

Gender equality and conflict management in dual earner couples: a Swedish case study

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Abstract

To an increasing extent young women and men regard gender equality as an ideal to strive for. But gender inequality in families is practised in real life and seems to be quite resistant to change, also in a country like Sweden where policies for a long time have promoted gender equality in families and society. In order to practice equality individuals have to strike a balance between their norms and moral concerns about mutuality in their relationships on the one hand and on the other hand the articulation of their individual selves. The strategies that they apply for balancing mutuality and autonomy are vital parts of the process of accomplishing equality. The styles of negotiation and conflict management are involved in the process. In my paper I will draw on a qualitative study of twenty two couples where men and women have been interviewed separately about their ways of sharing household labour, how they dispose of and allocate their material resources and of their styles of relating to children. The beliefs and values behind the ways in which they justify their practices in the mentioned aspects have been analysed and also there styles of conflict management and conflict resolutions.

Introduction

To an increasing extent young women and men regard gender equality as an ideal to strive for. But gender inequality in families is persistently practised in real life and seems to be quite resistant to change, also in a country like Sweden where policies for a long time have promoted gender equality in families and society.²⁶

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²⁶ In brief, Swedish policies towards gender equality in families have the following characteristics: Emphasis on individual social citizenship rights regardless of family and gender. Within the social security system, such as unemployment, sickness, pensions. Individuals have their personal entitlements and not linked to their belonging to a family. Individuals are paid on the basis of their own income without consideration of family support obligations. Lone mothers are entitled to advanced maintenance by the state and are basically self supporting. The policies have been actively promoting female employment regardless of motherhood and marriage. The employment rate of women is in international comparison very high. Fathers have equal right to parental leave and the law is through various measures emphasising mutual support obligations and maintenance as well as care of dependants of both parents. There is an emphasis on shared responsibilities between family and public services in care of dependants. Both parents have rights to parental leave for more than one year covered at 80% of income and extensive rights to child care subsidised through taxes and with high quality. Care of old dependant relatives (basically parents) and handicapped is primarily a public responsibility. In essence this means that families (i.e. women) are relieved from primary care responsibilities. Policy aims at reducing power inequality in families due to unequal economic status. In the Swedish marriage context, both partners are obliged to support each other according to their respective abilities. They also have a right to know about the incomes of

The focus of my paper is gender equality in couple relationships and the ways in which men and women understand equality and how they work it out in practice. In general individuals do not deliberately develop strategies for how they will be equal and equality is generally not the prime goal of their relationship. But in contemporary society men and woman, especially in dual earner families, have to sort out for themselves how they manage that what is joint and that what belongs to individual needs and interests. In my analysis I will draw on a qualitative study of twenty-two couples where men and women have been interviewed separately about their ways of managing household labour, dispose of and allocate their material resources and of their beliefs and values behind the ways in which they justify their practices in the mentioned aspects.²⁷ Further, how they tell about their styles of conflict management regarding domestic labour, money management and styles of relating to children. All couples had children between five and twelve years old and both women and men had paid work. The women worked 80-100% A few worked part time. Different educational levels are represented in the sample.

What is gender equality in families?

It is rather easy to identify and assess gender inequality, especially when measured and assessed on a macro level. Proportions and quotas are easily measured and grasped, pay gaps can be calculated and time use can be compared between men and women. But what is meant by *equality*? Absence of unequal distribution of assets and time? Equal proportions and equal representations? Equal command over body and sexuality or personal command? And who is to assess equality? Political agents? Influential researchers or other kinds of lobbyists? Should it be assessed by individual men and women themselves?

In studies that have been carried out on this issue it has been shown that individual women and men as well as researchers have different ideas about the meaning of gender equality (Hochschild 1989; Schwartz 1994; Risman e Johnson-Sumerford 1998; Knudson-Martin e Mahoney 1998; Holmberg 1993; Martinsson 1997; Roman 1999 a; b). We have not intended to evaluate the couples in terms of degree of equality. Our approach was to apply aspects that we found important in creating equality – mutual balancing (justice) in division of labour and resources, scope for self governance and being able to make a choice without force, mutual balancing of power and influence in conflict management. We regarded equality as a process, as a quality in relationships rather than as a result. An overarching hypothesis of ours was that "norms or reciprocity" have a significant impact on family relationships. Our interest has been in studying the different reciprocities and exchange patterns

their partners. Normally the assets are to be regarded as joint and will be split equally in case of divorce. Joint legal custody is 'automatic' after divorce or separation of cohabiting parents if fatherhood is registered. The rights of the child to access to both parents also after divorce are strongly promoted.

²⁷ The full study is about to be published in a book in Swedish (Bjornberg, U & Kollind, A-K (forthcoming). Part of the book will be published in English (Bjornberg, U & Kollind, A-K, forthcoming).

that partners use when solving matters of distribution and allocation of work and money. The assumptions that have governed our analysis are that ways in which norms of reciprocity and exchange are used in negotiations are linked to the ways in which the logic's of community has been developed within the couple.

In order to accomplish and practice equality individuals have to strike a balance between their norms and moral concerns about mutuality in their relationships on the one hand and on the other hand the articulation of their individual selves. The strategies that they apply for balancing mutuality and autonomy are vital in the process of establishing equality. The styles of negotiation and conflict management are also involved in the process.

I will present an analysis which brings out some of the core problems (apart from gender structures) which evolves around the intrinsic contradictions between individual autonomy, and that what community and solidarity presupposes, such as giving up autonomy and to accept mutuality and dependence in connection with equality. The purpose of my presentation is to explore with empirical examples how individual men and women manage these contradictions. I will discuss different negotiation styles regarding their expected potential for transforming or reproducing gender relations at the level of family.

Theoretical perspectives

Gender inequality is an expression of power inequality and a matter of structural conflict in society at large (Connell 1987). As such it is built into family life and takes on various kinds of expressions, but not necessarily into open conflicts. I define conflict as a confrontation between individuals (or groups) regarding scarce resources, incompatible goals, controversial methods or a combination of these (Sprey 1979). Conflicts are to be regarded as a process rather than a certain instance, which means that conflicts can be regarded in terms of underlying structures, such as gender inequality. They can become manifest in certain concrete situations where the inequities are put into the forefront.

Conflicts defined as contradictory needs and interests, are vital elements in everyday life among couples, but many of these conflicts are not spelled out as open conflicts. The types of conflicts or “communication situations” that we identify are what has been labelled “problem solving discussions” (Cahn 1990).²⁸

Power and influence

In the study we have been interested in how power and influence has been managed in negotiations about choices and strategies for division of domestic work, allocation of money and influence on decisions concerning joint and/or personal matters.

²⁸ Cahn identifies three different *sorts* of intimate interpersonal conflicts: “Specific disagreements” – overt disagreements and arguments over a particular issue. “Problem solving discussion” – encompassing communication situation dealing with an ongoing problem consisting of more than one conflicting issue. “Unhappy/dissolving relationships” – communication patterns of dysfunctioning couples seeking counselling.

Power is understood *as having control and being able to influence others* but also to be able to make decision according to own goals. With this definition power has two implications: The first implication that power is understood as to be able to make others do what they would not do by their own will. In this sense power is understood as control of others and a capacity to govern other person's behaviour. Second, power can also be understood in terms of "*power over self*" or autonomy where the individual is able to make decisions on own terms without being forced because of lack of alternatives or to be able to get one's way despite opposition of others (Thagaard 1996; Watts 1991). In close relationships there are always some degree of dependency on other persons and their terms. Being able to control the needs of others can imply to obtain control within the social community of the family. If for instance a wife and mother chooses to work part time, thereby giving up some of her own financial autonomy, this might not mean that she is losing influence in the family. It depends on her goals and alternatives of choice. If her goal is to obtain a centre position in the family via controlling the needs and emotions of the other family members she is trying to obtain emotional power. And if she has a choice to act otherwise, it means that she has 'power over self' or capacity for self governing (McNey 1992).

In understanding how power is working within families and other institutions it is also necessary to apply a concept of *normative power*. Normative power is understood in connection with the ways in which gender norms are working at an individual level. In every society norms, behaviour and attitudes regarding gender are constructed at a discursive level. These discourses are part of a process of gender differentiation with socially significant results – gender segregated labour markets, gender pay differences, gendered working conditions – a gender differentiation process which signify difference as well as hierarchy – evaluations in terms of more or less value etc. These processes generate constraining conditions in social relationships and in the ways in which individuals understand what is the proper way to act. "Doing gender" means to make a choice or be made to choose to act in such ways that the mutual understandings of what is normatively correct or even "true" in a gender perspective is obtained. In daily life it means to be held responsible to oneself and to the close surrounding for the choices that one is making – either one is following or transgressing normative expectations about what is proper for a woman or a man to do. Normative power is operating in social interaction and is not necessarily identified with a person actively using power resources to get one's will. It is working through identification and disciplining of self (Fenstermacher, West and Zimmerman 1987). This way of understanding power is inspired by Foucault's analysis, where power is developed through a process of normalisation. Through discourses definitions of what is normal and what is expected as well as what is not normal and deviant are produced. These definitions are creating knowledge and truths about the individuals. They generate a double process whereby people themselves become subjected and regulated through the kinds of identities assumed in discourse. Normative power through discourse does not carry a determining character. The norms that are communicated through discourses are working as "normative guidelines" which means that individuals do not adopt them completely but adapt them to their circumstances and social relationships

(Finch e Mason 1993) Thus, in practice discourses on norms and “truths” are open for negotiations at local and interpersonal levels (Magnusson 1998).

In analysis of negotiations and conflict management in line with this view on power and influence it is essential to differentiate between different perspectives of own interests and needs and those of the needs and interests of others. In my analysis I have combined two models. One is based on Attanuci (1988) and refers to how the individual (woman) regards her self and her own needs and terms in relation to those needs and terms of the other (husband). The needs and terms can be regarded as obligations and rights based on position as wife and husband or they can be regarded as reflected on own terms, thus where the element of obligations and rights are not integrated in the perception of self In the model below we illustrate the four dimensions as representations of four kinds of attitudes in relationships.

The unselfish attitude means that the self sees herself as governed by obligations and that the terms of others have precedence over those of self. This is a 'classical' combination where the needs of the woman have a small scope – the self sacrificing mother and wife who constantly is prepared to see to the needs of the others. Her loyalty is based on conceptions of duties and does seldom regard her own needs as justified – rather they have to be subordinated under the joint needs. As a contrast we have a selfish attitude, where own terms and needs have precedence over those of others and with stereotyped conceptions of the needs and terms of others. In a case where perspectives on self and other are regarded as governed by obligations, family norms, we have a relationship that is fairly stereotyped. A formal relationship without closeness. As a contrast we find the mutual attitude – the self has reflected on own needs and terms and is able to identify them and to relate them to an active attitude towards the needs and terms of the other. The main point in this mutual kind of attitude in a relationship is that the individual woman is able to take care of herself while also taking care of the other.

Figure n.º 1 illustrates styles of conflict management. The styles are differentiated according to two how the negotiating partners focus on own needs and interests and how the combination will be spelled out in the negotiation.

Figure n.º 1 – Styles of conflict management
 Her concern with own needs and interests
 And those of other's

		High	
His concern with own needs and interests	High	Competition	Subordination
	Low	Subordination	Compromise or avoidance

Collaboration: both partners care about own needs and interests and those of other's.

A model developed by Thylefors (1996) inspires the model.²⁹ Her model illustrates individual styles but my model illustrates relational styles. Four different styles of management can be identified: 1. In the case where both partners are focussed on own needs and interests both partners will strongly confront these, at least initially in the negotiation. Competition means that both partners intend to maximise their power and the strongest partner wins at the expense of the loss of the other. When both partners are prepared to give up on their needs and interests they will either reach a compromise as a conflict resolution. The other possibility is that they avoid further negotiations and decide not to communicate over the issue any further – a conflict management. Subordination means that one partner neglects his or her own needs or interests as a way of managing the conflict. Subordination and avoidance can also be regarded, as expressions of not daring or not being able to articulate own needs and interests. It can be regarded as associated with anxiety to take a stand and to make a choice, since an articulation of needs and interests in a conflict situation also implies a challenge to the individual self and the self-image that she/he is upholding, but also a challenge towards the independence/dependency of the relationship. In this context we can connect to the first model of the relational attitude of self For instance if the individual has a perspective of self implying that she is steered by obligations and that her obligations corresponds to claims (rights) of the other – the scope for negotiations is not very large. In this case avoidance or subordination are likely alternatives in conflict management. In contrast, if the individual judges own and other are needs and interests as negotiable, co-operation or compromise could be applied.

The collaboration style (Ekstam 2000; Thylefors 1996) or what Bisno (1988) refers to as 'integrative sub strategy' is highly communicative and demanding. It requires mutual recognition of a problem involving the interests of both parties. It means that both partners identify that they have a problem that needs solution. It stresses problem solving and the creative development of new solutions emphasising mutually advantageous benefit (but not necessarily equal).

Community and autonomy in conflicts – three examples

Now I will turn to the role of styles of negotiations and conflict management with specific regard to community and autonomy in the couples.

I have chosen three examples and they are chosen for the following reasons:

1. In all three examples the woman earns more money than their husbands do. In discussions of gender equality, the economic bargaining power of women has always been regarded as crucial. I do not deny that it is, but on the basis of the results of the study I claim that it is not sufficient for creating gender equality.

²⁹ Her model is based on Pruitt and Rubin, (1986).

2. The examples illustrate conflict areas that are crucial in connection with equality.

3. They illustrate how the modes of conflict management reproduce inequality and how different types of power is working, in particular the strength of normative power.

I will start with an example of how conflicts regarding domestic work are managed to show how the style of management ends up in a fairly unequal relationship despite good ambitions.

Conflicts on domestic work

Eva and Martin have a fairly equivalent social and economic position. Both work full time. The division of labour in this couple is unfair. According to Eva's estimation she does 75 percent of all domestic work, while Martin claims that their division of domestic work is made even in the long run. Eva has made several efforts to make agreements on how they should share the work and she regards making agreements as an ideal for accomplishing equality. She has not been successful in reaching solid agreements. Both of them admit that they quarrel a lot and in particular their confrontations are about the standards for doing domestic work and styles of relating to children. They have different views about many details – cleaning, laundry, keeping order, and opinions on how to set limits for children. Both confront their different opinions in open conflicts and both try to argue for their views and nobody is prepared to change, according to their own statements. Both of them describe their communicative style as open – everything is said, nothing concealed. Martin: "We are both blood and fire, very direct towards one another but also very generous. An intensity that displays critic and also generosity and praise." Eva: "We get extremely angry but he always takes the initiative to ask for forgiveness. For him it is much easier to do so than for me. I sulk until he asks for forgiveness. I don't know why, but it has always been like this".

Basically their conflicts are of a competitive style where both of them push their own interests. Eva wants him to do domestic work on her terms and he wants to do it on his terms and according to his standards. Since nobody is prepared to give in, the conflicts end up with that she does all work and he unloads her burden sometimes. His share is based on a bargain where the currency used is pleasure and non-pleasure. He drives the children to activities, what he does not like, but he knows that she wants time for herself and so he gives her this by going away with the children. He does not want to make agreements. His resistance to make agreements is justified by him with reference to their different attitudes, which by him are regarded almost as biological differences, so basic that they are not changeable. So his way to manage their conflicts is to resort to emotions and be quick to ask for apology, which she accepts after a while. The communicative style makes conflict management therapeutic rather than rational in the sense that they avoid handling the issue of the conflict and instead resort to save their relationship.

Martin and Eva have made an economic agreement, which gives each of them an equal amount for personal spending and savings. Eva has, by using a deliberate strategy, saved on her own account a fairly large amount of money. This is a strategy for economic self governance. The backside of the coin is

that the strategy is time consuming since it is based on very rational consumer behaviour. It is costly for her because it involves great energy in planning and searching for the best bargains. The money that she has saved she regards as partly her own but in particular to be used for the joint household. She knows that she decides on purchases, but she makes strategies for how she will make him accept the choices for consumption that she has made. It could be regarded as a kind of manipulative style or it could be regarded as a democratic or mutual style of decision making.

Eva has high ambitions for the well being of her family and she is prepared to make big sacrifices in terms of time, subordination of her own personal needs and her own wellbeing. In my interpretation, she presents herself as a person who is governed by normative obligations regarding standards for home and household in terms of order, cleanliness, well being of family etc. Thus, she represents the model of sacrificing mother and wife) and she is frustrated and tired. It is clear that she does not find that Martin governs her explicitly, she is governing herself. She also tries to govern Martin, but as she in the end accepts his passive resistance, she allows herself to govern herself according to norms that she thinks that she must follow, thus acting under a pressure of gendered normative power. The division of labour gets very uneven, something that he denies by creating a myth of that it will even out in the long run.

To summarise, this example illustrates many aspects of conflict management and power within modern families and which we found in the studied couples.

In the example, the woman had a higher income economic bargaining power on consumption for the household. In this respect she had self-governance. However, she did not manage to persuade her husband that he should be more involved. At least four basic reasons behind the absence of a conflict resolution can be discerned:

Reasons behind absence of conflict resolution

Priority given to relational ethics and emotions in conflict management; Saving the community was most important for both partners.

Normative power and how this was working in the relationship

Different understandings by the partners of how their personal commitments can be changed

Dependency in bargaining.

1. For Martin and to a less extent for Eva it is more important to look after the glue that keeps them together rather than to have a fair division of commitment to their joint home. So despite that Eva wants to make agreements and put more emphasis on individualism in their relationship this is only accomplished in their economic agreements.

2. She is not able to change her husband's commitment. He does not identify with her commitment and has no ambition to discuss a change of their understanding of the conflict, since he regards her attitude as part of her (es-

sential) personality as a woman. He is not prepared to reflect on his commitment.

3. Nor is she able to change, or at least reflect on, her own commitment. She allows herself to be governed by duties and ambitions (normative power) and accepts his emotional style in managing their conflicts. Their conflict on division of labour is not solved and she is not able to create the kind of community that she has as an ideal (agreement oriented community).

4. And finally, the dependency relation in the bargaining situation reduces her power, since she is more committed to the results of their negotiation than he is and she has more to gain of the outcome than he has. She is more dependent on him for the outcome than he is on her. (Bacharach and Lawler 1981). According to a dependence theory of bargaining, dependence as bargaining power is the backbone of bargaining relationship and intrinsic to all kinds of bargaining.

Conflicts regarding time for self

My next example will illustrate another theme of conflict about self-governance expressed as need of time for self. In the stories about division of domestic labour women have been articulating their needs of having a sense of freedom, being for themselves without any claims put on them, and being free without plans. None of the interviewed men in their narratives articulated needs of this kind on scope for individuality in the relationship. Sense of freedom in the stories of the women is not equated with leisure. It is expressed as a way to *be* rather than something to *have*. They talk about it as opposed to duties and obligations that they feel that they are dominated by in everyday life and they find it difficult to argue and to find legitimacy for it. The need for freedom that the women express is connected to the need to set limits for their selves. While doing so they face conflicts, which are encapsulated within the theme of domestic division of labour. They express it as a conflict within themselves, interpreted as a conflict between normative constraints and the need to decide on their own terms. It is a conflict between duties and authenticity.

An example will illustrate this kind of conflict – **Christina and Nils:**

Christina earns more money than Nils does and in her job she has a slightly higher status position than her husband has. She has been able to obtain economic self-governance via the household economy over which she has full control. Both Christina and Nils convey a picture of intense confrontations in the home. She describes herself as governed by duties and role prescriptions and this internalisation of normative gender prescriptions makes her life compulsory – something that she projects on the children and to a certain degree also on her husband. Her perspective of self is self-sacrificing – a perspective that she feels very angry about. In particular she expresses a strong desire to be free. She wants Nils to accept her norms and to make them his norms. He admits that she has been successful in steering him to more actively share

domestic work and childcare, but he does not accept her norms and level of ambitions.

Both Nils and Christina regard her perception of the situation as a conflict, which she has inside her self and he does not think that he can do anything about it. He says: "I feel very little guilt about this even if I many times have been accused of contributing to the situation and the constraints that she feels. On the contrary I have said: Okay, go ahead, I understand you – you can have a week of vacation, go to a health centre or whatever you want." He interprets the situation as a gender problem only by saying: "many women feel that they have to tie themselves up to children, care about them and be at hands for them for all different needs. This makes them feel a strong need to be alone sometimes. But she prevents herself to fulfil this need."

In between themselves they have been able to make agreements about division of labour, but the real problem has not been solved, since he does not accept her standards and she feels that she can not argue further with him about that. Instead, both of them transfer the conflicts to the children and she has constant high confrontations with them. She has not been able to reach a satisfactory level of self-governance.

To summarise: The style of conflict management in this couple fails to solve their problems for the following reasons:

1. Normative power and how it is working in the relationship.

She had a need for power over self, which is related to a tiredness of finding herself governed by norms and obligations – (normative power). They are inconsistent with her needs for being authentic and true to herself. She thinks that he has to take over her norms to be able to feel free. Since she can not make her husband fully take on board her perceptions of what needs should be met, she feels constrained and very frustrated.

2. Understandings of what can be changed.

He has recognised that she is dominated by normative constraints, but he does not recognise the social character of these constraints – he defines them as psychological constraints related to her female essence and thus hard to change. It is beyond his power to do anything. 3. Different understandings of agreements

Both are committed to an agreement style of division of labour, but they have different perceptions of what they have agreed upon.

4. Compromise style of conflict management and projection – avoiding conflicts in the couple.

They are unable to solve their conflicts in between themselves and the conflicts are targeted on the children, as a kind of projection of the self-disciplining of the woman in the family. Obviously the children don't understand why they are constantly put under constraints. In this case the father is more permissive than the mother is. He does not accept her rules for the children and she is not able to enforce her rules or not even explain them to the children. As a result there is a constant high level of frustration and confrontational conflicts within the family.

Conflicts regarding styles of relating to the children

In several couples the men and the women express that they have different styles towards the children. They tend to stress that basically they have a similar view on the goals of socialisation but in everyday practice they have different ways of dealing with them and this is often a source of conflict and quarrels between them. The differences follow a traditional gender pattern – the father wants to set clear rules, is sharp in communication with the children, gives clear indications about rules and principles – The mothers are more smooth, are less explicit with rules and boundaries, the ways in which they deal with principles and rules are related to the situation and the context

There is a clear and visible gender difference in the language that they apply when they tell about their different styles which also reveals a gendered evaluation of the styles and also of conflict management. Mothers are described as mild and fathers as hard. The mothers are described as inconsequent and easy-going whereas fathers are promoting principles and stick to them. On the other hand, men tend to leave the mothers with the responsibility for the children and to take care of many practical details. In the couples, this is never talked about as being easy-going and being passive on their behalf.

In most cases, both men and women regard their own style as the proper style and they try to avoid open confrontations, especially in front of the children.

It also involves a way of evaluating a style of conflict management. The style of being prepared to listen to arguments and to negotiate with the children is a style of compromising or even collaboration in certain cases, whereas a style of setting the agenda, applying rules and principles by domination is a style of competition. The former style receives a lower evaluation than the latter.

The third example will illustrate this kind of conflict – **Bengt and Gertrude**

In this couple Bengt applies a competitive style which is met by subordination of the wife, Gertrude. However she has started to reflect upon her style of conflict management and is changing. Bengt and Gertrude have different styles of relating to the children, as described. Other conflicts are about their divergent views on joint leisure activities, where Bengt is persistent on joint and active leisure, whereas she wants to stay at home doing nothing. She tries to live up to being the kind of good mother that she thinks that he wants her to be and to bring the children to joint activities on her free time. But the children also want to stay at home, just like she does. When Gertrude starts to argue with him about his style he gets very angry. She has developed an ambivalent attitude towards his style and attitude – on the one hand she admires his ambitions for the family and in principle she thinks that his rules are right. So she has for a long time subordinated to his wishes and the terms that he sets for her. By the time she felt more and more frustrated. Gertrud says:

"I feel that I am increasingly self-effacing – this is more and more so when one has children and one tends to think less and less about one's own needs". However after having accepted a managing position in her office she had to

make her decisions and argue for her own opinions. She transferred this habit and skill to her family and has started to develop a way of life that was more consistent with her own terms. This means also that she is less open to him about what she is doing. For instance, she hides her own consumption and opposes tacitly his view of the good mother. Gertrude says that she has gained more self-respect, but Bengt is opposing her new self "You are not a manager in this house", he says.

In this example we see that she is moving from being a self-sacrificing woman to being an authentic person. By allowing herself to take care of her own needs she also put up limits for how much his terms can intrude upon her. In this process she has chosen a conflict management style of avoiding conflicts instead of subordination as she used apply. In this case the man is more governed by obligations in his perspectives on her than she is on herself. Unless her husband will be prepared to accept her acting on own terms he will perceive her as selfish. According to my interpretation, she is moving towards mutuality, in her own perspectives of herself.

Concluding reflections

The pure relationship in Giddens's interpretation is free from normative obligations, rights and duties. Two independent individuals who make commitments at own will and who stay together as long as agreements are kept create the relationship. The analysis of the couples in our study displays a picture that is quite far from this idealised vision of modern couples. The agreements did in most cases not bring justice or equality. In the studied couples these mechanisms were made visible in the patterns of negotiations and conflict management that they applied. For instance that the men refused to negotiate or communicate openly over the issues referring to that they feel sick, they found different opinions as expressions of personalities with themselves and their women impossible to change, refusing to accept her norms, tactics of avoidance, subordination and passivity. The women in many cases avoided confrontation, subordinated their own terms and refused to reconsider the norms that they were guided by.

But in the study we could also identify several strategies of women to gain self governance. In this paper I exemplified these strategies: to obtain economic control, to obtain time for self and to relate to children at their own terms. I want to discuss the strategies to obtain self-governance and the role of these strategies for equality. Why just this dimension? Because I find it crucial for accomplishing of gender equality, since I find it to be a crucial brick in the game.

In her book, "Being human "The problem of agency" (2000) Margaret Archer develops a theory on individual agency. In her theory individual agency is dependent on inner conversations and commitments. I want to draw on her theory in my discussion of the strategies for self-governance and their implications for equality in intimate relationships. According to Archer an individual who wants to change the conditions of her life is starting off from a predicament, a problem which has to be dealt with through rational and emotional reasoning. The individual will have to identify the problems and the emotions connected to the problem. In a next step she will have to evaluate

the costs connected with going on as before or with a change. The I makes an inner conversation with the self with a goal to create a solidarity between the present and the future I, that is the I that the individual wants to become. This means to create an authentic self. The third step is to make a decision which involves a full commitment to the change and with full awareness of the costs involved with no change or change – Archer calls it a dedication... “a moment of conversational struggle, for the completion of the dialogue has to achieve both prioritisation and alignment” (p. 238). Thus, according to her theory, agency and change is deeply integrated with the individual identity.

The kind of change that has been discussed in this paper is relational-change of an interpersonal relationship that one person is trying to accomplish with another person women who want to change their husbands to be more involved and committed.

Following Archer it is not very likely that a person can make another person change, the person has to change her or himself. The women are motivated for change since they feel the predicaments of their everyday life. According to my view women have to reflect on the normative constraints and find solutions to reduce the degree to which they find themselves governed by obligations, in order to reduce the normative power. Women themselves will have to set limits for their own norm fulfilment and to be more true to themselves and their own interests – to be more authentic and to make commitments which are reflected on own terms. This involves applying conflict management styles that are communicative and articulated. We have in our study found several cases where women in different ways try to find scope for their own selves which I regard as connected with reflexivity and a wish to be more authentic. In several cases women tended to subordinate to the needs of others and not really confronting their own needs with those of the others. Strategies for promotion of the authentic self need to be open and communicative. To develop an authentic self is a step forward on the hard route towards equal relationships. It is even harder to be open and communicative about it. However it is a necessary move to make.

The three examples in different ways illustrate the tension between community and autonomy and the solutions to handle these tensions have different implications for achieving equality.

An orientation towards making agreements represents a kind of community that is achieved through logic of making calculations on inputs and outputs (Fiske 1991, 1992).³⁰

It has been argued that a community with strong elements of bargaining and calculation is not a viable kind of community. The arguments behind this

³⁰ Fiske identifies four elementary forms of social relations based on different kinds of reciprocities: "authority ranking" hierarchy based on gender, age where superiors receive more from inferiors that the latter get back. The superior to protect and provide reciprocates this kind of exchange with a norm of responsibility. "Communal sharing" where group belonging is emphasised. The kind of reciprocity in such relationships comes close to a "gift-economy", where creating, keeping and reproducing social relationships are regarded as the primary aim. "Equality-matching" with an egalitarian motive and a goal of even matching. Fairness and balanced reciprocity are elements of a guiding theme in the kind of reciprocity, but not with open acts of weighting and measuring. "Market-pricing" where exchange is explicit and bargaining, bartering, negotiations and contracts are typical elements as well as calculations regarding advantages and drawbacks.

assumption are that a viable family needs a nucleus and a periphery. A nucleus is built on gift giving and not on bargaining and calculation. In a relationship where calculations are basic, disintegration, conflicts, fragmentation and tensions are built into the relationship. Within a bargaining and calculating relationship priority is given to individual rights and autonomy rather than the need for jointness (Einarsdottir 2002; Holter and Aarseth 1993).

I argue against this theory even if I can admit that community based on contract is fragile. But I disagree with the assumption that bargain and calculation excludes a relational ethics. In my argumentation I refer to the concept of authenticity that was developed above. To care for the relationship must not imply that ambitions to set limits between the individual and others must bring disintegration and fragmentation. It can also imply that the individual looks after the self and also is responsive to the needs of the other. This kind of relationship was found among a few couples in the study. These couples had a collaborative style of conflict management, they were communicative and articulate about their needs and interests and the results of their communication was that they made their limits very clear to themselves and to the other.

Another model for division of labour and money I have identified as 'needs oriented'. It represents a kind of community where reciprocity is linked to a vision of needs economy. Each partner gives and does not expect to be reciprocated and any kind of calculation is regarded as morally wrong. This kind of community is focussing relational ethics and that what is best for the relationship as such. Everybody is supposed to subordinate their individual needs under that what is best for the community. Fiske calls the kind of reciprocity within this kind of relationship communal sharing. He identifies this kind of reciprocity as equal balancing. In this kind of community there is an element of gift and debt – the one who receives a gift has a kind of debt to the gift giver. The connections between gifts and debts are what create social bonding, i.e. community.

The needs oriented model for equality generate a sense of equality even if there is no real balancing of inputs to the joint. This was very obvious among those couples where this model was applied. Even if the basic logic of the model is the common good driven by the gift economy of love we found that women were more devoted to the common good than their husbands. The point is that the kind of morality that was implied in the model excluded negotiations and bargaining. The presupposition was a joint adherence to the common and we talked with women who were doing the lion's share who did not want to argue with their husbands because they expected him to be aware of his debts. It should be a spontaneous thing. That what is joint is not open for negotiation, it is self evident according to these women. Thus avoidance and subordination are used to manage conflicts rather than communications and compromises.

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