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Challenging unequal gendered conventions in heterosexual relationship contexts through affective dissonance

Abstract

In Nordic countries, intimate relationships are routinely compared against ideals of gender equality, even though equality is not always achieved in everyday life. In this article, we analyse interviews with women that lived in unconventional relationships: mid- to later-life women in relationships with younger men, and bisexual women who have had relationships with people of different genders. The women's expectations of equality and reciprocity in heterosexual relationships collided with the lived reality of inequalities, causing affective dissonance (Hemmings, 2012). We identify three strategies that women use to deal with this affective dissonance. In the first strategy, unequal relationship patterns are rejected and displaced onto other people's relationships. In the second strategy, interviewees legitimize the unequal situations in their own relationship by utilizing culturally available interpretative frameworks that circulate notions about gender and couple relationships. Both strategies provide a means for dealing with the unpleasant affective dissonance, but they make it difficult to demand change in the relationship. In the third strategy, the annoyance and hurt caused by inequality are not explained away. Confronting affective dissonance has politicizing potential: it allows women to actively challenge the inequalities in their relationships.

Keywords: heterosexuality, couple relationships, bisexuality, affective dissonance, inequality

Introduction

Nordic countries rank highly in equality measurements (Leopold, Ratcheva, & Zahidi, 2016), and discourses supporting equality are widely approved (Jokinen, 2004; Magnusson, 2008). However, it has proven more difficult to disrupt gendered power relations in intimate relationships than in public life (Jokinen, 2004; North, 2013), and consequently equality ideals do not seem to reach the

level of relationship practices (Haavind & Magnusson, 2005; Jokinen, 2004, North, 2013).

Inequalities in (heterosexual) couple relationships materialize, for example, as unevenly shared housework and childcare responsibilities between men and women.

However, research in Nordic countries indicate that ‘hands-on fathering’ and family-friendly welfare policies have challenged the traditional links between masculinity and domestic responsibilities (Bach & Aarseth, 2016; Bjørnholt, 2014; Lorentzen, 2007). Moreover, dual earner model and combining work and family has been supported by social policy in Finland (Salmi 2004). Equality ideals have especially affected how well-educated young middle-class men in Nordic countries perform masculinity (Bach, 2017; Bach & Aarseth, 2016). However, men’s involvement in fathering does not necessarily mean equal involvement in housework (e.g. Bach & Aarseth, 2016; Magnusson, 2005). Also, only 1-3 % of Finnish fathers take prolonged home care periods with their children (THL, 2019), which leads to unequal sharing of parental responsibilities when the child grows older (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014).

Women in Finland continue to do more housework than men in heterosexual relationships (Jokinen, 2004; Kiiänmaa, 2013; Miettinen, 2008), regardless of education and income level (Raijas & Varjonen, 2007; Takala, 2005). Women tend to be left with the main responsibility for coordinating housework and everyday life in heterosexual families (Author 2, 2015; Bach & Aarseth, 2016; Jokinen, 2004; Miettinen, 2008; Sihto et al., 2018). Women also do more emotion work than men that is, work that aims to take care of others’ emotional needs, improve others’ well-being and maintain harmonious relationships (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; Strazdins & Broom, 2004; Umberson, Thomeer, & Lodge, 2015). In this article we explore why many unequal conventions in (heterosexual) relationships persist, and what the favourable conditions for changing them might be. The focus is on the affective aspects of intimate life and how they intertwine with cultural and social conditions (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). To be able to address this intertwining, we draw on theorizations of affectⁱ within feminist and cultural studies (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010;

Hemmings, 2005; Koivunen, 2010).

Women and men in heterosexual relationships often routinely reflect on and verbalize unequal relationship practices. However, this does not necessarily lead to change in day-to-day gendered routines (Adkins, 2002; Jokinen, 2004; see also Kolehmainen, 2012). Bach and Aarseth (2016) have suggested that exploring unconventional heterosexual relationships, such as those between career-oriented women and their male partners, who position themselves as “running the family”, can provide useful insights into how and why gendered practices do change. By focusing on interviewees who live or have lived in relationships that are considered unconventional – mid- to later-life women dating younger men, and bisexual women who have had relationships with partners of various genders – we explore whether these heterosexual relationship contexts “with a twist” might provide beneficial conditions for the renegotiation of (heterosexual) gendered conventions.

Heterosexual couples with large age differences can be considered unconventional in Finland, where the average age difference between spouses in their first heterosexual marriage is two years. In two-thirds of first marriages, the husband is older, while the wife is older in only one-fifth of marriages (Nikander, 2010). Research on inequalities in heterosexual relationships often highlight domestic contexts of a shared household and immediate care responsibilities, such as raising children (Miettinen, 2008; Lammi-Taskula, 2007). The situation might be different for couples with an age difference and who have no childcare responsibilities to negotiate. Yet, men can rely on their wives to provide them with care, whereas for women the availability of male spouses’ help is not so taken for granted, especially as the women age (Crawley & Lynch, 2012; Spitze & Ward, 2000).

Non-heterosexual couples, especially female couples, are more equal than heterosexual couples in sharing household chores, finances and childcare (Author 2, 2015; Brewster, 2016; Gotta et al., 2011; Kelly & Hauck, 2015). Bisexual women often stress that their experiences of

relationships with different genders, have led them to question heterosexually gendered ways of being in a relationship (Author 2, 2015; Scales Rostosky et al., 2010). Yet, the ideal of equality is more easily achievable when bisexual women are together with female and trans partners (Author 2, 2015). These studies indicate that gendered practices in a relationship are interlinked with the particular gendered context where the relationship takes place.

Furthermore, we argue that it is necessary to look closely at the affective dimension of how unequal situations are legitimized and negotiated in relationships. In order to grasp the affective dimension of unequal situations, we deploy Clare Hemmings' (2012) concept of affective dissonance in our analysis. Hemmings (2012) suggests that moments of affect – whether discomfort, anger or hurt – carry political potential. We claim that affective dissonance can be a necessary starting point for initiating change also in heterosexual relationships. We identify three strategies for dealing with unequal situations that invoke affective dissonance, and argue that these different responses are connected to possibilities for either maintaining inequalities or enabling change.

Heterosexual relationships as a site for inequality

Wendy Hollway (1984, p. 228) states that “heterosexual relations are the primary site where gender difference is re-produced,” highlighting the importance of analysing gender within the context of lived heterosexuality. Taken further, heterosexual relationships can be crucial sites for social change and the potential disruption of gendered conventions (Beasley, 2010).

Since first-wave feminism, love and marriage have been criticized as institutionalized forms of heterosexuality, which justify and naturalize women's subordination to men through the gendered division of finances, household chores, care and emotion work in marriages (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; Jackson, 1999, pp. 113–114, Richardson, 2000, p. 20). Instead of a naturally

given phenomenon, sexuality came to be considered a realm of practices, desires, norms and ideas that are connected to the broader organization of society (Gunnarsson, 2014, pp. 2–3).

In this article we use the combined concept of “heterosexual relationship context” to refer to a particular context that seems to invite certain ways of doing genders together (Author 1, 2012; Butler, 1990; Jokinen, 2004; Magnusson, 2008). It does thus not refer to an individual’s sexual identity or sexual orientation, which may be heterosexual, bisexual or something else.

Eva Magnusson (2005, 2008) has analysed the cultural resources and rhetorical strategies in Finland, Sweden and Denmark that legitimize gender-based inequalities and power asymmetries in heterosexual relationships. Utilizing these strategies, inequalities become, a matter of personality or naturalized gender differences, which makes it difficult to envision change. Consequently, both men and women interpret everyday experiences in heterosexual relationships through frames that position men’s real or assumed needs as central, making women’s wishes and needs secondary or excessive (Holmberg, 1993; Magnusson, 2005, 2008; see also Kolehmainen, 2010, pp. 186–188). Nevertheless, studies also indicate new ways of interlacing emotional connections and domestic responsibilities within middle-class heterosexual couples (Aarseth, 2007).

The complicated dynamics of intimate relationships outlined above can also be understood through Lauren Berlant’s (2011) concept of “cruel optimism”. Cruel optimism refers to the maintenance of attachments to cultural objects – such as a heterosexual relationship – that can threaten our well-being and diminish our possibilities for satisfaction, despite the hope of happiness that is invested in the object. An attachment of cruel optimism does not necessarily feel cruel or unpleasant to the individual. However, such attachments might not feel good to the individual either, and they are not optimistic or positive in themselves; rather, the optimism refers to the investment in the continuity of the attachment.

Furthermore, as Sara Ahmed (2010, p. 29) notes, happiness functions as a promise that steers us towards certain objects in the world. A heterosexual couple relationship can be seen as a

“happy object” that is charged with a strong affective promise of happiness (Ahmed, 2010), entailing cultural promises of intimacy, reciprocity and even equality (Berlant, 2008). But as the studies discussed above show, expectations of reciprocal and equal partnerships are often not met (Sihto et al., 2018). Nonetheless, Ahmed (2010, p. 50) claims that exposure to the unhappy effects of the promise of happiness can be affirmative, since it can provide us with alternative ways of imagining what might indeed be a good or better life.

Likewise, Hemmings (2012, p. 157) claims that a moment of affect – anger, frustration and even rage – is often at the core of transformation. Developing Elspeth Probyn’s (1993) notion of “feminist reflexivity”, Hemmings draws attention to situations where our embodied sense of self – “who one feels oneself to be” – clashes with the social world – “the self we are expected to be in social terms” (Hemmings, 2012, p. 149). This collision, which Hemmings terms “affective dissonance”, produces an affective struggle that has politicizing potential for alternative knowledge to develop and action to take place. In the context of this research, what causes affective dissonance is the collision between the cultural promises and expectations of an intimate and rewarding reciprocal heterosexual relationship and the lived reality of its inequality and unfairness. The affective dissonance – painful as it often is – might well be suppressed; yet it might also invoke a sense of injustice and a desire to correct that injustice (Hemmings, 2012, p. 157). We ask what kind of role affective dissonance plays in resisting the persistent pull of gendered conventions in the context of heterosexual relationships. We explore how different ways of dealing with affective dissonance function in negotiations of equality in relationships.

Establishing data sets for analysing affective dissonance

We analyse two sets of interview data. Author 1 conducted the first set of interviews in 2013–2016 with 19 mid- to later-life women (aged 41–68 years) in Finland who had experience of a relationship with a substantially younger man. The mean average age difference was 14 years. The

relationships were mostly ongoing, with the exception of two past relationships. Two of the relationships could be described as “friends with benefits”, and the rest were long-term relationships that had lasted between eight months and 30 years. Six interviewees were married to their younger partners. The interviewees were working-class and middle-class women. The interviews were structured around 12 questions that focused on the women’s relationship experiences with the younger men, their understanding and experiences of romantic relationships in general, and whether that had changed during their life.

In 2005 author 2 conducted seven couple interviews: four with bisexual women and their female partners, and three with bisexual women and their male partners, one of whom was a transman. The research request was centred on bisexuality in relationships: the wording was “I am seeking couples where one partner – a woman – is bisexual”. The couples’ relationships had lasted from three to seven years. Author 2 was able to reach 11 of the participants in 2014–2015 for individual follow-up interviews. She was unable to reach either partner from one female couple, and the former partner of one bisexual woman did not want to participate and also refused consent to use the 2005 couple interview in the study. Author 2 was thus able to use five original couple interviews in her analysis. Participants were aged 22–42 at the time of the first interview, and 32–52 during the follow-up interview. By the time of the follow-up interviews, the majority of the couples had separated. One mixed-sex couple had stayed married. In 2014–2015, two of the bisexual women were in long-term relationships with men, three were married to men, and one was single. Three of their former male partners were in heterosexual marriages, one woman was in a registered partnership, and one was single. The latter two participants did not give accounts of experiences of heterosexual relationships and their interviews were not included in the analysis. The majority of the participants were well educated, yet this study also included participants from lower educational backgrounds: by the follow-up interviews, eight of them had higher-education degrees, and three had vocational qualifications.

The couple and individual interviews produced different responses (Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2013). In 2005, all the interviewees invested in an equality ideal (Author 2, 2015). Yet, this ideal picture became complicated when the mixed-sex couples gave accounts of their daily lives with gendered tensions and unequal sharing of housework. The equality ideal was more easily achievable in female and trans relationships. The individual interviews in 2014–2015 gave a more complex picture of the participants' (past and current) relationships. Living up to the equality ideal seemed even harder to attain in the participants' new, mostly mixed-sex relationships, but also in some female relationships. In both the couple and individual interviews, the investment in the equality discourse seemed more complex when the interviewees were describing their daily practices in relationships.

Both authors' interviews were conducted in Finnish cities and towns. They took place in participants' homes or places that offered privacy, such as meeting rooms in libraries or universities, or corner tables in cafés. The interviews lasted from one to four hours. They were audio-recorded and transcribed using a simplified version of Jefferson's (2004) system. The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions, and were organized around relationship-related themes. Interviewees were also encouraged to elaborate outside the posed questions.

When analysing our data, we first identified the passages in which the interviewees expressed annoyance and/or hurt about unequal situations, either in other people's relationships or in their own. We then analysed the ways the interviewees dealt with these situations. We chose for detailed analysis the unsatisfying and hurtful situations, because these situations have to be reconciled in order to legitimize the continuation of the relationship. We explore how different responses to the affective dissonance that emerged in those situations are connected to possibilities for either maintaining or challenging inequalities in participants relationships.

Negotiating gendered conventions

We have identified three affective strategies to the affective dissonance caused by the discrepancy between the expectations of a reciprocal and equal heterosexual relationship and its unequal lived reality. In the first strategy, unequal situations are located in other people's relationships. When the interviewees assess these situations from a distance, the inequality and the women who find themselves in such situations are judged, often rather harshly. However, when interviewees discuss such situations in their own mixed-sex relationships, they cannot distance themselves so easily. Hence, in the second strategy, the discomfort of affective dissonance is dealt with by using culturally available interpretative frameworks that circulate notions of gender and couple relationships. These help to make sense of and normalize the annoying or hurtful unequal situations (Magnusson, 2008). This strategy can provide temporary relief from the affective dissonance, but at the same time it does not challenge the unequal gendered practices in the relationship. In the third strategy the interviewees confront the affective dissonance. This affective strategy might not provide as much relief in the midst of unequal gendered practices, but we claim that it is a necessary state in order to create possibilities for change.

Displacing affective dissonance

In our two sets of data, unequal situations in heterosexual relationships can be scornfully condemned when the narration deals with a situation that is not acute for the interviewee but concerns an imaginary or real situation located outside her own relationship.

Leena (all names are pseudonyms), 59, has been with her partner, who is 20 years younger, for 10 years. She ponders gender, equality and generation:

Most men of my age unfortunately are such that they make others serve them or they maintain some rights for themselves, like men can go out for a beer and women sit at home waiting. I could never be with someone like that. [...] No, I could never be with a man who, like, for example is like my father was. Mother did all the housework. I could never [do that].

Leena condemns a relationship scenario where the woman serves her husband, and where rights and duties are unequally distributed. The rejection is powerful, as Leena “could never” see herself in such a situation. This kind of rejection enables one to distance oneself affectively, as it provides a way to express frustration and moral judgement of unequal conventions without having to struggle within such situations.

A similar distancing often occurs when bisexual women and their partners in female relationships compare their relationships with heterosexual ones. In the couple interview in 2005, Mia – in answer to a question about how similar or different to other relationships the couple think their relationship is – compares her female relationship with her partner’s sister’s heterosexual relationship. In Mia’s caricatural depiction “the man takes care of the family, and the home and the house – and the woman takes care of everything else, they take care of the children and the housework.” Mia’s partner Jenny rejects the gendered arrangement with firm words: “I wouldn’t accept that.”

Ten years later Jenny is in a relationship with a man who has a drinking problem. She is asked how her partner’s alcoholism affects their life together, she expresses her annoyance that her partner does not share the housework equally or take care of their son. However, she formulates her expectations in a much gentler way than 10 years earlier: “It would be so nice if he was with us in the everyday bustle.” Jenny’s account suggests that a heterosexual relationship forms a particular context, which invites certain ways of doing genders together. The pull of these practices is hard to resist, especially when the female partner lacks resources and support due to her partner’s alcoholism.

Struggling with unequal gendered conventions

When the interviewees discussed situations of inequality in their own current relationships, women described the ways in which they try to get along with annoying or hurtful situations that conflict with expectations of a reciprocal heterosexual relationship, and thus cause

affective dissonance. One way of getting along with this dissonance is to draw on culturally available interpretative frameworks for gender and relationships (Magnusson, 2008).

The theme of not being able to rely on a younger male partner when in need of care reoccurs in Author 1's research material, and is evident in cases where the woman was already in her mid- or later-life stage when the relationship began. Women worrying especially manifested itself in interviews with older women who anticipate a physical decline in the relationship. In the following excerpt, Anneli, aged 62, is replying to a question about the kinds of positive change her relationship may have brought to her life, as previously she had reflected on the frustrating aspects of her current relationship with a 48-year-old man. Anneli discusses her partner's unwillingness to provide care on occasions when she faced mental and physical illness. She states:

Well, we have been together for 20 years, so it is very difficult to remember the time before that. But we have also been separated every now and then. We were separated for two years at one point. There are things like my partner has not been able to cope with me, if I have been sick. At one point I was diagnosed with depression and he could not stand it at all and we were separated. [...] Once I had an operation, they suspected cancer and well, this man, for some reason, he said that he does not, well once he visited me in the hospital and dropped two kilos of mandarins on my newly operated stomach. He doesn't have, he kind of does not get this at all, how I am feeling. After that we were separated for a while. [...] But it has nothing to do with age but his character, he should take others more into consideration.

The interviewee discusses here her sense of being deprived of care from her partner in situations where she was particularly vulnerable. The painfulness of her partner's inconsiderate behavior becomes palpable when she tells how her partner, "...dropped two kilos of mandarins on my newly operated stomach".

The interpretative framework in the account above concerning the inability of Anneli's partner to provide care is similar to one of the interpretative repertoires that Magnusson (2008) identifies when women and men legitimize the uneven distribution of household chores in heterosexual relationships. In the excerpt, it is the interpretative framework of "individual differences" (Magnusson, 2008, p. 85) that is used to account for him avoiding care responsibilities and for, "...not getting it at all". This enables one to make sense of the hurtful situation, but at the same time does not provide reasoning to demand change, because a person's character can be regarded as a fairly static feature. Rather, this interpretation may help cement the perceived unequal situation. Sometimes, this might be the only sensible option, such as in Helena's case. Helena, aged 55, reflects upon a past heterosexual relationship in which her partner prioritized work and neglected the family. She is puzzled by her submissiveness, as she has no problem standing up for herself in other spheres of life, such as at work. "On the other hand, I was always a bit scared of Seppo physically, as in certain circumstances he might have attacked me," she concludes.

Feminist research on men's violence against women in intimate relationships in Finland highlights how public services fail to take responsibility for gendered violence, leaving women to resolve situations themselves (Ronkainen & Näre, 2008, p. 16). The victim's position is characterized by a demand for strong subjectivity (Husso, 2003), which invites one to question one's own submissiveness, as shown in her conclusion, especially in a culture where vulnerability can invoke shame (Ronkainen, 2001, 2006).

In Author 2's interview set, another interviewee's situation is entirely different. Hanna had a previous long-term relationship and registered partnership with a woman. Her current husband, contrary to general statistics, provides her with the care she needs and shares the caretaking of her small children. However, Hanna's wish for emotional sharing is not met in the current relationship. In the interview, she talks about her previous long-term relationship

with a woman in wistful terms. She says, "...when I think about it [monogamy] as a whole, I think the price is high, that I live everyday life with a man – that I'm not in a relationship with a woman." When Author 2 asks her to slightly clarify what she means, she explains:

I feel like, how it was with Anna and how I imagine it, to share one's daily life with a woman: it is easy and natural. Being together and being separate somehow intertwines more seamlessly [with a woman], communication is easier, and it's easier to be on board with what the other person is going to do, and what they want and wish.

In the following excerpt, Hanna is answering an interview question about a situation in which she feels unhappy in her current relationship. She replied:

It's like I share a lot about my experiences and Peter then listens to me and understands, but doesn't necessarily; he doesn't engage actively in the conversation which of course is because that's characteristic for him. It's like he listens, but doesn't have something to say right away like although he's interested about it, he doesn't necessarily start to reflect on it... I wished so much that the other person would empathize and mirror it back to me and reflect on it with me together ... like the way I do with my friends.

Hanna's description reflects other research findings on emotion work in relationship contexts (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; Umberson et al., 2015). Umberson et al. (2015) analyzed in-depth interviews with lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples in long-term relationships. Minimizing the boundaries between partners, for example sharing feelings and discussing them with partners, was important to women in the study. Regardless of relationship form, men did not highlight a specific wish to minimize boundaries. In heterosexual relationships, men justified the maintenance of boundaries by saying, for example, that they did not know what to do about the things that bothered

their wives. In the course of their long-term relationships, however, the men performed more emotion work in order to lessen their desire to maintain boundaries.

Furthermore, Thagaard and Stefansen (2014), who have studied middle-class Norwegian heterosexual couples, argue that there is diversity in how middle-class men emotionally contribute to their relationships. According to Thagaard and Stefansen (2014, p. 24), it is important not to focus only on the “feminized” aspects of love, such as talking about feelings, thereby overlooking men’s “acts of practical love and care” (Jamieson, 1999, p. 477). Furthermore, Gabb and Fink (2015) suggest that visceral everyday practices create the texture of long-term couple relationships. For example, Hanna’s husband shows his affection and love by engaging in caring acts that go beyond the equal sharing of household duties.

The way in which Hanna seems to posit her wishes for reciprocal sharing as the major problem in her relationship reflects Lena Gunnarsson’s (2014) conceptualization of heterosexual relationships as “loving him for who he is”. It also reflects an interpretative framework in which women take into account both their own point of view and their male partner’s (Kolehmainen, 2010; Magnusson, 2008). By this logic, men are regarded as incapable of change, and women are supposed to adapt themselves in relation to these unchangeable men (Gunnarson, 2014; Sihto et al., 2018). Hanna’s taking blame for the situation functions as a means of getting along with the affective dissonance brought about by her expectations of a reciprocal, intimate heterosexual relationship and the lived reality of it. In this case, the culturally available interpretative framework of gender differences and individual differences (Magnusson, 2008, p. 85) helps to suppress the dissonance and cement the gender differences, rather than enabling alternative knowledge (Hemmings, 2012), such as developing a man’s capacity for embodied forms of emotional reflexivity (Holmes, 2015, p. 189). Moreover, utilizing these interpretative frameworks enables one to live with the cruelty of intimate attachment (Berlant, 2011).

Challenging unequal gendered conventions

The interpretative frameworks that women use to make sense of unequal situations (Magnusson, 2005, 2008) that evoke affective reactions of annoyance and hurt provide a means for getting on with such situations yet not for changing them. Instead, creating favorable conditions for change requires one to confront the affective dissonance caused by the collision between expectations of equality and a lived reality of inequality. In unequal situations that evoke annoyance and hurt, enduring affective dissonance – the feelings of annoyance and hurt – enable women to actively challenge them.

Marjatta, aged 68, has been together with her 53-year-old partner for the past 18 years, and was married twice before that. After being asked the interview question “How has your understanding of relationships changed during your life?”, she looked back on her second marriage, which lasted for more than two decades. Marjatta describes how her husband stopped participating in household chores after starting his own business and joining a parish where he spent every moment of his limited free time. She remembered:

So I was working during the weekdays and then I did the household chores on Saturdays all by myself. I got fed up with that because I think that in a marriage you should do things together and be together, instead of just calling home to ask if the dinner is ready. The only thing that he [the former husband] did at home was that he baked the bread. That was the only thing. Once my mum and dad got him a bread machine for Christmas. I told them that I would not accept the present, because the only household chore that he did was baking the bread for the whole week. With a bread machine, you can only bake one loaf at a time. We swapped the bread machine for a microwave oven, so that at least he would be doing some household chores.

Marjatta described her expectations of reciprocity as, “In a marriage you should do things together and be together.” Rather than being a happy object in a romantic sense (Ahmed, 2010), marriage for Marjatta signifies first and foremost an ethical commitment, which is lived out in everyday life through the reciprocal sharing of responsibilities. Yet her description highlights the very uneven sharing of household chores in her previous marriage. Affective dissonance appears here as her annoyance; she “got fed up” with the situation. Nonetheless, she does not go on explaining or normalizing the unequal situation that caused her annoyance. Rather, in the midst of this familiar gendered distribution of unpaid work, Marjatta explains how she refused the bread machine as a Christmas present from her parents. The act of refusing the bread machine might seem counterproductive in the sense that the appliance might possibly have saved time on household chores. However, in Marjatta’s narration, it becomes understandable as an act of drawing a line. By sending the bread machine back, Marjatta made an effort to actively influence at least one aspect in her husband’s involvement with the household chores.

Nevertheless, challenging the unequal gendered positions readily offered by heterosexual relationships requires a woman’s continuous effort. Harry, whose bisexual female partner in a previous relationship continuously demanded that he make an effort to share housework equally, says in the follow-up interview that this was a “constant struggle” . In his current relationship, he does not face such constant demands. He describes the current situation as, “...all the time there is this process that I try to do more and more [housework], but in the end, when I’m at home, I’m a bit lazy.” In principle, Harry invests in the equality ideal when he states, “...of course it is important that both take part [in housework], I’m aware of that.” He is also reflexive about his gendered upbringing as a boy: “...[in his childhood home] my mother did everything, and of course I was this spoiled bastard.” Yet his reflexivity and awareness of gendered conventions do not lead him to fully take responsibility for the situation as cultural conventions allow men more freedom to define the terms of their participation in childcare and

housework. This example also shows that thinking about emotional responsibility along gendered lines in terms of “emotional” versus “practical” acts of love might be somewhat mistaken, especially if there is also a shortfall in men’s practical acts in relationships (Thagaard & Stefansen, 2014).

Paula, a bisexual woman, who had stated in the couple interview in 2005 that she would “die in three days” if she had to live in “a traditional woman’s role” (Author 2, 2015, p. 437), explained in her follow-up interview in answer to a question about how she and her husband Thomas shared childcare responsibilities. She revealed:

Well, I have consciously tried, when Max was born and I hadn’t had anything to do with babies before, he was like a UFO from outer space and I didn’t have any idea what do with him – and then Thomas asked me – like how to dress him when we went outside, and I was like, I don’t know, like I know just as much as you do, like you try and think yourself now.

When Paula and Thomas’ first child was born, Paula made a conscious effort not to fall into the “all-knowing” mother role. By describing their newborn baby as a UFO from outer space, she refuses the role of a mother with innate childcare skills. Yet her husband expected this from her. There is irritation in her voice when she relates how she told her husband, “...like you try and think yourself now.” In this way, she puts her husband on an equal footing when it comes to the responsibility for taking care of their children and figuring out how to do so.

Paula describes how she and her husband have succeeded in their efforts, “...to care for them [their children] half and half”. Yet Paula’s description reveals that gendered conventions are embedded in a wider web of social relations. She describes how people around them approach her with regards to the children. She mentions:

[others]expect all the time that the mother comes or that mother... we both go to the nursery school every day and they say all the things to me [the mother]. If there are shoes missing or anything – those messages come to me, like fathers couldn't understand. It irritates me so much.

Despite these circumstances, she continues to challenge the gendered conventions surrounding childcare. Paula states:

If we go somewhere for a weekend I've let him, unlike so many mothers, won't let the father pack the children's clothes. [And I've said] there you go, you pack Helena's clothes, I can take Max's. Like you think now, we are there for two nights and three days, so how many outfits she will mess up and how many nappies we'll need to take. Men can do it, if you let them and if you don't tell them that pink and orange won't go together. [...] If you want to control everything, then you also get to do everything by yourself.

According to Paula, sharing the parenting responsibilities requires her to give up controlling how their child is dressed and to swallow the potential embarrassment of inappropriate clothing choices made by her husband. However, she is willing to risk coming across as a sloppy mother in order to share the childcare responsibilities equally with her husband. In Paula's account, the affective dissonance arises out of the discrepancy between her ethical principles of equality and the norms of womanhood and motherhood imposed on her. Challenging gendered conventions in such situations requires her to allow herself to be put in an uneasy situation and to confront the affective dissonance that subsequently arises.

Concluding discussion

This study shows that unconventional relationship experiences do not straightforwardly indicate altered gendered conventions in participants' heterosexual relationships. Older

women's accounts of personal relationships especially highlight oppressive experiences, but inequalities also occur in younger bisexual women's relationships. Older women's narrations of their past heterosexual relationships highlight inequality in the sharing of housework and childcare. Yet an acute issue for them in their relationships with younger men is that they cannot rely on the younger male partner when they need care. Bisexual women, for their part, question heterosexually gendered relationship patterns in their talk. Yet this questioning is understandably harder to put into practice in their different-sex relationships than in their non-heterosexual relationships.

Women's descriptions shed light on the cruelty of the intimate attachment (Berlant, 2011), as their experiences and expectations of equality and reciprocity in heterosexual relationships often collide with the lived reality of inequalities in relationships, sometimes in a harsh way. We have analyzed this collision by utilizing the concept of affective dissonance. Our analysis aligns with Hemmings' (2012) idea that affective dissonance can carry politicizing potential. In the first two strategies for dealing with affective dissonance that we identified, attention was directed away from the painfulness of the oppressive situation. In the first strategy, this was done by locating the inequality in other people's relationships. By doing this, the interviewees could distance themselves from the painfulness of that kind of inequality. In the second strategy, interviewees relied on available interpretative frameworks on gender and couple relationships. While relying on these interpretative frameworks provided a way forwards from annoying and hurtful situations, it also directed attention away from an oppressive situation.

However, the affective dissonance that arises from the disjunction between experience and expectation has potential to become a catalyst for the desire to correct injustice (Hemmings, 2012, p. 157). In the third strategy, women's annoyance or hurt is present in unequal situations, yet not displaced or normalized. Rather, women act in ways that challenge

the inequality of the situation. This means that women act against the cultural expectations imposed on women or mothers, and thus put themselves in an uneasy position saturated with affective dissonance. We argue that confronting affective dissonance is required in order to change gendered conventions in heterosexual couple relationships.

The interviewees in this study have had various experiences in romantic relationships. Throughout their lives, mid- to later-life women have engaged in heterosexual relationships framed by different material, economic, legal, and cultural conditions, depending on their stage of life. The bisexual women, most of whom are highly educated, not only have experiences of relationships with variously gendered partners, but also have access to queer cultural knowledge of equal ways of living in female relationships. Consequently, the horizon of expectations reaches beyond a conventional heterosexual relationship, which enables the interviewees to reflect upon, and challenge, the promise of happiness (Ahmed, 2010) that heterosexual coupledness presents.

These discourses also need to address men and make them responsible for their actions regarding the equal sharing of chores and childcare. What becomes clear in our study is that the idea that men are capable of change is an important precondition for change (Holmes, 2015). Also, the partners of those bisexual women, who challenged the gendered division of childcare, belonged to the 3% of fathers who stayed at home with their child for longer periods. This highlights also the relevance of the wider socio-material structures to the changing of gendered responsibilities in families.

Heterosexual couple relationships are charged with strong expectations of happiness, intimacy, reciprocal bonds, and equality, yet these expectations are often not met (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2008). The affective dissonance this engenders and the different strategies used – even by the same women – highlight ambivalent attachments to heterosexual relationships as cultural and personal objects. Women identify what is problematic about situations in their

heterosexual relationship, yet their attachment to it continues. The first two strategies that they use provide a temporary solution that brings relief for a while but maintains an attachment to a happy object, which, we argue, might not pave the way for change. Nevertheless confronting the ambivalence of this attachment and the affective dissonance it engenders – discomfort, annoyance, or hurt – can have a politicizing potential. While affective dissonance points to the possibility of potential change, it also explains why such change can be difficult. If striving for equality always felt good or even comfortable, equality probably would have been achieved already.

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