 2010, show that Norwegian fathers of young children have become more involved and active in the household, and also more inclined to adjust their professional career to the needs of the family. At the same time, children spend less time with both parents, as subsidized public childcare is offered for children from the age of one; 80% of one-year old children attended nurseries in 2014 (Kindergartens, 2015).

The developments in the two countries should be recognized as main tendencies, not as absolutes. The universal caregiver model is not fully realized in Norway; women still earn less than men and do more of the housework, they have more part-time employment, and the Norwegian labour market is quite gender-segregated (Kjeldstad & Nymoen, 2012; Knudsen & Wærness, 2008). In the Czech Republic, gendered re-familialization of care is not the only tendency. The discourse of new/involved fatherhood is to some extent present (Maříková, 2009), and the critiques against the structural problem of young women's disappearance from the labour market first voiced by feminist scholars and activists are finding some resonance in the wider public discourse and even among politicians.

The general picture nevertheless shows two countries which currently appear to be at opposite ends of the (re-)familialization–defamilialization continuum when it comes to public childcare arrangements, labour market participation of (young) parents, and distribution of care responsibilities. Returning to ideas about naturalization and de/re-naturalization of gendered work, we could say that the Czech development tends towards a (re-)naturalization of a gendered care-work divide where women increasingly seem to bear the
costs of reproduction. The Norwegian developments move in the opposite direction; in the Norwegian context care work is increasingly de-gendered and de-familiarized, and the association of female/reproduction/private is thus de-naturalized.

In our exploration of the youth narratives we do of course not expect to find direct reflections on state policies and historical developments of gendered division of labour, neither do we consider the narratives to be determined by state policies or historically developed societal models. Drawing upon approaches from discourse analysis, we aim to trace subtle expressions of work–care models linking to questions of gender identities and social roles, and through this uncover both naturalized social orders and social change. We view the narratives as stylized expressions of norms and options where a variety of subject positions can be identified, in the sense of “identities available to individuals” (Neumann, 2001, p. 178). Subject positions can be regarded as a narrative resource that opens up for specific views of the world while simultaneously preventing other ways of experiencing and understanding (Autto, 2015; Fairclough, 2003; Søndergaard, 2000). Our young story-tellers construct subject positions from a range of discursive elements available. Their sources of inspiration may thus be many and diverse. The positions that they consider accessible and desirable will nevertheless be a strong indicator as to how it is possible and reasonable to imagine oneself as caretaker and employed person in their national and local contexts, and thus the level of naturalization of the positions.

**Stories of work and family life**

At the centre of our attention are ideals of family life, provision, and domestic work/childcare as they appear in the personal accounts of our young study participants. The material on which the paper is based stems from a comparative project where fieldwork was conducted in the Czech Republic and Norway during the period of 2007 to 2009. The project’s focus was on how young people write and talk about their future. Data collection took place in two different communities in each country among youth aged 14–15 (i.e. in their final year of compulsory schooling). The communities, one rural and one small town in each country, can all be considered “average”, “unexceptional” places in their national context, both in terms of living conditions and employment prospects for young people.1 We approached the youth through local public schools, and all interaction with the youth took place in the school setting. The groups of youth we met were ethnically homogeneous; with the exceptions of two immigrant children in the Norwegian context all the young people we interacted with belonged to the national majority of the two countries. Data collection methods used were essay-writing as well as individual and group interviews. The essays were written in classroom settings on the topic “My future”, and on the basis of some keywords given in advance (education and work, love and family, place of living, migration and travel). All pupils invited to take part handed in texts of various lengths, and we obtained altogether 160 essays, 78 from Norway and 82 from the Czech Republic. The essays form the core material for this paper, although a few references will also be made to interviews.2

As mentioned above, we are searching the narratives for emergent subject positions, and ways that they are plotted into the story-line of the narratives. What is included, and what is left out? What are the popular or desirable positions or identities, what is narrated as unwanted and what is left unarticulated? We will start by looking briefly into the youth preferences with regard to family models and occupation, followed by a more elaborate
discussion of gender and country-specific imaginations of the work–care balance and gendered labour in the household.

**Future husbands and wives—the nuclear family model**

As mentioned in our introduction, research on gender and care-work dilemmas often takes adult women and men living in “standard” family settings as a starting-point of analysis of ways that couples work to organize their family life and the gendered division of labour. The nuclear, heteronormative, family model is thus a premise on which the analysis is built. In our setting of the topics for the essays providing the foundations for this article, “love and family” were two of the keywords. Although our formulations were very general, not suggesting one particular model, it is evident that almost all responses elicited had the heteronormative, nuclear family in mind. The vast majority of the study participants expressed a wish to establish such a family and have children of their own.

In the narratives we find a few exceptions to this pattern. Firstly, there are two Norwegian girls who identify as bisexual or lesbian, leading them to doubt their ability to establish a family. A couple of male participants (one Czech and one Norwegian) outright reject or at least express doubts about living in a partnership with wife and children altogether; either having family is seen as too demanding to be attractive, or the marital relationship is described as full of constraints and therefore undesirable.

These cases are rare exceptions in our material. Similarly to other studies of adolescents’ family perceptions (Anyan & Pryor, 2002; Pryor & Rigg, 2007) we find that the nuclear, heteronormative, and love-based cultural model dominates (Haldar, 2006) and is desired both by girls and boys in the two national settings. Searching for emergent subject positions, alternatives to the dominant model are articulated through the marginal positions of homosexual partner and bachelor of choice. The subject positions available within the frames of the heteronormative nuclear family are abundantly expressed, however, and well recognizable in male and female variants. In the following sections we will look in more detail into variants of the dominant positions, and through this explore how the young writers combine and stress different aspects of adult ways of life in their respective stories.

**Becoming an adult: economic independence and provision**

The youths’ narratives of their future life present step-by-step trajectories towards adulthood, where education precedes establishment in the labour market, which then leads to family. For most, the steps imagined go from education, via work, to the establishment of the family.

I’d like to get myself a nice little house in the vicinity and get a nice woman as partner. I do not want to marry before I have a steady job and also not get any children until then. (Norwegian boy)

Others are more concerned with obtaining housing, upscaling gradually to secure sufficient space for the family:

First I would like to be financially secure, and then I would like to have a family. I would get a flat; 1+2, that would be sufficient. In time I would buy something bigger, if I had a girlfriend. (Czech boy)
The wish for a professional identity is strongly expressed both among boys and girls, and we find that the youth in both contexts express gender-segmented choices of education and work careers. The field of manual work represents the most stereotypical professional gender roles, with car mechanics and electricians as the most popular male occupations, and hairdresser or beautician as the female variant.

We also find some individuals who transgress the gender boundaries when it comes to imagined future occupations. Interestingly, these gender transgressions almost exclusively occur among girls, aiming for instance for a police career (two Czechs and one Norwegian), professional soccer career (three Norwegians), or, in one case, a career as a coastal skipper on a fishing boat:

Sitting in the pilot with a fag in my mouth, yelling at my apprentices. [...] Why a fishing boat? Why the sea? I grew up at sea, it’s in my blood. My grandfather was a sailor; my father is a skipper, and my brother an engineer. (Norwegian girl)

Gender transgressions are exceptions, however; most girls and boys in both contexts present occupational choices which are non-transformative gender-wise. This being said, almost all see themselves as future professionals who will take economic responsibility for the future family. For youth of both genders the trajectory of education and work before family is in line with ideas about the accountable adult; i.e. adulthood as a state of stability, autonomy, and responsibility (Kjær, 2002; Lee, 2001). There are some variations in how economic provision for the family is envisioned, however. A tendency worthy of notice is an explicit awareness among some Czech boys of their role as main providers for the family, as expressed by this boy during an interview, in his response to a question about the appropriate time to establish a family:

Only when I have completed my studies and have found some work so that I can provide for the family. (Czech boy)

Mirroring this, we find a few Czech girls who indicate that they do not see themselves as main providers for the family.

Children I would like to have after I am married and have become secured financially. (Czech girl)

In contrast, we find that expressions about own economic independence and agency are more strongly expressed among the Norwegian girls than among the Czech. The skipper story above is one example of female independence, expressed first and foremost through the wish to take on a leadership role in a male domain. Others are more concerned with the economic aspects of a professional life:

Salary is important to me because I want to treat myself with a nice house and expensive clothes. [...] I do not want any children before I reach my 30s, I’d like to wait for my financial status to be solid and time to take care of them. (Norwegian girl)

I have decided to get a really good education and earn enough money to be able to handle a mortgage and buy a house. I have also decided to find someone trustworthy to have children with, someone who doesn’t freeload on me. (Norwegian girl)

While the first case does not contain any reference to a partner at all, the latter does, although not as a person to share economic responsibilities with. Rather the male partner is seen in his capacity as future father of her children, and someone trustworthy who is not taking advantage of her good financial situation. In this latter case two subject positions are surfaced:
that of the economically agentic woman and its negative contrast, the irresponsible male. This juxtaposition of the responsible woman and the irresponsible male is found also in the Czech material, occurring in a couple of the essays and one of the interviews. One Czech girl for example stated, during a group interview, that she thinks girls are more determined about their occupational choices at an early stage of life because they have to be able to support a family in the future. Boys do not have the same obligations and can waver from one occupation to the next without paying attention to the consequences of their acts.

The image of the irresponsible male is not predominant in any of the national contexts, however; adult economic responsibility is foregrounded much more than its opposite among both boys and girls, and as descriptions of both self and other. The subject position of the provider mainly appears as non-gendered, although, as shown above, with some cross-country variation.

**Balancing care work with paid employment, no problem?**

A general finding across national contexts and genders is that very few people, if any, express a wish to sacrifice the family for their career, or have a spouse who does so. When looking for cross-gender patterns we find detailed and explicit elaborations of the importance of children in the narratives of some Norwegian boys, and the way they imagine themselves as caretakers.

I’d love to have children. I’m not sure of how many yet. It seems incredible to have children. I love to be with my niece and my nephew. I just hope that my job won’t take all my spare time or disturb my sleep. Neither do I want my job to take time from my children. (Norwegian boy)

I’d like to have a good job close to home. I will not marry before I have a steady job, and no children either. I’d love to have three children when the time is right, and I want to spend my spare time at home with my wife and the children, keeping the house and garden neat. I don’t want to be too busy at work, I’d like to contribute to my children’s health and education. When they get older, I’d like to help out economically with financial support for an apartment or a car. (Norwegian boy)

These boys talk about children as a crucial activity and responsibility in adult life, both as a source of joy and a lifelong commitment. Their articulation of the potential conflict between the two domains of family and work, and their priorities to let the children come first, is clear but quite general (“won’t take all my spare time”, “don’t want to be too busy”). Another boy formulates the same dilemma in a more elaborated manner:

I’d like to work, but also to have some spare time. Since I do want a family, I don’t want my job to be of the kind that keeps me constantly on duty; like if the phone rings I have to leave for work. I’d like to have three children, four is one too many. I’d like a girl who is quite nice, and who accepts that I sometimes have to go to work. (Norwegian boy)

The awareness of ways that work life can penetrate family life and leisure time is definitely high (“constantly on duty”; “like if the phone rings”) and is seen as undesirable. However, even if work is not everything for this boy, a future wife should still have to be ready to take responsibility for the family when work is calling.

Seen from the perspective of the girls, the wish for an involved male partner, and the opposite, the dismissal of a husband who is never at home, is surfacing in some girls’ accounts in both contexts.
I’d like to work as a nurse at a hospital close to home. I’d like a job where I get a decent salary and the possibility of getting time off at important occasions. I’d like to have a man whose job does not demand too much travelling, because I do not want to end up alone. I demand that he shows responsibility, likes children, and is willing to build a family. (Norwegian girl)

[I would like to] have two children, that would be maximum, and a husband who is a pure career-seeker is out of the question. I would like to have a husband who would help me in my career as well as in the family and who would at the same time have his own work. (Czech girl)

For these girls a desirable partner is one who knows how to divide his attention and energy between the family and the job, and who also pays attention to their needs. As concerns balancing paid work and care work in their own lives, only a couple of the girls touch upon this as a potential dilemma, and in all cases the care side of the coin is given priority. A Czech girl discusses how she would like to become a flight attendant, but at the same time mentions that she can only keep this job for a limited period of time since the profession is not compatible with having a family and children. The way to balance career and family is to adjust the former to the latter. A Norwegian girl suggests a similar solution:

I’d like to work as a tourist guide. When I am around 29 I shall have found the man of my dreams, and we shall have twins. Since I am getting an education within a profession that you can practise only for approximately 10 years if you wish to have a family, I need to have plans after that as well. (Norwegian girl)

While the willingness to adapt career to family needs is present among both Norwegian and Czech girls, and there are a couple of cases in the Czech sample that take it quite far. One girl writes:

I am planning to have three children: boy, girl, and then it doesn't matter. I would like to be a good mother, and be 100% at the disposal both for my husband and for the children. (Czech girl)

This attitude is not visible in any of the stories of the Norwegian girls. However, it does appear in two male narratives from Norway:

Whether my wife has a job or not, is not that important to me as long as she does what she feels like and we have enough money to lead a good life. I’d like her to be attractive. (Norwegian boy)

I want my extended family to be big, and I want two kids, preferably boy and girl, my wife could certainly stay at home, as long as she stays fit. (Norwegian boy)

The possibility of having a non-employed spouse is, in the first of these cases, predicated on the male being able to earn enough money for leading a good life. While they both express a wish for an attractive spouse, the second explicitly couples attractiveness to work indicating that housewives may become negligent and stop caring about how they look.

Examining the youth’s reflections around care work and the balance between domestic duties and paid employment, we find a variety of subject positions, desired and undesired. Some on them are clearly gendered. Firstly, we find the position of the male breadwinner; marginal in terms of frequency of occurrence, but present in both contexts. The female subject position of the housewife is rare as a sought-after trajectory in the young girls’ narratives, and only present among a couple of Czech girls. Family orientation is expressed strongly by girls and boys in both contexts. However, there are some differences gender-wise in how this is articulated. The girl career-seeker, in the sense of one who gives priority to career over family once the family is there, does not appear as an imaginable position among girls or among boys. The male equivalent is present, though, mainly as an undesirable position, but
sometimes as a necessity. Among boys we find an awareness that work sometimes must be given priority, while girls seem more ready to let the career go when a choice has to be made. Overall, we find few reflections on female care work and mothering. This stands out as a contrast to the distinct images of fathering roles expressed in particular by some Norwegian boys but also found in girls’ articulations of male involvement as a desirable quality of a future husband. The striking contrast between silent motherhood and explicit fatherhood could imply that women’s care work is still seen as natural, while men’s involvement in care has to be both learnt and negotiated.

Discussion

As shown in the presentation of care-work models and national policies, the Czech Republic and Norway have moved in different directions when it comes to solving care responsibilities and labour market participation of parents with young children. With reference to a diachronically informed concept of naturalization (Frøystad, 2015), we suggested that these macro-level policy processes have worked to transform the relationship between naturalized gendered domains, re-enforcing the role of the female carer in the Czech context, while de-naturalizing it in the Norwegian context. We also asked the question whether the tendencies observed at the policy level are reflected in young people’s imaginations of their lives as future parents and providers. Employing the concept of subject position as an analytical tool, we found that a complex picture of cross-country and cross-gender similarities and differences emerged.

Firstly, the narratives present both the male and female provider as two well-established options. Girls and boys in both contexts narrate themselves as working persons or professionals, and by this activate the subject position of the economically independent and responsible adult. The economically responsible adult appears as a naturalized position which by and large is non-gendered. Parenthood is also a self-evident part of a future life for both males and females, expected to unfold within the frames of a traditional nuclear family. Interestingly, we find no direct traces of the state-governed care-work arrangements in the two contexts. None of the young reflects on the role of nurseries, parental leave schemes, or the role of grandparents in helping them to realize their career plans or organizing their daily life.

This brings us to the question of balance between the two domains of family and work, and how it appears in the narratives of the young. In our analysis of the empirical material we apply the two different models of balance: Santos’s conceptualization of balance as an individual norm (2015), and thus reflected in narrations of individual life trajectories; and a relationally focused model viewing the family as the balancing unit.

Following the first model we find a traditional harmony-oriented notion of balance in play, implying that the ideal situation for the narrating subject is marked by absence of conflicts between care work and professional work. Quite a few of the young in both contexts express a matter-of-fact attitude to the management of the two-income family, where they see their professional lives and children as inevitable parts of a fulfilled life, and the two domains are narrated as complementing each other. Particularly interesting are the Norwegian male voices positioning themselves as involved fathers, young men who explicitly see themselves as carers for children and through this maintaining the balance within the family. Such voices are hardly present among the Czech boys, indicating that the
notion of “prioritizing the family” refers to different norms in the two contexts. While family is given priority over career for boys and girls in both contexts, should they have to choose between the two, possible threats to maintaining a balanced relationship between family and career do occur in the narratives. The young narrators use the stylistic device of negative contrast to communicate their values, and when imbalance is a topic, it is always ascribed to unwanted subject positions. Moreover, it is always male absence that causes imbalance.

In order fully to understand the problem of male absence and imbalance, it is necessary to take into consideration balance as it operates within the family, i.e. the relational aspects of balance. This implies looking at how the narrators suggest that the gendered division of labour between partners should be worked to achieve and maintain balance between paid labour and care work. We have shown that girls find male career-seekers who do not participate in the family sphere undesirable as spouses. More numerous than negative stories about potential failures are narratives presenting possible solutions to prevent imbalance within the family and thus also between career and care work. One finding is that a few girls in both contexts seem ready to change their career track in order to be available for the family. Their stories narrate a life trajectory with a change of course from career to care as a second phase. Shuffling the distribution of paid work and unpaid care is presented as a strategy to keep the family in balance. We also find a few Czech girls who express a readiness to take full responsibility for the domestic sphere, implying that potential imbalances are solved “traditionally”, with a gendered segregation of labour by spheres. Another significant finding that emerges through female narratives is the image of the involved father/partner as an attractive male subject position. There is a consciousness among girls in both national contexts that emotionally competent partners and involved fathers must be sought—not all men are of the right kind, i.e. sufficiently family-oriented. The involved fathers and partners are thus narrated as a condition for balance. Interestingly, and to accentuate the gendered outlines of balance, it is the female narrators in both the Czech and the Norwegian contexts who introduce the relational aspects of balance. In contrast, neither the Czech nor the Norwegian young males include considerations on how co-operation and distribution between family members could be a solution to possible work–care conflicts.

In sum then, and this time in view of the macro-level tendencies in the two contexts, to That extent do we find a correspondence between the trajectories of the countries’ differing welfare policies, and the youths’ voices? And following from this, to what extent do the gendered cultural life scripts stand out as different in the two contexts?

There are clear traces of the history of women’s extensive contributions to paid labour in the two contexts. Female labour market participation is by no means regarded as exceptional by our young study participants; rather it is taken for granted. We do, however, find that economic independence is more strongly expressed by Norwegian girls, who articulate clear expectations towards autonomy and control in a more explicit manner than the Czech girls. This is in tune with Norwegian state policies facilitating female labour market participation through extensive provision of public childcare services. Among the Norwegian youth we also find traces of the recent policies directed towards increased male participation in childcare and domestic work, articulated through the subject position of the involved father. Both care work and provision, as narrated by the young Norwegians, appear to some extent to be de-gendered, and the connection between the female and the domestic thus partly de-naturalized. This is not, we will argue, a result of changed notions
of motherhood, but mainly caused by alterations in the male position in the family, which again can be linked to the above-mentioned policy efforts to transform fatherhood (see also below). In the Czech context we find fewer traces of such a de-naturalization, in spite of the self-evidence with which the role of the female provider is articulated. The Czech girls stand out as somewhat more ready to take fuller responsibility for care work, and no parallel to the involved father as a desired male position is present among the Czech boys. Whether this represents a process of re-naturalization, reflecting the Czech policy trend towards re-familialization of care for young children, is difficult to say. It could also just be a continuation of the “working mother” pattern established during communist rule in Czechoslovakia.

To conclude the comparison, we will claim that differences in life scripts are indisputably found between the two contexts. Looking at gendered expectations towards contributions to the family through the analytical lenses of subject positions, we do, however, also see some parallel patterns pertaining to the female position in both contexts pointing in the direction of similarities in gendered life scripts. Care work as performed by females is rarely mentioned, by Czech or Norwegian girls. This goes in particular for the subject position of mother, which is weakly articulated. All girls want to become mothers, but do not elaborate on what this may involve, in terms of practical and emotional care work. This suggests a notion of motherhood that is taken for granted in its implications; motherhood may appear to the female narrators as obvious and conventional, and thereby not necessary to voice. Seen in combination with the inclination among some girls to adjust their career to the demands of the family, this indicates a realization of a potential double burden weighing on women on the part of both Czech and Norwegian girls. Nevertheless, the burdens of care work and parenthood are not completely naturalized as female. Girls in both contexts wish for—or rather demand—involvedness from their potential partners and by this present a solution to the work–care dilemmas similar to Nancy Fraser’s universal caregiver (1994): If you take your share of the care work, then my part will remain bearable.

Notes

1. The Norwegian settings are both located in Western Norway, while the Czech small town is found in North Bohemia and the rural setting in South Moravia.

2. A total of 41 of the Norwegian essays were written by girls and 37 by boys, while the equivalent numbers for the Czech essays are 38 and 44. From Norway we have 38 essays from rural youth and 40 from urban, and from the Czech Republic we have 41 rural and 41 urban. We have not found significant rural–urban differences with regard to the topic of this article, and have therefore decided not to comment upon the geographical origin of the youth in our analysis. The essays varied greatly in length, from just a few lines to two full handwritten pages. The shortest essays do not necessarily contain elaborations on all topics. As concerns the topic of love and family approximately 80% of the students write about it. The girls in both contexts in general write longer essays than the boys.

3. For a more elaborate discussion of the youth’s occupational choices see Heggli, Haukanes, & Tjomsland, 2013.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Notes on contributors

Haldis Haukanes holds a PhD in Social anthropology from the University of Bergen, Norway and is a professor at the Department of Health Promotion and Development, University of Bergen. She has done anthropological research in the Czech Republic for 25 years, on topics such as post-communist transformations in Czech villages, food, gender and care, and youth and the future. She has also been involved in research on the African continent and has recently headed the research project “Gender in poverty reduction. Critical explorations of Norwegian Aid Policy on Gender Equality and Women’s Rights.” Publications include Parenting after the Century of the Child. Travelling Ideals, Institutional Negotiations and Individual Responses (Ashgate 2010, edited with Tatjana Thelen); Recasting pasts and futures in Post-socialist Europe. Thematic issue of Focaal. Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology 66, (2013, edited with Susanna Trnka); and Shifting Meanings of Gender Equality in Development. Perspectives from Norway and Ethiopia. Progress in Development Studies 16, (2016, with Marit Østebø).

Gry Heggli has obtained her PhD in Cultural studies from the University of Bergen, Norway. She currently holds a position as an associate professor in Education studies at the Department of education. Her research interests are children and youth studies, parenting and writing practices in within and outside educational institutions, and publications include Fearing the future? Young people envisioning their working lives in the Czech Republic, Norway and Tunisia. Journal of youth studies, 16 (2013, with Haldis Haukanes and Marit Tjomsland) and Krigen mot sukkeret. En kamp i det godes tjeneste? En studie av hvordan vitenskapelige og moralske diskurser former foreldreidentiteter. [The war against sugar. A power for good? A study of how scientific and moral discourses shape parent identities]. BARN – forskning om barn og barndom i Norden, 33, (2015).

References


