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Household Labor as Care: Care Practices and Gender among Swedish Couples expecting their First Child

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to provide an alternative way to understand gender equality. The division of household labor between Swedish couples expecting their first child is in this article analyzed in terms of *caring practices* (Fisher & Tronto 1990; Tronto 1993, 2013) instead of as chores that can be distributed. This made it possible to identify intra-relational caring practices within the couples that sometimes clash with the ever present 'third party; the state and its gender equality discourse. Both expectant mothers and fathers practice all forms of care, although not to an equal extent. Besides gender, pregnancy difficulties and health problems are circumstances that affect caring practices in this context. As part of a longitudinal study, 25 individual qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals in heterosexual couples expecting their first child. The interview material was analyzed thematically, which aimed to identify, describe, and analyze patterns of care in the data. It is argued that these pre-natal care practices affect how the participants shape their ideas about what gender-equal parenting is, beyond or together with this third party and its gender equality policies and discourses.

Keywords: care, caring, third party/state, everyday practices, intra-relational practices

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Introduction

Gender equality is a well-researched area and Sweden is often mentioned as a prominent country in this area due to its strong and well-established policies and discourses promoting gender equality. Further, the vast majority of the people in Sweden see gender equality as something good, almost taken for granted, and as an important aspect of 'Swedishness' (Duvander, 2014; Kaufman et al., 2017; Martinsson et al., 2016). However, there is a tendency to talk about gender equality in general terms, not being specific about what we actually mean. Gender equality has many dimensions and meanings, and it is used in different ways in people's everyday practices, as well as in public discourses and politics. In this article, the focus is on getting a more nuanced and specific understanding of gender equality through the lens of care.

I argue that we need a concrete and content-rich starting point, a 'care-centric narrative' (Doucet, 2023: 12; see also Tronto, 2013: 30-31), to better understand complex everyday family practices. Therefore, in this article, household labor is seen as a caring practice, instead of merely chores that can be distributed (see also Duffy, 2011). By cleaning the home, doing the laundry, changing car tires, or shopping for food, you show care – not only for the home, but also for the people living there together with you, and for the 'family project'. Through analyzing the division of household labor among couples expecting their first child through the lens of care, using Tronto and Fisher's (1990) and Tronto's (1993, 2013) concepts of care, we will be able to see that equality and fairness have many different faces and can be achieved in many ways – ways that are not always represented in gender equality politics and discourses. We will also be able to see how the manifold layers of household labor that are performed in everyday life are related to contextual conditions such as gender, health, workload, and pregnancy.

Following from this, the aim of this article is to get a nuanced and specific understanding of gender equality through analyzing the division of household labor between Swedish couples expecting their first child as caring practices. Questions that are addressed are: what are the different forms of care practiced among the participants in their division of household labor? How are the care practices related to the participants' gender position, and other contextual conditions such as needs, abilities, health, and pregnancy? How are the caring practices related to ideals and understandings about gender equality?

Some of the relevant research that has been done in the field is presented below, as well as the theoretical tools that are used in the analysis. The analysis section is divided into three different themes: strict calculations and equal distribution, compromises and negotiations, and needs and abilities leading to (a hope of) fairness in the long run. Finally, the article ends with a discussion of the results and conclusions.

Earlier Research

Earlier research, both Swedish and international, has shown that couples have optimistic expectations about equal parenthood, despite the challenges they expect to face. Yet, they often end up in traditional, gendered ways of organizing household labor, care of the child, and the division of paid and unpaid work (Baxter et al., 2015; Grunow & Evertsson, 2021; Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate, 2023; Katz-Wise et al., 2010; Kuhhirt, 2012; Miller, 2011; Twamley & Faircloth, 2023). Qualitative research has for example focused on negotiations within the couple (Björnberg & Kollind, 2003; Finch & Mason, 1993), and on how women and

men relate to and position themselves in relation to the gender equality discourse (Björk, 2017; Björnberg & Kollind, 2003).

Departing from their longitudinal study of 300 first-time parents in nine different countries, Grunow and Evertsson (2021) emphasize the importance of institutional contexts and gender cultures in individuals' life courses. Through extensive empirical data, they show how parents' decision-making, interactions and formations of motherhood and fatherhood are "shaped by the opportunities and constraints provided by the institutional context" (Ibid.: 112) and that it is via interactions with relevant others that the institutional context "can get under the new parents' skin" (Ibid.: 112; see also Flisbäck, 2024). The doing and undoing of gender in the transition to parenthood are thus conditioned by the institutional set-up which, according to Grunow and Evertsson (2021), includes regulations around parental leave, daycare provision and cultural norms. Even though it does not focus on relevant others like family, friends, or colleagues, this article contributes to the research field by showing how expectant parents negotiate around caring practices, with themselves, each other, and the Swedish gender equality discourse.

Grunow and Evertsson (2021) found that heterosexual couples, despite living "fairly egalitarian lives", started doing gender in more traditional ways in their transition to parenthood (see also Miller, 2011). Twamley and Faircloth (2023) found the same pattern in their two different longitudinal projects in the United Kingdom: women ended up taking the main responsibility for the children and the household, often working part-time for many years. Twamley and Faircloth (2023) claim that there is a discourse–policy gap in the UK, consisting of a cultural acceptance of shared parenting clashing with policies that make it hard to realize this sharing. The remuneration of parental leave is poor, which leads to few men choosing it, and subsidized childcare does not begin until the child is two or three years old (Ibid.: 13). Even though the conditions are different in the Swedish context, the same patterns seem to prevail, which means we also need to search for other explanations for it (than policies and remuneration), which is an aim of this article.

In a German study based on household surveys conducted between 1985 and 2008, Kühhirt (2012) shows that regardless of previous circumstances around paid work, salary level etcetera, parenthood led to a long-term increase in women's household labor and childcare time, while men's time use was hardly affected at all (see also Baxter et al., 2015; Katz-Wise et al., 2010; Ranta et al., 2023). Kühhirt argues that gendered inequalities within the family will persist despite a better economic situation for women, mainly due to gendered norms. He wants to see more research on a micro level (see also Miller, 2011 and her call for studies of micro politics, as well as Twamley and Faircloth 2023 who plead for a focus on lived experiences of equality). In this article, the micro level is scrutinized, allowing us to understand subtle nuances in how gender equality is played out in couples' everyday lives.

Theoretical Tools

For this article, the data, which consists of qualitative interviews, is analyzed through Tronto and Fisher's (1990) and Tronto's (1993, 2013) typology of different aspects of care. Since this typology has been criticized for being too descriptive and for lacking aspects of relationality and morality (e.g. Mason, 1996), I will apply a theoretical framework where these qualities are added to Tronto and Fisher's model. First, however, I present my perspective on family practices and their embeddedness in society.

In line with many other family researchers, I perceive family practices as deeply embedded in societal institutions and discourses, such as for example regulations around parental leave, and the gender equality discourse. In line with Morgan (2011; cf. Bourdieu, 1996), I argue that external agents such as the state, what I call here a third party in the couple's private lives, are present in everyday family life and that the law and the family are intertwined in a way that can place structural constraints or external pressure on family life, as well as enable different ways of organizing family life. Morgan (2011) makes a distinction between family as an idea, and day-to-day family living, i.e. the *doing* of family, something which is of relevance for the analysis since it problematizes possible tensions between ideals and everyday care practices. Grunow and Evertsson (2021) call the transition to parenthood a biographical turning point (cf. Baxter et al., 2015 who call it a critical stage in the life course) and refer to other researchers who have shown that this 'turning point' marks the start of gendered divisions of household labor and care. In this article, and in line with Jackson (2005) and Flisbäck (2014) this turning point is seen as an existential imperative. That is, it constitutes a situation in life when existential issues are raised, or become more urgent, as the limitations of one's existence become tangible.

A distinction that has played a significant role in much earlier research is the one between *caring about* and *caring for*. In short, caring about is feeling concern for another person and that person's needs, while caring for is mostly about the activities and work that needs to be done for this other person's wellbeing (Morgan, 2011; Noddings, 1984; Skeggs, 1997). Graham (1983: 16) talks about this in terms of *caring as love* versus *caring as labor*. Tronto and Fisher (1990: 35-64) and Tronto (1993: 105ff; 2013: 22-30) elaborated on this distinction and distinguished between:

a) *caring about* – which is noticing the need to care
b) *taking care of* – which is to take responsibility for and determine how to act on the identified need[1]
c) *caregiving* – which is the actual work of care that needs to be done
d) *care receiving* – which is attentiveness to the response to, as well as the result of, the care given, and
e) *care with* – how the caring needs, and how they are met, are consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom.

These different aspects of care are deeply embedded in relationships and should be seen as an integral whole (Mason, 1996; Tronto, 1993). According to Mason (1996), they involve different types of activity: moral, practical, and emotional. She states: "It is a version which suggests that activity, work, thinking, and feeling are bound up together in rather complex ways around the moral practice of care" (Ibid.: 22). The relationality of care is central in the frames of feminist care ethics. Care is not done *to* someone, but *with* someone; it is: "constituted not by interactions between two or more separate subjects but by intra-active relationships between subjects" (Doucet, 2015: 237). Feminist care ethics see human subjectivity as "relational, vulnerable, embodied, interconnected, interdependent and intra-dependent" (Doucet, 2023: 20; see also Noddings, 1984). Further, care practices are always situated (see Duffy, 2011; Eldén, 2014; Mason, 1996; Samzelius, 2023). They are performed in relation to specific contexts, i.e.

[1] In a later book, Tronto (2013: 22) labels this as *caring for*, but in this article the analysis sticks to the original label of *taking care of*, since it is considered to better capture the responsibility aspect of it.

the societal, discursive and institutional contexts; the family; and the social identities (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, etcetera) of those who constitute that family, as well as other circumstances such as personal experiences and needs, and health aspects.

Negotiation is a concept often used in family research. If both explicit and implicit forms of negotiation are considered, this constitutes an efficient analytical tool for understanding everyday practices in families (see Björnberg & Kollind, 2003; Finch & Mason, 1993; Roman & Peterson, 2011; Samzelius, 2023). As Roman and Peterson (2011: 35-38) write, negotiations are often subtle and unspoken processes of interaction which aim to arrive at agreements, understanding, consensus or smoothing of different interests. Finch and Mason (1993) argue that implicit negotiations often occur over a longer period of time, during which commitments develop gradually and sometimes go unnoticed. Similar to what occurs in care practices, negotiations in everyday family life are always situated in a specific context and shaped by social structures, discourses, norms and moralities around family, parenthood, gender, equality, justice, etcetera (e.g. Björk, 2017; Finch & Mason, 1993; Morgan, 2011; Samzelius, 2023).

To sum up, the theoretical tools used in the analysis in this article are the different forms of care mentioned above, the feminist care ethics' focus on intra-dependency and situated practices, and theories about negotiations. Intra-dependency and situated practices are used in order to shed light on how the parties in the couples are not just individuals who depend on each other, but also a unit with complex patterns of dependencies and conditions that demand contextually specific practices, which sometimes align with the gender equality discourse and sometimes not. Negotiations are not dealt with here in any analytical depth, but they are constantly present in the data, explicit or implicit.

Method and Empirical Data

This article is based on material from 25 interviews with individuals who are part of a heterosexual couple expecting their first child, conducted during 2022 and 2023 in a project about parental leave, gender equality, fairness and class. Expecting one's first child and moving closer to the birth is a specific situation that often intensifies thoughts about the couple relationship (see Flisbäck, 2024), as well as the organization of labor and care, including parental leave (cf. Grunow & Evertsson, 2021; Twamley & Faircloth, 2023). The participants were in the age span 27-45 years (although one expectant father was 58 years old). Only three of the participants were born in a country other than Sweden. The majority of the participants were middle class with white-collar jobs. Only seven of them had blue-collar jobs. Two participants were students, one participant was working on an hourly basis, and one was on sick leave. All participants were living in a couple relationship, either as spouses or as cohabitants. Some of them lived in big cities, some in smaller cities and some in the countryside. The participants were recruited via calls on social media (Facebook), announcements in three different union journals (Kommunalarbetaren, Handelsnytt, Mål & Medel), flyers in the city of Borås, letters with flyers to managers in elderly care and maternity care in Region Västra Götaland, and in some cases via personal contacts.

The first round of interviews took place before the child was born and the second round took place approximately one year after the birth of the child. The participant with the longest time to the birth of their child was five months pregnant and the one closest in time gave birth the night after the interview. In the latter case, the father was interviewed two weeks after the birth. The analysis in this article builds exclusively on the interviews conducted before the birth

of the child. Interviews were mostly conducted face-to face, but some were conducted online for reasons of geographical distance and convenience. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in verbatim. The participants were informed about the purpose of the project, their freedom to withdraw at any time, and about confidentiality and the use of the results – all in line with standard ethical guidelines in Sweden. The project has received ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

The interviews were conducted individually with each party in the couple separately in order to create a space where it was possible to talk freely around the issues and to pay attention to both similarities and differences between the expectant mothers and fathers. In two of the couples, the male partner did not participate. In the presentation of the empirical data, I have been cautious to separate the parties in the couples, in order to strengthen the confidentiality between them. This means that I lost the opportunity to analyze the quotes from one party in a couple in relation to the other. Instead, I analyze them as individual voices from men and women living in heterosexual couples expecting their first child. To further strengthen the anonymity, I did not use pseudonyms, but indicate only whether the quote comes from an expectant mother or expectant father.

The interview material was analyzed thematically, which aimed to identify, analyze and describe patterns (themes) in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was not limited to what is most common in the data but dealt with everything of interest to the aim of the study and the research questions (Ibid.). Contexts and complexities were the focus, which is in line with thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In the initial phase, I performed an open coding of the material, focusing on everything said about household labor and care. In the next phase, I coded in more detail and created themes out of the codes. In the last, theoretically informed, phase, I analyzed the thematized material with the help of theories around care.

Results and Analysis

In the analysis, three themes regarding division of household labor were discerned: 1) strict calculations and equal distribution; 2) compromises and negotiations, with the three subthemes of avoiding conflicts and feeling good, negotiating traditional gender ideals and socialization, and negotiations about responsibilities; and 3) needs and abilities leading to (a hope of) fairness in the long run. All three themes include different forms of care, which will be elaborated on below. All of them, except the first, can also be understood as ways to legitimize *not* sharing care responsibilities in a gender-equal way and/or as resistance to the Swedish gender equality discourse.

Strict Calculations and Equal Distribution

A theme found in the material is calculations around division of household labor. One of the expectant mothers' states that she and her partner have to measure time and effort carefully in order not to end up in a gendered division of labor: "I think it can be useful to, for example, to chart how many hours you actually do household things in one day or a week. You should not think that your intuitive idea about the division of labor is accurate, you maybe have to measure and balance things a little." For her, it is about realizing how much her partner is doing, and vice versa, to make her partner aware of the efforts she is making:

> … that the partner actually understands how much the other is doing. Maybe the partner who feels that she/he is doing the most underestimates the other one's work. But also, that the one doing less doesn't understand what is actually being done. That you don't think about the fact that if the house is going to look like this… it means that the other partner has to spend ten hours extra every week to make it happen. And the one who is doing less can realize their own ambitions and focus on their career…

Two participants state that gender equality is very important to them and that they aim to do exactly the same things in the same amount in their relationships, even though it might feel inconvenient and a bit hard to go against what they have been socialized to do and therefore are better at. One example of this is how both the expectant mother and the expectant father got chainsaw licenses when they needed to use a chainsaw. Another example is that even though the expectant father is the one interested in cars and engines the expectant mother also has to change the tires on their car. Doing the same things and spending the same amount of time on the activities – not the results or that different chores should be weighed equally – is thus in focus for them. This is different from the first case where it is about measuring time and effort carefully, not necessarily that they do the same activities.

In relation to this, participants talk about trying to avoid the risk of falling into traditional gender roles, something that can be seen as the presence of the Swedish gender equality discourse. Another aspect can be that they want each other to be competent and able to manage all kind of chores in everyday life, regardless of gendered assumptions or patterns. One expectant mother says that she wants both her and her partner to be able to handle the baby: "I don't want it to be just me who changes the diapers, then my partner will feel totally abandoned when I am not there." Instead of talking about it as a matter of the fair or equal division of labor, her argument seems to be that she does not want him to feel helpless.

As shown above, even strict calculations involve care. In the first example, the desire to make their partner see the other's efforts can be interpreted as a form of *caring about*, to feel concern for and acknowledge the partner. It might also include a desire that the partner *cares about* you, by seeing and acknowledging your efforts. *Caring about* the other is also expressed through the aspirations of both parties to be competent when it comes to household labor and care for the future baby. This is especially explicit in the quote about changing diapers, where the woman expresses concern for her husband to not feel helpless, but also in the quote about efforts to do the same things, like changing tires or using a chainsaw. These competencies can also be seen as strategies for not becoming restricted by traditional gender roles. Further, since the care expressed above is situated within a commitment to equality, justice, and freedom, it can be interpreted as a form of *caring with*.

Compromises and Negotiations

The participants negotiate with themselves, each other and the gender equality discourse. In this section we see how the gender equality discourse is seen as a potential threat to a peaceful family life, and after that, how traditional gender ideals as well as gender socialization frame the negotiations around a fair and equal division of household labor. Finally, I shed some light on negotiations around responsibilities.

Avoiding Conflicts and Feeling Good

Having a peaceful and functional everyday life is a recurring theme in the interviews. Quarrels and fights around a fair division of labor take a lot of energy and seem to threaten the relationship (see also Flisbäck, 2024). "It [gender equality] can feel a bit dogmatic and guilt-tripping (---) things just get unpleasant and hard and tense", as one expectant mother says. In the quote below, the discourse about gender equality is described as something that directly affects the couple's everyday intimate life and their relationship. This expectant mother says that she does most of the household labor, that she spent many years trying to change this through explicit negotiations, and that the division of household labor has been a source of conflict:

> I have been very, very principled and pretty much on the war path. (---) I have been very upset from a gender equality perspective. (---) But now I have become much more… a little bit softer on this, I think. (---) It has made it easier in our relationship as well as for me (---) You don't have the energy every day all the time. Sometimes it is just easier that he sits and reflects on how to set up the baby chair in the car while I fix the dinner.

Part of her 'softening' stems from her feeling that the gender equality discourse puts a lot of pressure on women:

> I have simply become tired of this, that I, or us women, are in charge of making it so damn gender-equal. Otherwise, you have done wrong, chosen the wrong man. But I have not chosen the wrong man. He just happens to have his history with him. (---) Should I look for a gender-equal man? I think I would have to look for a long time.

The gender equality discourse is thus portrayed as something that puts a lot of pressure and feelings of guilt on women, positing women as the ones responsible for the struggle for gender equality. Partly giving up on negotiating around ideals emanating from the gender equality discourse has made this woman's life easier and the relationship less filled with conflict.

Another expectant mother says that the goal, for both partners in the relationship, is to "feel good in the end" and that no one should stand back or "fall behind". She states that gender equality has "no value in itself" and that gender equality is only a problem for the couple if one of them considers it a problem. At the same time, she says that she would not be satisfied if she was living in a totally unequal relationship. An expectant father says that the division of household labor is based on their interests, that he wants to "help out" with household labor, and that it is important to support each other. He continues: "Then it automatically becomes gender-equal too. (---) If both parties are satisfied with the arrangement, it is fair. And gender-equal. Because if you force it on someone that does not want it, it is not fair or gender-equal."

The participants express concern for, and awareness of the relationship's needs, i.e. *care about* the relationship, in three different ways: a) efforts to change the relationship as in having explicit negotiations around a gender-equal division of household labor; b) "giving up" on having a gender-equal division of household labor in order to make the relationship more harmonious; and c) explicit resistance to the gender equality discourse in order to protect the relationship from tensions and struggles connected to that. All three can be seen as forms of *caring about* the relationship as well as their own and each other's wellbeing. Finding a balance and that both parties feel satisfied with the division of household labor are aspects that are emphasized in these negotiations, i.e. not a strict and equal division of labor. For the woman who had 'given up' we can also see forms of *caregiving,* since she ends up doing the work in order to keep the peace. Maybe we can even say that she is *taking care of*, i.e. taking responsibility for, the relationship, since it is her, not her partner, who seems to be in charge of all these processes.

Negotiating Traditional Gender Ideals and Socialization

In parallel with the gender equality discourse and equality-promoting policies in Sweden, the participants are partly socialized into traditional gender roles and are ambivalent about the gender equality project to varying degrees.

Sometimes the negotiations are contrasted with how things were in their family of origin, where some participants saw their mothers as being overloaded with work and responsibilities for the home and the family. One expectant mother distances herself from her past and says that she could never have "the kind of relationship" that her parents had and that she is happy that she and her partner have a more gender-equal relationship than they had. At the same time, she embraces some of the traditional gender values she learned in her childhood and wants to be "a little bit the bun baking mummy too". She laughs and says: "I don't know. It's a little bit… outdated view." Gender equality is very present in her talk, and she tries to negotiate with it and find a way to relate to it that she is happy with and that also is legitimate according to the dominant gender equality discourse.

The two genders are seen as different and complementary by some participants – a view that one expectant father combines with the gender equality discourse in terms of equal rights. He stresses that "the two genders are different" and that the third party, i.e. the state, should not be allowed to intervene if both parties in the couple are happy with the situation. At the same time, he says: "I always try to defend gender equality and Swedish social democratic values." Others talk about the gendered socialization process. One expectant father states that he and his partner are "at risk" of falling into gendered "set-ups". One example he gives of this is that his wife has full control over all the baby clothes and other baby things, while he has not yet even opened the boxes of baby clothes that he received from his mother.

One pregnant participant was born and raised as a woman, but today identifies as transsexual or a man. He lives together with another man. In spite of both of them living as men, he finds himself doing most of the household labor:

> Unfortunately, we have a very traditional gender division, where I have the female role; I take care of the home. I think, unfortunately, that it is how I was raised somehow. I was raised as a woman; I have lived as a woman for

> 21 years of my life. So, I see these things. I see the needs for dishwashing, and cleaning, and wiping the tables, and that sort of thing. And he does not. So, unfortunately, it is me who does it all.

He explains that his partner does more of "the heavy things" on the farm where they live, which he appreciates, since he is the one who is pregnant and not capable of doing much of that kind of work. Still, he states that he spends much more time than his male partner on their common household chores in total.

Wanting a more equal distribution in terms of seeing what needs to be done is a recurring theme in the interviews with the expectant mothers. To see what needs to be done corresponds with the concept of *caring about*, i.e. noticing the need to care. But the participants in the 'female' position also *take care of*, i.e. have the responsibility for the care – they "carry it all", as one participant says. Unpacking and sorting baby clothes is a way to plan ahead, to take responsibility for the future, i.e. *taking care of* things. When it comes to *caregiving*, the actual work of care that is done, it appears that both parties in the couple contribute, although not to the same degree or not doing the same chores. There is a tendency in the material to accept a kind of 'male incompetence', like in the quote above where the male partner is described as not being able to see what needs to be done, or in the quote earlier where the participant has given up on her expectations of her partner's ability to do household labor, and instead accepts him sitting down and figuring out how to install the baby chair in the car.

We can also see that the clash between the gender equality discourse and the traditional gender roles that the participants are (partly) socialized into creates an ambivalence. The participants embrace the idea of gender equality while also valuing differences between the genders – differences that lead to gender inequality when it comes to the division of household labor. The most illustrative example of this is the expectant mother who both distances herself from and embraces her past; a past where she learned how to bake and cook and be a mother – how to *care*. Yet another important point here is that the division of household labor is often a result of implicit negotiations that develop gradually over time, often unnoticed (Finch & Mason, 1993).

Negotiations about Responsibilities

Some expectant mothers talk about the responsibility for household labor in terms of being a 'project leader' or a 'boss'. One of them says:

> I don't want to feel like the boss of the family. (---) That picture is something I think a lot about and try to resist, at the same time as I easily end up there. Partly because of my personality. There are people who are much sloppier than I am and maybe care less about having things nice in which case it is easier to not become a project leader. (---) But I am not interested in caring for my partner as if he were a child. (---) The project leader role, I think, you don't compromise around, you have to share it.

We see that she is struggling with handling the unequal division of responsibility for the household - and actually also responsibility for her partner. On the one hand, she says that she easily ends up shouldering most of the responsibility, and on the other hand she says she never compromises on sharing it. Yet another expectant mother talks about how she has the overview and takes responsibility, but that her husband got better at doing things after she got pregnant. An expectant father says that he does not have any problem with letting his wife remind him to do the dishwashing: "It does not hurt her to remind me".

Wanting a more equal distribution in terms of seeing what needs to be done is another recurring theme in the interviews. The transsexual participant says: "He does not see those things. Then it is hard for him to take the initiative around them. At the same time… I don't want to go around and nag about it and say 'hey, shouldn't you do this?' I want him to see." The expression "I want him to see" is key to not ending up as the one responsible for the household. They have discussed this a lot, they have had explicit negotiations, but it is still hard to bring about a change, according to the participant. The tenacity of the socialization process becomes obvious and results in them ending up in positions they did not chose consciously.

The most striking in this section is whether or not someone *can* see what needs to be done, i.e. can *care about*. This competence seems to be situated in terms of gender; in these cases men are described as incompetent, incapable – something which might also spill over to capacity to realize ideals around gender equality. We also see the participants negotiate around different aspects of care related to household labor. On the one side, we hear expectant mothers say that they don't want to be the one leading the project and nagging about and delegating chores, and on the other side we hear expectant fathers say things like "it doesn't hurt her to remind me". In Tronto's (1993, 2013) words, the male position has no problem with letting the female position manage the *caring about*, i.e. seeing what needs to be done, and the *taking care of,* i.e. taking responsibility for the job being done. In these cases, the participants in the male position seem to be happy about handling the *caregiving* part only, i.e. doing some of the actual work that needs to be done. However, it is important to note that both women and men take part in this unfair division of responsibilities for the household, following the socialized traditional gender patterns, albeit in different ways. The absence of *caring with*, i.e. that the needs and how they are met are consistent with democratic commitments, is obvious.

Needs and Abilities Leading to (a Hope of) Fairness in the Long Run

A recurrent theme in the interviews is that individuals have different needs and abilities and that it is important to respect each other regarding this. People need different things, need different amounts of rest or time for themselves etcetera, and people also have different circumstances for contributing to the joint project of parenthood. Needs and abilities depend on things such as personal traits, health conditions and conditions around pregnancy and giving birth.[2] Due to these circumstances, a long-term perspective around equality and fairness unfolds (cf. Twamley & Faircloth, 2023, who call it future rebalances).

One expectant father describes himself as very energetic and efficient. He often wants to do things for the common project even if he is doing more than his partner:

[2] Pregnancy, post-partum conditions and breastfeeding are aspects that will be elaborated on in a forthcoming article.

> I have a lot of energy and I don't get exhausted very quickly, so I can… In the evening, for her, I guess at some point she just falls asleep. (---) So, I can take care of the kitchen or clean up for the day or do the laundry in the evening. (---) Equality does not mean 50/50. Now, if I just need six hours of sleep and she needs ten, then why don't I spend those four extra hours that I have every day on doing something for us as a couple?

According to him, quantification is tricky. Instead, it is about making sure that both get what they need.

Another aspect of circumstances is health issues, which in the interviews were raised as a central aspect of the division of household labor. This is connected to the participants' talk about the family as a "machine", a "joint project", or a "unit". One expectant father whose partner of many years has had problems with her mental health expresses it like this: "There are periods in life when you just cannot do it. And it has to be like that then. (---) I just had to ride it out, I cannot put demands on a person in that kind of situation. I just have to carry the heavy workload. Then there is no more talk, you just do it. (---) When it comes to health, you have to."

Besides health issues, workload can be an aspect that pauses an equal division of household labor. One expectant father claims that it is important to share the chores around the family and the house, but that a reorganization of this during specific periods is fine, for example when his partner wrote a book or when he was renovating the house. In another interview, an expectant father talks explicitly about a long-term perspective on fairness: "It might not be fair every day, but it will be equalized over time. One week one party has a lot to do at work, and also a bad headache, and is thinking a lot about a cousin who feels bad, I don't know, then maybe it is like "I have to step in", and I take on the cooking, laundry and changing of diapers today. If you can extend the time axis, I think it is good."

In some interviews, with both expectant fathers and mothers, the pregnancy is highlighted as a factor to weigh in. One expectant father talks about compensating for the time lost during pregnancy. His partner felt exhausted during pregnancy and therefore she lost time in her job project: "At least I will offer to maybe stay home an extra two, three weeks or so, so that she can finish those things that she now didn't have time to finish. (---) Maybe it could also be seen as compensating a little bit for what is happening now." Other expectant fathers talk about the tiredness, the risks, and the heavy workload that a pregnancy brings. Besides these aspects, one expectant mother brings up circumstances around giving birth that demand loyalty to the common family project: "We don't even know how I will feel, I might have had a cesarian (---) Lack of sleep can lead to postpartum depression. (---) I think that things cannot be the same as before (---) the equation does not add up, so you have to have a common… a loyalty to the new everyday life."

In one interview, an expectant mother says that she does most of the household labor, and that she fears that she will do even more after the child is born. In their relationship, they have a "traditional way" of dividing chores, she says. She continues by saying that even when he will be at home with the child on paternal leave, she will be the one doing most of the household labor, since he will be occupied with the child. The principle that the one who is at home with the child also does the household labor seems to only apply to her. This makes her tired, sad, and angry, she says, but since she already been in conflict with her partner around this issue, her present strategy is to "grin and bear it".

In the quotes, we can see how the participants prioritize each other's needs and abilities over an equal share of household chores, which means that fairness is negotiated in relation to care aspects and an understanding of the other person's limitations. Further, it becomes clear that it is not enough to *care about* the partner, i.e. acknowledge the partner's present and future needs, you also need to *take care of*, i.e. take responsibility for, and make decisions concerning the situation and the needs for care, as well as do the *caregiving*, i.e. do the things that need to be done. Some expectant fathers "step up" and do more *caregiving*, i.e. actual doing of household labor, during the pregnancy, and some plan to do more after the child is born. Some of the expectant mothers express hopes and/or fears around a fair division of household labor in the post-partum situation. Or in other words, they express worries around not *being cared about* enough, whether or not the partner will *take care of*, i.e. take responsibility for, the whole project, and that the *caregiving* part will not be divided fairly. Altogether, this means that they reflect on whether they will *receive enough care* and if caring needs and how these needs are met will be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom, i.e. the *caring with* aspect.

This need and ability talk can be seen as a form of resistance to the liberal discourse about gender equality based on an idea of two autonomous and equal individuals. Instead, it promotes another way of organizing household labor, a way based on care, that considers existentially different conditions in which the body has a central position. The participants are thus involved in a complex intra-relational, intra-dependency process that acknowledges vulnerabilities and limitations (Doucet, 2023). Another important point in this section is that the hope of fairness in the long run demands great faith in each other and the relationship; they have to trust that the relationship will continue and that the partner will "give back" later (see also Flisbäck, 2024). The involved parties have to take risks.

Conclusions

In this article, the division of household labor between heterosexual couples expecting their first child is interpreted as care practices, following a typology produced by Tronto and Fisher (1990) and Tronto (1993, 2013). I argue that these prenatal care practices affect how the participants shape their ideas about a gender-equal parenting, beyond or together with the third party: the state, and its gender equality policies and discourse. The main contribution of this article is to make visible and problematize how the intra-relational caring practices in the everyday life of the expecting couple often clash with the gender equality discourse of the third part/the state. The research questions are answered and discussed below.

Which Different Forms of Care are Practiced among the Participants in their Division of Household Labor?

All dimensions in the care typology were present in the data. *Caring about*, i.e. being attentive to other people's needs and seeing what needs to be done, was found in the following forms: a) realizing how much one's partner is doing, and hoping that one's partner acknowledges how much you are doing; b) making sure that one's partner is competent and not falling into gender traps; c) protecting the relationship against external pressures, such as the

gender equality discourse; d) noticing what needs to be done; e) considering one's partner's limitations; f) caring about both one's own and one's partner's projects; and g) planned caregiving in the future as compensation. *Taking care of*, i.e. taking responsibility for the needs for care being met, was found in the following forms: a) being in charge/the 'project leader'; b) doing chores without needing to be asked; c) planning ahead; d) stepping up when the other is not capable; and e) sharing responsibility for their life together as a common project. *Caregiving*, i.e. performing the actual work of care that needs to be done, was found in the following forms: a) doing the equally distributed labor; b) doing things to avoid conflict; c) doing things when asked; d) doing things to help and support; e) doing what is considered necessary; and f) temporal redistributions of labor due to current conditions. *Care receiving*, i.e. noticing, responding to, and seeing the results of the care given, was not as present in the data, but is an implicit aspect of the other dimensions of care, for example noticing the harmonious relationship after having done things to avoid conflict. *Caring with*, i.e. that the caring needs and how they are met are consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom, is not a very explicit theme in the data. However, the strong presence of the gender equality discourse in the everyday negotiations and practices of the participants makes this dimension perhaps the most prominent.

How are the Care Practices Related to the Participants' Gender Position, and Other Contextual Conditions such as Needs, Abilities, Health, and Pregnancy?

In the data, we can see how gender affects caring practices. The participants explain this by socialization into gendered patterns in society. More expectant mothers than expectant fathers say that they have a big responsibility for, i.e. are *taking care of*, the household and the future child, and more expectant fathers use wordings such as "I want to help", signaling that they are not *taking care of*, i.e. not seeing themselves as responsible for the household. Some expectant fathers express confidence only in performing the *caregiving*, i.e. doing chores. But the general tendency is that both expectant mothers and fathers expect themselves to do all forms of care – even if they do not succeed in these aspirations all the time. Since some expectant mothers also express that they are involuntarily made responsible for gender equality being realized in everyday life, they have dual burdens when it comes to *taking care of*. They seem to be a kind of echo of the third party, the state, and feel responsible for fulfilling the gender equality ideals of the Swedish state.

Further, some expectant mothers claim that they do more *caregiving*, i.e. actual work, either because they want to avoid quarrels and tensions or because they have given up on their male partner's ability to see what needs to be done, i.e. to *care about*. *Caring about* is directly connected to the *taking care of* dimension. If you don't notice needs, it is probably hard to take responsibility for making the care happen. It is important to note however that this uneven division of care can change under certain temporal circumstances such as tiredness, an extra heavy workload in the female partner's paid work, health problems, pregnancy difficulties, etcetera. Then the male partner steps up and takes responsibility for all dimensions of care. Since the data set is relatively small, I am not able to draw any strong conclusions about how the different gender positions affect care practices in general.

How are Caring Practices Related to Ideals and Understandings about Gender Equality?

The participants in this study all embrace the idea of gender equality and strive for a fair distribution of household labor, which can be interpreted as the presence of *caring with*. One interpretation of gender equality, built on a notion of gender sameness, is that the parties in the couple should do the same things in the same amount. This derives from social constructivist feminism, which considers differences between the genders to be a social construct that can, and should, be altered. Connected to this is *care about* making the partner more competent and the partner's personal growth: the partner, regardless of gender, should know how to do all things in the household and around the child, so as to be able to handle different situations even if they are alone in the home. It is also about a fair division of all caring aspects. Another interpretation, deriving from difference feminism, in which the two genders are seen as different and complementary but equally valued, is that the time and effort for household labor should be divided equally, but that the parties in the couple can do different things. Connected to this is *care about* harmony and a lack of friction in the relationship and efforts to avoid conflict, as well as *care about* the individuals' preferences and already established competencies, which often align with traditional gendered patterns. Another interpretation of gender equality that emerged in the material is about formal rights and duties (a human rights perspective). How the division of household labor and care is done is not relevant from this perspective, and the state should not intervene in the private sphere.

In the interviews, we also see resistance to the Swedish gender equality discourse based on *caring about,* where the aim is to make both parties feel confident and not pushed. But we also see a concern for harmony and a lack of friction in the relationship. Resistance to the gender equality discourse can thus be interpreted in terms of care. However, when the gender equality contract is broken, the participants seem to feel inclined to legitimize it and explain why – to themselves, each other, people around them, society, and, also us as researchers in the interview situation. This can be interpreted as wanting to still keep in line with the gender equality discourse.

Discussion

Sweden's policies around gender equality, as well as the discourses and norms that surround them, are built upon a strong belief in the autonomous individual's rights to develop themself and their potentials, as long as it is not hurting anyone else. In this liberal democratic model, it is the individual's responsibility to make sure that gender equality is observed in everyday life. In the interview material, this pressure is very obvious among all participants, but it is the expectant mothers who most strongly express tiredness and frustration around it. The ideals around and expectations of gender equality collide with care as an intra-relational practice, deeply embedded in everyday intra-dependencies (Doucet, 2015, 2023). Family life is, as some participants describe it, "a machine" that needs to function, often under pressure of time. People live the majority of their lives in the concrete micro world, where the well-being of the individuals in it, as well as the family as a whole, is a priority. When you feel that you must choose between living a gender-equal life or a life where everyone is in harmony, you choose the latter. Well-being demands care, and people try to care for each other as best as they can, something which is very visible among the participants in this study. This does not mean that they give up trying to achieve a gender-equal and fair division of labor within the home. The state as a third party in this equation permeates every choice they make and frames all their care practices, but through negotiations with each other, themselves and this third party, they

accommodate, compromise, and find their own ways of doing it, just as Ranta et al. (2023) describe it (see also Björnberg & Kollind, 2003).

The body and its limitations are aspects that seem to be underestimated in the gender equality discourse. If one party in the relationship suffers from bad health, physically or psychologically, it affects the division of care, since that party might be limited in their abilities and might have more needs. Further, pregnancy often entails big changes in the body; you become heavy, tired, and sometimes you have pain or become incapable of doing certain things. This seems to destabilize the gendered way of dividing household labor and care practices, but only temporarily. The postnatal body is another 'fact' that seems to be neglected in policies as well as in research about gender equality in parenting. The partner who has given birth is often exhausted, and needs time to recover, but is expected to breastfeed and care for the new child – and sometimes also for the household. Bodily conditions, such as the ones discussed here, and the relationship between them and ideals of and expectations of gender equality need to be further researched.

Noddings (1984: 24) argues that care is always about a move away from the self, towards the other: "Our attention, our mental engrossment is on the cared-for, not on ourselves." She also claims that care is not contractual or about "fixed rules", but about acting with "affection and regard" (Ibid.; see also Bourdieu 1996, where he calls the idea of the family a place free from calculations). In line with this, the participants in our study talk about a reciprocity, where fairness will come in time with future caring acts, which is something that requires trust (see Flisbäck, 2014, 2024), both in that they will stay together and that your partner will care for you when the time comes.

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Data Availability Statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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