Against the grain? The craving for domestic femininity in a gender-egalitarian welfare state

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Abstract
This article aims to develop new conceptions of the psychosocial dynamics that drive the re-romanticization of domestic femininity in current financialized capitalism. Feminist scholars have described this heightened cultivation of mothering as a reparative move in response to irreconcilable tensions between cultural ideals of the ‘balancing mother’ and ‘lean-in femininity’. This article adds a materialist-psychosocial lens to these conceptions, to enhance understanding of what drives this craving for domestic femininity. Drawing on a free-association narrative interview study with couples in the financial elite in the comparatively gender-egalitarian Norwegian context, I describe a specific emotional mechanism that resists democratization of gender in this specific group. The interviews reveal a felt need to cultivate ‘the human side of things’ at safe distance from the competitiveness of ‘hard-core finance’. The Nordic earner-carer model with its entwinement of care and professional pursuits, cultivated by the more self-fulfilment-oriented parts of the professional middle-class appears not only unwanted but threatening. In my analysis, I retrieve and develop a psychoanalytically inspired historical-materialist feminism, one that perceives of the gendered division of work as a split in modes of focusing human energy. I suggest that the resurgent cultivation of domestic femininity is nurtured by a self-energizing antagonism between competitive and relational practices. I further argue that the cultivation of domestic femininity in these financial couples points to a potential antagonism between the democratization of love and the specific anxiety-driven competitiveness to which this financial-elite group may be particularly susceptible.

Keywords
Capitalism, gender equality, opting-out-mothers, psychosocial, work and family

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Introduction

In an era characterized by unconditional celebration of autonomy, competitiveness and ‘lean-in-femininity’, Western countries are witnessing a re-romanticization of the nurturing mother (McRobbie, 2013; Solheim, 2007). Especially in Anglo-American countries, women are leaving their professional careers to invest time and energy in a nurturing sanctuary for the upcoming generation (Orgad, 2019; Stone, 2008; Vavrus, 2007) – as with the ‘opting-out revolution’, where highly educated elite women choose to leave the workplace to become full-time homemakers (Jones, 2012; Orgad, 2019; Stone, 2008). Although there is little evidence of a large-scale increase in the number of stay-at-home mothers, the re-romanticization of the nurturing and sensitive mother, dedicated to providing a stimulating atmosphere and a beautiful home, emerges as a distinct cultural phantasy (Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015; Rottenberg, 2017). Accompanied by images of the ‘mompreneur’ – a woman able to combine homemaking with a small but meaningful enterprise from the kitchen table – this opting-out mother evokes a renaissance of the ‘angel of the house’ that flourished in the early phases of competitive capitalism (Davidoff, 1995; Solheim, 2007). Today’s financial capitalism, with its market rationalities and competitive individualism, is accompanied by a movement ostensibly ‘against the grain’: a re-romanticization of domestic femininity.

Somewhat surprisingly, this revival of romantic imaginaries is also apparent in the gender-egalitarian Nordic welfare states (Aarseth, 2015; Bach, 2014; Sørensen, 2017). Despite being impacted by globalizing financial capitalism, increasing privatization and the spread of market competition, the Nordic countries remain characterized by ‘state-managed capitalism’ (Fraser, 2016: 104). Arguably, these countries are still characterized by extensive internalization of care and social reproduction through state provision of social welfare. Although far from the ‘perfect paradise’ where women really can ‘have it all’, the social democratic welfare regimes of the Nordic countries have enabled both men and women to participate in the labour market without denying themselves the opportunity to care for their own and others’ human needs and relationships. In contrast to, for instance, the United Kingdom and the United States, today’s decline of domestic femininity is enabled by generous parental leave systems, socialized child care and strict labour-market regulations (Ellingsæter, 2018). In Norway, employment rates are 84% (women) and 88% (men), 19 weeks of the paid parental leave is reserved for fathers, and 97% of all 3- to 5-year-olds attend state subsidized kindergarten (Kitterød and Lappegård, 2012: 672). Although women in heterosexual couples continue to bear the main responsibility for domestic pursuits, fathers now contribute 4½ hours per day, compared to 6 hours per day for mothers (Kitterød, 2012). The earner–carer model has become increasingly widespread (Ellingsæter, 2018). Its entwinement of personal and professional life has a strong appeal among highly educated ‘self-fulfilment-oriented’ professionals (Aarseth, 2018; Kitterød and Lappegård, 2012).

Nevertheless, certain groups seem to be going against the grain. One such group includes parents employed in profit-intensive enterprises, such as the emergent group of financial intermediaries, the empirical basis for this study. Here we find a resurgence in domestic femininities strikingly similar to the ‘opting-out’ phenomenon and associated gender imaginaries as those described in the United Kingdom and the United States.
What, then, is it that leads these couples to resist the entwinement of care and professional pursuits so appealing to the majority of the professional middle and upper-middle classes? Much of the explanation may lie in the specific work cultures that characterize these profit-intensive professions—cultures that undermine the feasibility of utilizing the family-friendly welfare services (Halrynjo and Lyng, 2009; Lyng, 2010). However, difficulties in reconciling work and family cannot fully explain the craving for gender-segregated family cultures. In this article, I explore the subjective psychosocial dynamics that lead these couples to reject or resist the earner–carer model and its attendant entwinement of gendered subjectivities, motivations and practices (Aarseth, 2015). Further developing a psychosocial conception offered by historic materialist feminist theory, I explore the motivational dynamics involved in this resistance, offering new insights into the dynamics that obstruct gender–egalitarian societies more generally.

Managing complex tensions between care and capital

In contradiction to media images of a nostalgic return to traditional gender roles and a new desire for domestic femininity, empirical studies of ‘opting-out-mothers’ flag a variety of factors that push mothers to step back from high-commitment careers (Halrynjo and Lyng, 2009; Orgad, 2019; Stone, 2008). Instead of revealing a ‘natural desire’ that blossoms when women become mothers, these studies describe oppressive expectations and work environments hostile to the demands of family caregiving (Jones, 2012; Lyng, 2010). These detriments prevent mothers from ‘becoming the balanced woman who felicitously balances work and family and public and private aspects of the self’ (Orgad, 2019: 12). After a period of struggle and torment in attempting to meet the ideal of balancing high-commitment career and mothering (Halrynjo and Lyng, 2009; Orgad, 2019; Stone, 2008), a ‘breaking point’ (Orgad, 2019: 61) occurs. Rather than being a planned and ‘natural adoption’, this is a jarring and unexpected push from career to care commitment (Halrynjo and Lyng, 2009: 328). Even for the privileged group of upper-middle-class professionals, this shift is accompanied by considerable shame at being unable to ‘lean-in’ (McRobbie, 2013).

Recurrent in the literature is an emphasis on how stay-at-home mothers draw on various discourses to negotiate their reinvented identities as full-time mothers (Orgad, 2019: 23) to provide themselves dignity and meaning (Halrynjo and Lyng, 2009). These mothers typically emphasize that they are not submissive homemakers (McRobbie, 2013; Orgad, 2019). This new domestic cult centres on the perceived need for constant investment in children and the cultivation of a sanctuary for nurturing human sensibilities (Vincent and Ball, 2007). The heightened cultivation of mothering and the hectic intensity of everyday family life, captured in the image of the ‘CEO at home’ (Orgad, 2019: 75), emerges as a reparative move in the tensions between cultural ideals and lived reality (Orgad, 2019: 12). It offers an achievable identity in amends for the failure to meet the un-achievable liberal-individualist ideal of the ‘balancing mother’. In more complex ways than the ‘exploitation of women’s love power’ (Jonasdottir, 1994) in post-war Western middle-class families, these identity constructions express efforts to juggle irreconcilable tensions between work and family in capitalist society.
Here I add a materialist-psychosocial lens to this research. This allows me to scrutinize how the contradictions between care and commodity production are experienced, not only through feelings of shortcomings, vis-à-vis the phantasy of the ‘balanced mother’, but also by revealing how various perceptual and motivational forms emerge as parts of embodied practices in response to needs and requirements (Gunnarsson, 2013). In the pushback against early psychoanalytically informed historical-materialist strands of thinking (Chodorow, 1978; Hartsock, 1983, see Nielsen, 2017, for discussion), a potentially productive approach was dismissed. This is the idea of gendered division of work as a split in modes of focusing human energy, between competitive and relational inclinations (Dinnerstein, 1999). This split not only fostered a devaluation of women and care, but obstructed a potentially enriching dialectic or ‘resonance’ between subject and world (Gunnarsson, 2013; Rosa, 2019). Freed of the more controversial notion of gendered personality-structures, this strand offers a productive tool for developing enhanced conceptions of the psychosocial motivations underlying today’s resurgent romanticization of femininity. This approach sees perceptual and motivational structures, how we understand and relate to the world, as shaped by a specific societal organization of human praxis – what Marx called ‘the metabolism of society and nature’ (Rosa, 2019). In this view, human needs and external conditions should be understood not as passive limits but as factors that ignite engagement with the world by forcing the organism to focus and direct its energies (Gunnarsson, 2013: 12). Thus, I propose a psychoanalytically informed historic materialism, emphasizing how subjective motivations and perceptions emerge within human strivings, in order to bridge inner longings and vulnerabilities with external conditions. This approach offers a tool crucial for conceptualizing the psychosocial processes that drive today’s re-emergence of idealized cultivation of femininity and the either/or schemes of devotion (Blair-Loy, 2003).

The phenomenon of opting-out mothers in Norway provides an instructive case for further conceptualizing the relation between the resurgence of romantic imaginaries and current tensions between care and commodity production. Here, opting-out mothers appear less as part of a general retreat from a ‘liberal-individualist, progressive, and (supposedly) gender-egalitarian imaginary’ (Orgad, 2019: 195). Instead of embodying the more general conflict between mothering and career, these mothers voice distinct resistance to the predominant earner–carer model and the attendant entwinements of care and self-realization. This model accords well with the self-fulfilment-oriented segments of the professional middle and upper-middle class in Norway’s gender-egalitarian welfare state, enabling mutual synergies between professional and personal enrichment (Aarseth, 2018).

**Emotional exposure and emotional investments in financial-elite families**

My analysis draws on a narrative interview study of heterosexual, predominantly Norwegian-ethnic, financial-elite families in Norway. The parents had typically started their careers in financial centres such as the City of London and have today settled in homogeneous all-White neighbourhoods on the well-to-do outskirts of Oslo: ‘golden ghettos’ (Ljunggren and Andersen, 2015). In all, 22 parents, 13 women and 9 men,
living together, were interviewed individually. Each couple was living together with three or four children, 6–18 years old. The fathers held senior positions in the expanding sector of financial intermediaries, working as investors, proprietors or as partners in consultancy or law firms that provide financial services. With one exception, the mothers had also begun their careers in similar enterprises. However, nine of them had opted out after the birth of their first child and at the time of the interviews were homemakers. With few exceptions, they were assisted by so-called ‘au pairs’ from the Philippines.3 A number of them combined homemaking with flexible part-time work, including work–life balance counselling, teaching arts and crafts, interior decorating or managing small investment companies.

Parents were interviewed separately, in their own homes where possible. Interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews and analysis draw on Hollway and Jefferson’s (2012) free-association narrative method where interviewees are invited to tell stories instead of answering questions. The purpose of using free association is to avoid the more reflective accounts of motives and values that result from asking questions. It is to allow insights into more implicit and pre-discourse ways of perceiving and relating to the world (Martin, 2011). After introducing the overall aim of my study – to explore how different job situations influence everyday life in the family – I asked interviewees to tell about their current jobs and the trajectory that had brought them there. After this initial prompt, I ask for minor clarifications or elaborations, often by repeating something the interviewee had just said. I would avoid introducing new themes and allow interviewees to stay within their own narrative frameworks and associative connections. I wanted to get at their immediate associations and meaning frames, their ways of interpreting and relating to their world. In this article, I concentrate on the interviews with the mothers: the specific patterns analysed here, although supported by many of the fathers’ narratives, were most evident in their narratives.

In line with materialist-psychosocial theory, I focus on interviewees’ emotional investments or patterns of emotional urgency linked to their specific life situation. For this purpose, I rework Hollway and Jefferson’s (2012) emphasis on “the defended self”, taking inspiration from post-Freudian conceptions of the strivings to bridge inner longings and outer conditions (Aarseth, 2016). Specifically, I focus on modes of directing the energies flowing from the tensions that arise from a sense of being ‘radically exposed to the world’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 140–141) or a ‘situated experience of oughtness’ (Martin, 2011: 252). This reworking provides a suitable analytical tool by drawing inspiration from feminist appropriations of Bourdieu’s psychosocial practice theory (Aarseth, 2016; McNay, 2004; Reay, 2015). It allows us to examine how subjective desires and emotional motivations emerge; not only in efforts to seek recognition by subjecting to cultural ideals, but as desires and emotional motivations that emerge in the dialectic tension between human needs and potentials (Gunnarsson, 2013). I ask, what, in this ‘exposedness’ to the world of the financial elites’ organized strivings, ignites this craving for gender-polarized practices and subjectivities? In a group so heavily invested in profit-intensive and market competitive enterprises, which emotionally informed perceptions and energy directedness resist the earner–carer compromise as embraced by other privileged professionals in the Nordic egalitarian welfare state?
The shift to ‘the human side’

My initial prompt (‘can you tell me about your current job and how you got there?’) sparked off remarkably similar stories about the bliss of mothering. Although most of the women had been working for a business enterprise, what they chose to highlight was how they had decided to leave the world of finance when their first child was born. All except one of them hold master’s or doctoral degrees in economics or law and had embarked on a business career. They described their opting-out as a sincere, highly desired and deliberate choice, arising in a natural and compelling way from their experience of the transition to motherhood, emphasizing it as ‘a real privilege’.

Margaret tells of the years when her children were small: ‘My husband was making a lot of money, he was away all day, and I was completely happy’. With minor variations, all these women report that they came to realize how meaningless their business jobs had been. They had an understanding that they were ‘not really passionate about the job’, or they were suddenly no longer interested or realized that they no longer had the same ambitions as before. Some acknowledged this realization as a welcome opportunity to leave a sphere in which they felt unsuccessful: the choice was actually ‘rather simple’, and they expressed relief. Typical is this quote from Tina:

But then I started to realize that I really had been yearning for this little baby, and it was so lovely, just being with him . . . and then, well, to have to leave him to someone else it, well, that felt awful . . . So I asked my boss for extended leave – actually, I was entitled to it – but he said ‘no’, and then I thought: ‘but, hey! this is a gift’, and so I just said: OK, I’m off, then. [So, you just quit?] Yes, I just quit. And it was such a huge relief!

Something happens with the arrival of the first child. It is as if a new world, a totally wonderful new world, emerges before their eyes. As Margaret explained,

I was more than happy to be at home with my wonderful little boy. And this didn’t change when other children arrived and eventually grew older. To me, it was as if . . . to give these small babies away – have someone else can look after them . . . No! Never! No way! All those wonderful moments . . .

She then mentioned a niece who had recently had her first child and had been preparing for her exams while at the maternity clinic: ‘How is that possible?! I just don’t get it!’ ‘I had this deep desire to be a mother’, says Catherine, who holds a doctorate in business and administration from an elite British university. ‘I’m not the kind of woman who would just hand over my child to a nanny. That would really break my heart . . . ’

We should bear in mind that these are the stories that my interviewees wanted to tell, in retrospect, and at this particular time point. Had they been interviewed some 10 years earlier, they might have told different stories; perhaps that they planned to scale down their career for some years and then return (Halrynjo and Lyng, 2009). Also, the interviewees’ repeated positioning of themselves as women who would prioritize their newborns over studying for exams, or hiring a nanny, may be spurred by a felt need to distance themselves from the hegemonic norm of dual-career families in Norway’s upper-middle class.
Regardless, the narratives that emerge in these retrospective stories are compelling. Some convey a lack of ambition or interest, whereas others had realized, even before the transition to motherhood, that they had ‘actually always had been more interested in human beings and human relationships’. But even in the cases where they had really ‘loved their job’, the women experienced a landmark shift upon the arrival of their first child. They each convey a story of total transformation, where ‘a different part of their own selves’ comes forth, a more wholly ‘authentic’ self. Cecilia realized that she had always been ‘extremely creative’. She used to sketch a lot and made her own clothes. She feels that this creative side was repressed when she began studying economics. Then, with the first child, this side of her was reborn. ‘It was as if something woke up in me’. Suddenly, she simply did not care whether the insurance company where she worked made a profit.

Whereas the husbands seemed to thrive in the harsh, competitive atmosphere characterized in some interviews as ‘hard-core finance’, these women realized that they themselves were more concerned with the human dimensions, in particular emotional issues and relations between human beings. Some interviewees mentioned more aesthetic pursuits as part of these human dimensions, now presented as ‘the other side’ of hard-core finance. ‘All those wonderful moments’ seem to include both ‘those wonderful, thrilling children’ and a longing for ‘beauty’ more generally, expressed particularly as some form of creative self-fulfilment. In the interview narratives, these dimensions are equally about ‘the human’. It was this part of themselves that was awakened with the birth of their first child – ‘the human side of things’.

Most of these women are now involved in ‘human activities’ of some kind, whether higher studies in literature or art, or photography, yoga, coaching – or they have become deeply involved in children, both their own and other people’s. They report spending vast amounts of time on other human beings – their own children, elderly parents who are perhaps living in other towns, in-laws, or children and their parents living in the neighbourhood. This investment in other humans is accompanied by explicit recognition of the profound contrast to the pursuit of profit: it is seen as the other side of life.

Tina and Charlotte have succeeded in developing their qualifications from their business degrees towards something more ‘human-related’, like coaching or teaching. They emphasize that they consider it their mission to help other people, whether adults or children, to find the right balance in their lives, to reach a ‘Zen-mode’ or some higher level of human fulfilment – to become a more ‘total human being’, as Tina put it. Other interviewees dream about ‘doing something that has to do with human beings’, or something aesthetic and creative, like photography, garden design or perhaps starting up an exclusive boutique. They express anger and bitterness at their original choice of profession. If they were to choose what to study today, they would opt for ‘a more traditional womanly education’ that would enable them to work ‘with human beings’.

Creating a sound foundation

The detailed accounts of daily pursuits also show that the daily lives of these mothers are oriented towards a highly specific project: providing a sound foundation where human resources can be nurtured (Aarseth, 2015). Such a foundation requires having good
routines. As Maria put it, a child who gets good routines at home will be ‘well prepared for later challenges’. Healthy food is crucial – ‘getting them to eat their broccoli’, as Catherine put it – as well as enough sleep, time spent outdoors and involvement in sports activities. But most important is the psychological foundation, which is particularly evident in cases involving children with special needs. In these cases, the mothers emphasize their extensive investment of time and energy. Margaret’s son was diagnosed with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). She reports that she stayed by him for entire days at his day-care institutions and later maintained daily contact with his school teachers, ‘in order to get them to understand what he needs’.

Interestingly, these vast investments – which the mothers may have highlighted partly to legitimate their situation – also included other people’s children and concern for neighbours more generally. For instance, Charlotte organizes an after-school homework assistance programme, and Catherine is active in the local church. They emphasize how important it is that ‘someone has the time and energy to take care of such things’: one must invest in the local community in order to make everybody feel included. They highlight their local community as a place where people can rely on each other and ‘be part of something’. Margaret stressed that an important reason why her son had managed fairly well, despite his ADHD diagnosis, was that he had been included, had been made to feel ‘part of the group’: ‘Here [in the neighbourhood] we have everything that can knit people together’. The local neighbourhood community is described as a place where ‘everybody knows everybody’ and where the children can ‘walk in and out of each other’s homes and gardens’. This emphasis on inclusiveness and care for ‘the human side’ is seen as a critical requirement for well-being – perhaps, also, later success. Since all the children in the neighbourhood know each other, there is no need for them ‘to show off, or jostle for position’, as Julia explained, and no need for them to ‘try to show that they are someone they are not’.

**Fighting the toxic energies**

These women’s accounts of the sound foundation and solid routines of everyday life place the father as a disturber of these foundations. Not infrequently, the mothers deliberately exclude them from accounts of everyday life: ‘they don’t count at all’. From Sunday evenings to Friday afternoons, the fathers generally seem invisible, having ‘checked out’ of the family. In the interviews, both mothers and fathers mentioned this arrangement. ‘We simply don’t count with him on weekdays’, says Charlotte. When the men do come home in the evening, their arrival is hardly a particularly welcome event in family life: they are demonstratively ignored. More than once, I heard reports of how the husband came home and found there were no leftovers, nothing planned for his supper, so he fried up some eggs and sausages. Dinnertime was adapted to the children’s schedules. This arrangement may be a practical way to avoid potential conflict around unpredictable return hours and mealtimes. ‘It’s really very hard to make plans for his being there because that will cause problems when he doesn’t come on time’, Sofia explains. Still, I was surprised at the resentment and irritation expressed by some mothers. ‘If he happens to come home early, he just goes around in circles’, says Sofia.

‘To tell the truth’, says Maria, a full-time-homemaker, ‘he lives a life apart from us’ – and the women seem to prefer to maintain this distance. Of course, this resentment may
be the result of many hours of waiting and numerous disappointments when fathers have failed to turn up for a football match or a school performance. But there seems to be another aspect to this aggression, with the fathers as representatives of something that these mothers perceive as a disturbing, even chaos-inducing, force. The women have their settled routines and have set strict boundaries, where the fathers appear as disturbing elements. Several mothers stressed the importance of calmness, of focus and balance, and of opposing such disturbing factors as computer games and TV shows. A recurrent theme in their accounts is how fathers sabotage these routines and bedtime schedules. Charlotte points out how ‘all these things’ that her husband sets about doing, like watching films and football matches on TV, undermine her efforts at ensuring the child’s regular bedtimes, getting enough sleep and a healthy diet. Maria is furious when her husband comes home precisely during that final hour around the children’s bedtime. There is a tension, if not direct antagonism, between her efforts to provide a family environment characterized by balance, calm and good health, and his unease, evident stress and activities. ‘I’ve told him that, as far as I’m concerned, he could as well have stayed at a hotel on weekdays’, she says. This is not only a question of strict routines and fixed procedures but also – and these situations seem entwined – part of a broader emphasis on mental well-being and balance, echoing the sensitivity expressed in these mothers’ narratives about the importance of protecting ‘the human side of things’.

This antagonism to the ‘toxic energies’ from the world of finance is evident in various ways in the interviews. For instance, the mothers, and the fathers as well, stress that, although most of them started their careers in the City of London, they would never have contemplated raising a family in London or in other similar financial centres, described as chaotic, stressful and exhausting. Children, they feel, should grow up in a safe neighbourhood, surrounded by a green environment, with ‘sound values’. ‘In London, everything was about how much money you made and how successful you were’, explained Tina. In an explicit refutation of this emphasis on ‘material values’, the mothers emphasized the importance of protecting their children from an overly competitive environment. Indeed, the investment in creating and maintaining a ‘haven in a heartless world’ (Lasch, 1977) appears as a more general quest in their narratives. On entering their big houses, typically surrounded by extensive gardens and intimidating alarm systems, I was struck by how the general atmosphere served to relieve tensions. Behind the walls and fences was a warm and relaxing atmosphere, a kind of sanctuary. The women were usually wearing informal ‘home wear’ in soft, natural fabrics, some were barefoot, and they were typically not wearing any make-up. I would be offered a cup of tea from a wide selection of herbs held to alleviate various kinds of imbalance and unease. The relaxed environment was further enhanced by the mothers’ highly developed small-talk skills. I found myself immediately engaged in chatting about topics tailored for a personal exchange that could bridge any divergence in experiences, worldviews and values.

The importance of having such an enclosed sanctuary was particularly evident in the three cases where I was not granted entry to the home, and the interview had to be conducted in some public place. ‘I’d never, ever, even consider inviting any of my colleagues into my home’, explained Elisabeth. Also Catherine firmly rejected the idea of arranging the interview in her home. She and her husband had recently purchased his childhood home by buying out his sisters. This had been a ‘huge investment’ – but, she
explained, the house is more than a place to sleep: ‘It’s our anchor in life right now, hav-
ing this house. When I come home and shut the gate behind me, I feel that I can breathe
at last’. Catherine describes how weekends and holidays stand out as heaven-sent time
off from ‘the storms’ in her husband’s business-life. She portrays a distinct sense of a
separate space, a place apart, where they can enjoy the fruits of their struggles. After the
hardships of weekdays, Fridays become ‘a real treat’:

In the evening, when we’re together and everything just falls into place . . . I love Fridays. I
always make sure that Friday is a completely free day, so I can prepare the meals for the
weekend, and I know that Friday evening we’ll have a wonderful family time. [. . . ] we love
it, and we know that for the next two days we’re going to be together, and no one is going off
to London or anywhere else.

Although the portrayal of a ‘sanctuary’ was perhaps most accentuated in this narra-
tive, this was a recurrent theme in other interviews as well. On the other hand, interview-
ees also conveyed a mixture of self-assertion and resentment. Some recounted how the
husband had made fun of their activities, such as studying literature at the university or
doing some of the cooking when friends or neighbours arranged big parties. What the
women see as precious priorities like ‘cooking and providing a good atmosphere’ are
things that others devalue.

The craving for separate spheres

The expressions of ‘an imaginary extension of everyday life’ (Prokop, 1976) that
emerge in these interview narratives construct an idealized lifeworld. Inside, the needs
and longings that must be supressed in the anxiety-driven competitiveness of the world
of hard-core finance are instead enlarged and revered. Here, the ‘Nordic paradise’ of
de-gendered dyadic relations and shared parenting has no place. In fact, their strivings
in today’s comparatively gender-equal Norwegian welfare state resemble those of the
18th-century bourgeoisie, with cultivation of the domestic realm as a true paradise, a
place of beauty, calm and harmony, in response to the increasing alienation and brutality
of the early days of capitalism (Davidoff, 1995: 50; Frykman and Löfgren, 1987). The
modern-day version is less embellished and more oriented towards health, sound living
and mindfulness.

The intensive search for beauty, and the compelling urge to maintain a separate sphere,
reflect well-established insights in psychoanalytically informed thinking: we retreat into
more primitive defence mechanisms like separation and idealization when we feel threat-
ened (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012; Layton, 2009). To my interviewees, in accord with
my emphasis on subject–world relations, the threat is towards something they consider
vital to their very subsistence and ontological security: ‘human sensibilities’ or ‘the
human side’. Their experience of ‘oughtness’ and exposure to the harsh demands of the
outside world spurs energetic investments in the affective labour involved in maintaining
social bonds and forming of human subjects (Fraser, 2016). This is done by investing in
a sound foundation aimed at nurturing resilience and combatting the toxic energies asso-
ciated with the work-world. This investment in human well-being and life powers could
be seen not only as an effort to preserve dignity through constructing an identity that is ‘close at hand’ but also as an expression of the constitutive tension between care and commodity production in advanced financialized capitalism. Here, the psychosocial tensions between the life-preserving energies required in social reproduction of human beings and the dynamics linked to increased positional competition rise to the forefront.

As Layton (2009) has argued, societal formations characterized by intensive competitiveness tend to produce environments where it is essential to shed feelings of dependency and vulnerability, whatever the cost. This is particularly so for those engaged in the organized strivings of ‘hard-core’ finance. In order to survive, the self must be effective in managing the surrounding world. Achieving such effective management requires an enforced ego-strength: a capability to suppress anxieties stemming from primary feelings of vulnerability and dependence. Perhaps then, the earner–carer model fits better those engaged in more self-fulfilment-oriented professional pursuits. In this model, the urge for professional self-realization and the creation, nurturing, and stimulation of human capabilities and sensibilities are entangled in a different way, and with possibilities for being in contact with a personal source of meaning. This is the kind of ‘subtle interplay’ between inner longings and external circumstances that the self-fulfilment-oriented typically pursue (Aarseth, 2018). For this group, then, ‘the human sides’ are to a lesser extent seen as something in need of strict separation and protection. The entwinement of care and professional career appears not only as an arrangement that blocks the ability to ‘go all in’, but is also perceived as a source of synergy and mutual enrichment between personal and professional self-realization (Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011; Aarseth, 2018). By contrast, within these financial-elite couples, the sense of being exposed to the world could be seen as influenced by the compelling coercion of intensified positional competition, and the need for enforced ego-strength and agency. This requirement to expedite agency and positional competitiveness diminishes the ‘mental space’ (Young, 1994) where human vulnerabilities, anxieties and longings can be contained, reflected upon, and even savoured. The narratives of these mothers reveal an urgent sense of the need to keep these forms of subtle interplay of inner longings and external conditions – ‘the human dimensions’ – strictly separated from the harsh requirements of competitive enterprises in the public sphere of ‘hard-core’ finance (Aarseth, 2015). Although these idealizations of ‘the human sides’ might be considered alienated in terms of separating the good from the ‘bad’ (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012; Layton, 2009), they should not be reduced to a pathology. I see these idealized and split imaginaries as part of a definite mode of focusing life energies better-suited to the ‘objective’ requirements of the anxiety-driven competitiveness that governs the profit-intensive financial enterprises. These imaginaries foster the strength, fitness and ability to be a ‘focused self’ in the face of the anxiety-driven competition ‘out there’.

Conclusion

The narratives recounted here reveal some of the underlying emotional dynamics that drive these finance-business families to resist the more de-gendered organization of social reproductive work prevalent in other privileged groups in the ‘family-friendly’ Norwegian
welfare state. One hypothesis is that these de-gendered organizations of family life pre-suppose societal environments and conditions that allow for more subtle interplay between personal longings and vulnerabilities on one hand, and public practices on the other. Such modes of alleviating anxieties and unleashing libidinal strivings are in discord with the emotional motivations that accompany investments in the anxiety-driven competition of hard-core finance (McDowell, 2010). The cultivation of domestic femininity responds to the felt need to cultivate ‘the human side of things’, kept strictly separate from the hard-core finance of the outside world. It becomes vital to protect the ‘human sides’: caring for human life powers through the providing of a sound foundation, and rejecting the toxic energies of anxiety-driven competitiveness and its highs and lows. For this reason, the Nordic earner–carer model, with its entwinement of care and professional pursuits and blurred boundaries between private sanctuary and public practices, appears not only unwanted, but threatening.

These financial-elite families, with their gender-segregated motivations, direct and centre their energies in a way aimed at holding together a dialectic of human needs and powers that may appear detached, but are actually parts of the same whole (Gunnarsson, 2013). The resurgence of romantic femininity could be seen as one possible expression of a deepening of the historically produced split between human and nature. More intensive externalization of care and human sensibilities, energies and belongings from the psychosocial dynamics involved in profit-intensive pursuits all contribute to this deepening. Perhaps this could be seen as the current materialization of the ‘boundary struggle’ between care and commodity production (Fraser, 2016) among those who are most privileged but also most invested in the competitive dynamics of profit-seeking. Here, the boundary struggle could manifest itself in the heightened need for a sound foundation and ‘ontological security’ on one hand, and the need for focused energy, resilience, enforced ego-strength and competitive inclinations on the other. It could be argued therefore, that the resurgence of an idealized domestic cult is not only an alienated expression – but it is also ‘a rational’ one.

This cultivation of domestic femininity in the financial elite points towards a potential antagonism between the democratization of love and a specific kind of positional competitiveness to which this group is particularly susceptible. Yet, the described re-romanticization of domestic femininity appears not only as an effort to make sense of conflicts emerging from the deep tensions of advanced capitalism, but also as a rational response to intensified competitive capitalism. Rejecting the ‘totally meaningless’ and harsh world of hard-core finance, and seeking seclusion or protection from its destructive forces, constitutes a potentially productive antagonism between the outside world of hard-core finance and the ‘human side of things’. The tougher the work-week, the sweeter the home sanctuary; the greater the earnings, the more welcome are the sanctuaries they provide. Viewed from the perspective of profit-maximization, this represents a highly productive tension. The revival of gender-polarized subjectivities and motivations in specific socio-economic groups can be seen as expressing an intensified subjective need to provide space for nurturing human vulnerabilities and imaginaries. This space is kept at a safe distance from the toxic energies of the positional competitiveness that increasingly governs public practices. In that case, the gender-romantic cult described here indicates a deep-seated antagonism in Western society today: between the wish to promote
gender equality and the wish to spread the competitive ethos of market logics to as many areas of society as possible.

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Notes
1. The term was introduced in an influential article in the New York Times (Belkin, 2003), describing elite-educated women who had decided to stay at home full-time with their children.
2. Only 2% of married or cohabitating women are non-employed and regard themselves as stay-at-home mothers (Kitterød and Rønsen, 2013). The vast majority of this statistically minor group are not opting-out elite women, but women with low educational levels. There is little statistical information on the exact correlation between specific professional groups and domestic arrangement, but the partner’s income has been shown to increase the likelihood of being a stay-at-home mother (Kitterød and Rønsen, 2013); furthermore, that heterosexual couples where the father works in the private sector and/or holds a leadership position more often practise traditional gendered work divisions (Kitterød and Løppégård, 2012), and that fathers with very high incomes less often make use of their paternal leave quota (Kitterød et al., 2017). Moreover, financial intermediaries and other groups with exceptionally high incomes tend to live in certain neighbourhoods (Łunggren and Andersen, 2015): ‘golden ghettos’ with a notably high frequency of stay-at-home mothers.
3. Whereas in-house-domestic help have been largely abandoned in the Norwegian society the last decades, the au pair scheme for so-called ‘cultural exchange’ has offered a possibility for low-paid in-house services. Whereas common in this particular sample, the overall number of au pairs is few (689 accepted applicants to Norway in 2019).

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