Existing as Equal

*Gender Equality among Urban Middle-Class Icelanders*

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Reykjavik among middle-class Icelanders transitioning into parenthood, this thesis aims to explore what equality is, or, depending on how it is read, what equality may also be. It does so by identifying equality as sameness as central to Nordic culture as well as political discourse and efforts to undermine issues pertaining to relations between men and women. Through a commitment to practices and that which is largely considered normative or ideal, I explore the content and meaning of housework as partly constitutive of the private sphere in opposition to the public. This investigation sheds light on the limited extent to which actual persons’ divisions of domestic doings say anything accurate about equality. In turn, I examine some of the practices and discourses through which good mothers and fathers come into being, and how these processes condition or affect the simultaneous becoming of other things, for example gender and personhood. Crucially, a commitment to mothers reveals how motherhood in particular is generative of important differences between men and women, whereas a focus on fathers reveals how differently gendered parents are also similar in significant respects. In the end, I attempt to take claims to equality at face value by evaluating words in relation to practices and by suspending the notion that it is key to look at differences and similarities in order to discern whether someone is equal to their partner. By emphasizing the existentialism of Simone de Beauvoir at the expense of her commitments to materialist feminist politics, I approach equality as a specific way of being in the world. When he or she who claims to be equal to their partner is understood as a complete person who lives such a truth, it becomes possible to see how the equal relationship is at heart an authentic interrelation, which may or may not speak of great differences or similarities, contingent upon any given couple’s specific situation.
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Despite time and distances, my friends from the IB, my initial stay in Reykjavik and the years in Skåne continue to remind me of why we must stay curious and restless and polemic; how intimacy is knowledge and immanence is death. If existence precedes essence, it is through our relationships that I become who I am and find strength to continue to become.

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1 Introduction

“The spirit of adventure is no longer enough. What is needed, instead, is a persistent and uncompromising questioning of the world as it is, and what it is made of: in other words, a deep questioning of that which is taken for granted across broad domains” (Lien, 2015a, p. 21).

This thesis is about gender equality among urban middle-class Icelanders transitioning into parenthood. It is crafted from material gathered through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, from January to July 2014. I have chosen to begin with the above quotation as it eloquently captures the primary motivation behind this research project. Anthropologists have traditionally done fieldwork somewhere “out there”. A corollary to this was that culture was for long approached as something inherent in geographical locales where “we” do not live (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). Not only has this had political ramifications beyond those intended by good-hearted scholars of colonial-born disciplines (cf. Spivak, 1988), but a scrutiny of tradition exposes an enchantment with binary oppositions that underlies the disciplinary dogma that only a culture shock is generative of curious and alert anthropological gazes (Howell, 2001a, p. 17), as well as the idea that we may study ourselves by studying Others. Such epistemological maxims have yielded much, for better and for worse. But what is lost when that which is taken for granted is studied as reference points rather than being questioned on its own terms? My decision to study urban middle-class Icelanders transitioning into parenthood reflects other interests than the ones implied by the notion of a spirit of adventure (Howell, 2011). I imagine this project to be in solidarity with that of “doing away with the between” (F. Hastrup, n. d., p. 3) to the effect that one cannot “determine what is ‘otherwise’ and what is at the center” (ibid., p. 10).¹ I will begin by accounting for the main motivations that have resulted in such a defined reference group. Then I proceed to reveal how gender² equality became the taken for grantedness to be questioned, and end this introduction with an investigation of the concept of equality in the Nordic region as it is generally used by academics, policy-makers and laypersons alike.

¹ Particularly inspiring in this respect has been the biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling’s book, Sexing the Body (2000), as well as Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto (1991), Judith Butler’s Bodies That Matter (2011), and Edward Said’s Orientalism (2003).

² Following Butler (2008), I will consistently use the word “gender” as it is likely that the idea of a biological sex exists only secondary to the idea of a social gender. According to this logic, sex is gender.
Motivations

Before I matriculated at the master’s program of anthropology at the University of Oslo, I had lived and studied for one year in Reykjavik and subsequently produced a bachelor’s thesis about young Icelandic women combining parenthood and studentship (see Norsted, 2013). These experiences have admittedly influenced how I have decided to approach the Icelandic setting a second time around. Below, I account for some of the already existing anthropological literature on Iceland while simultaneously explaining why I have chosen to sharpen my focus in the ways I have.

Addressing Urbanity

Despite being a small island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, Iceland has never been an island in terms of being socially isolated (Pálsson, 1995). There has always been contact between Icelanders and the continents, although it is true that independent farmsteads throughout the country were more or less isolated for centuries (K. Hastrup, 1990c). Iceland has never been a pure cultural space, unaffected by foreign politics and discourses. Today, however, big business is implicated in the fabrication and dissemination of an imaginary of Iceland as culturally pure and geologically unique. It is not uncommon to encounter narratives about unspoiled and raw nature, strong and beautiful (even promiscuous) women and audacious men, who are the direct descendants of Vikings, in commercial campaigns attempting to sell weekend-trips to foreigners (Alessio & Jóhannsdóttir, 2011). This mainstream marketing strategy relies upon an image of the “true” Iceland as existing somewhere else than where two thirds of the Icelandic population lives: in the Reykjavik metropolitan area. It may therefore seem surprising that much anthropological literature on the culture of Icelanders ally with the mentioned trend and amount to something that may be crudely referred to as exotification. A closer look at the anthologies The Anthropology of Iceland (Durrenberger & Pálsson, 1989) and Images of Contemporary Iceland (Pálsson & Durrenberger, 1996), for example, will reveal a disciplinary interest in rural settings and phenomena that one may claim have little direct relevance to the urban (or average?) Icelander. This is not to say that this research is not valuable in its own right, but much of it can be analyzed as part of the mentioned tradition of sidestepping that which is taken for

3 The recent book Gambling Debt (Durrenberger & Pálsson, 2015) represents a notable illustration of the fact that the tendency I criticize is in no way as strong as it once was.
granted across broad domains. Indeed, in the early 1990s a controversy broke out among native anthropologists of Iceland and certain foreign colleagues who were accused of neo-Orientalism in terms of persistently disregarding urban Iceland, among other things, as Iceland proper (Einarsson, 1990; K. Hastrup, 1990a). My intention has not been to rekindle this debate, but to explain that urban Iceland became interesting to me partly because of the tendency to neglect it as a proper place for fieldwork.

Addressing Class

Related to the tendency of studying the remote and exotic is the tradition to study downwards. That is, anthropologists have traditionally concentrated on people who are less rich or powerful than themselves (Rabinow, 1986). With time, however, focuses have increasingly been directed upwards. It is no longer uncommon to study people who are powerful in some way or another. Like a commitment to what is taken for granted in Iceland prompts a focus on the city, it urges dealings with the middle-class.

The issue of class is interesting in an Icelandic context for several reasons. Durrenberger, for example, observes that Icelanders have a tendency to “deny social and economic inequalities” and “project inequality onto personality” (1996, p. 176; see also Pálsson & Helgason, 1996). More recent research, however, establishes that Icelanders have become increasingly mindful of class differences in the wake of the 2008-2011 financial crisis (Oddsson, 2010). Anthropologist Kristín Loftsdóttir’s (2014) research on public discourse about Icesave, which was a British- and Holland-based filiation of the Icelandic Landsbankinn, underscores this point. In 2008 the bank went bankrupt together with two other large banks, and this caused the collapse of the country’s financial sector. Loftsdóttir observes how public discourse in the wake of the financial crisis was largely characterized by tendencies of bipolarization in terms of pitting “us” against “them”; the small and vulnerable Icelanders against the big and strong foreigners. This discourse became relevant the few times the topic of the financial crisis was explicitly mentioned during my fieldwork, but in a slightly different manner. More often than not, conversations about the crisis were framed by ideas about hierarchical differences that are internal to Icelandic society. My interlocutors⁴ would talk about the Icelandic political and financial elite in a way that functioned to distance the

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⁴ I prefer this word to the more conventional term “informant” because it has clear connotations to the dialogical and reciprocal nature of how I experienced the relationship between me as a researcher and them as research subjects had. My most central interlocutors will be introduced in chapter 2.
normal middle-class from the rich upper class, whose mistakes everybody is now paying for. Indeed, most of the people I came to know thought of themselves as belonging to some diffuse middle-class, thus seeing themselves as part of a population segment that is neither over- nor underprivileged.

Following Skeggs (1997), who argues that the world is always experienced from a specific class position, I have chosen to narrow my focus by taking a primary interest in the middle-class. I have also been inspired by Marianne Gullestad’s similar delineation of reference group and “use the term [‘middle-class’] in a commonsensical (to social scientists) and imprecise way, as a shorthand expression to characterize the milieu studied” (2001, p. 353). Thus, the ways and views that will be presented in this thesis stem from people who may be seen as part of the middle-class, as understood with reference to tertiary education and relatively high amounts of cultural capital.

Addressing Parents

An exploration of the history of Icelandic nationalism and feminism will reveal that both movements have historically privileged the woman as mother (Kristmundsdóttir, 1989). Much evidence supports the claim that “In Icelandic culture there is a deep, significant set of associations among concepts of mothering, moral upbringing, and the nation imagined as woman” (Koester, 1995, p. 575). For example, Iceland’s chief nationalist symbol, Fjallkonan, is an independent mother (Björnsdóttir, 1996). David Koester explains this by recourse to the relative autonomy of Icelandic women in pre-modern Iceland. The social organization of the time was characterized by a gendered division of work where men frequently took “leaps into the wild”, whereas women typically took care of the social sphere of the farmstead (K. Hastrup, 1985, 1990b). As men were out fishing or farming, women took care of everything related to the household, including the education of children. This has also been the case in modern fishing villages (Skaptadóttir, 1996).

This narrative, whether true or not, is a background against which contemporary lives unfold. Yet much has changed in Iceland as elsewhere, and it is likely that the experiences of men and women of Reykjavik today are unique in several respects. No longer is the social simply corresponding with the spatial inside (Pálsson, 1995, pp. 63-64), and neither women nor men find that their proper place is either within the home or outside of it. What remains somewhat stable, however, is the importance of children. To argue that motherhood is a prerequisite for Icelandic women’s transition to adulthood (Skaptadóttir, 1995, p. 195)
perhaps an exaggeration, but it is ostensibly the case that parenthood is a desired life-project for a majority of Icelanders, reflected in the fact that the birth rate among Icelanders is the highest of the northern countries (Ostner & Schmitt, 2008). Indeed, Icelandic women receive special treatment from the state as mothers (Gurdin, 1996), and single motherhood, typically stigmatized elsewhere, has traditionally been unproblematic in Iceland (Kissman, 1989).

In relation to this, it must be explicated that people cannot be reduced to their so-called parental functions, as if these things existed somewhere outside of culture and everyday life. Yet it is necessary to take seriously parenthood and what it means to desire, bear and rear children if one wishes to take seriously the social reality of most men and women. This is part of the reason why I turned to the context of parenthood in the first place. In a heteronormative (Ambjörnsson, 2006) society like contemporary Iceland, parenthood is indeed one of those things that are taken for granted across broad domains. I also consider this initial choice of context to be a methodological strategy, as I imagined parenthood to be a setting in which the identities of men and women could be readily studied ethnographically.

**Problem Formulation**

My experiences from living in and learning about Iceland facilitated certain observations that I was keen to explore anthropologically when given the opportunity. Twice over the past five years, for example, the World Economic Forum has crowned Iceland the world’s most gender equal country (see Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2010, 2014). Coming from another such high-ranked country and completing my undergraduate studies in a third, I was intrigued by Iceland receiving this title. Like Norwegians and Swedes, Icelanders tend to take pride in being gender equal, yet it remains a country in which a house management school is popular among young girls, certain well-liked daycares and primary schools segregate children into classes based on gender identity, and family policies are in fact less generous than elsewhere in the Nordic region. This is something I initially thought of as both contradictory and fascinating, and Iceland therefore became the site for a research project concerned with three central themes: gender, parenthood and equality. In the incipient stage, I was inspired by Fanny Ambjörnsson’s (2004) study of gender among Swedish high school girls, and left for Iceland with a somewhat vague research question about how gender is constructed in the context of everyday lives. The problem formulation that this thesis attempts to answer, however, was only articulated quite some time into fieldwork:
If men and women regard each other to be equal without regarding each other to be the same or even necessarily doing the same things in and outside of their homes, then what is gender equality?

One of several experiences that urged this question took place on a sunny morning in May, when I was out and about with two female interlocutors and their babies. That particular day I was initially paying a visit to Perla and her husband Ágúst, who were both at home with their almost two-month-old daughter. As I was about to press the doorbell to their apartment, I was greeted by Perla’s generous smile. “Perfect!” she exclaimed, “I was just about to take Ýr for a walk”. Ágúst soon appeared behind her, but not, it turned out, to join us on the excursion. He rather helped by assembling the baby stroller that was conveniently stored in the basement, which had to be accessed from the outside. As Perla and I approached Laugavegur, she disclosed that Sóley and her son Rafn, with whom I had spent the previous day, would join us. I wondered whether Sóley would bring her partner Jökull as well, or if this would be a girls’ meet-up only. A few minutes later, however, it became clear that only the five of us were on our way towards the harbour where we had decided to have lunch.

At the restaurant, we were lucky to find a table outside. Ýr and Rafn had fallen asleep during the twenty minutes stroll to our destination, thus Perla and Sóley could sit down and enjoy a moment of not attending to the little ones. They both removed their light and fashionable spring jackets and excitedly declared that this was Icelandic summer at its best. We ordered food, and while waiting to be served the girls conversed devotedly about the latest developments in their babies’ sleeping and breastfeeding habits. The conversation flowed easily and jointly we visited any topic worthy of discussion. The girls told me about the small restaurants and design stores in this area of the city, only to follow up with questions about how I had gone about the challenge of making local friends. While responding, I spontaneously decided to engage the girls in an intellectual discussion about equality, as I found the present situation interesting. I asked whether they felt less equal to their partners now that they had to be with their babies virtually every second of the day. Sóley was quick to answer that she was currently less free to do as she pleased as compared to Jökull since he was exempt from the obligation to breastfeed, but that she did not feel less

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5 Written informed consent was obtained from everyone who participated in the study. I have attempted to anonymize the people I refer to by giving them pseudonyms. For the same reason I have sometimes altered biographical information.

6 Even though I am able to use Icelandic, I mainly spoke English with my interlocutors. I had studied Icelandic for a year prior to fieldwork and was therefore able to understand most what they said when they spoke Icelandic to each other. It took some time to be brave enough to practice broken Icelandic nonchalantly, but my competence in speaking grew slowly but surely throughout my stay.
equal to him due to this circumstance. It depends on one’s situation, she explained. If one dreads to be at home and take care of children, one is also likely to experience oneself as less equal to one’s partner. Perla continued by pointing out that one may in fact ask whether it was their male partners who had become less equal with their mutual transition into parenthood. As women on parental leave and the babies’ essential source of food, she reasoned, they were as mothers free to bring their babies wherever, whenever. The other day, for example, she had taken Ýr to a café for several hours when she was bored in her own apartment. By doing this, she had taken the child away from Ágúst, who naturally also wants to spend time with his daughter. Maybe the problem lies in the way we understand equality, Sóley added. Women cannot be equal to men if equality is understood as emerging from equal time spent on professional careers. Indeed, only someone who is afraid to upset their pre-conceived ideas about women and the world, Perla concluded, would reason that doing what is best for one’s child may oppose equality.

What emerged from this scene was the problem of understanding these women’s experience of equality in the absence of sameness to their male partners. This is not to say that Perla and Sóley, or their friends for that matter, are fundamentally different from their partners. Rather, it is a fact that they only ambiguously subscribe to a mainstream understanding of equality as sameness, and they cannot be said to be “the same” as their partners. Yet despite of this, they understand themselves as equal to them. What is the logic behind this presumed paradox? What sort of relationships are experienced as equal? In what follows, I account for what I have referred to as the mainstream understanding of equality as sameness (which, admittedly, I also subscribed to prior to fieldwork) and how the Icelandic welfare state represents a setting in which its realization is attempted.

**Equality as Sameness**

In the book *Gender Equality*, Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers outline the features of what they identify as a real utopia project: a gender equal society, “a society in which men and women engage symmetrically in employment and caregiving, and all parents have realistic opportunities to combine wage work with the direct provision of care for children” (2009, p. 4). It is a dual-earner/dual-caregiving society in which the state works progressively to make it easy and attractive for men and women to engage in the same kinds of practices to the same
extent. In other words, what these scholars envision as real gender equality is a very high degree of sameness between men and women.

Gornick and Meyers identify a set of policy propositions that they believe will significantly contribute to this kind of societal change: family leave provisions, the regulation of work time, and early childhood education and care (ibid., pp. 17-26). They frequently mention the Nordic countries (although Iceland seems to be forgotten) as exemplary states that have variously succeeded in implementing important elements of this policy scheme. It is perhaps not so surprising that these countries find themselves competing on the top of international systems for measuring equality. The reason why I begin with Gornick and Meyers’ “real utopia” is the extent to which this conception of equality is shared across broad domains. Although it is possible to come across feminists holding that equality must not imply sameness (see Orloff, 2009), it is certainly the case that much discourse about equality—whether academic, political or mainstream—take it for granted that equality means sameness.

**Equality in the Anthropology of the Nordic Region**

The theme of equality within a Nordic context has not gone unexplored by anthropologists. Marianne Gullestad (1989, 1992, 2001) is a pioneer on the subject. She sees the Nordic nations as part of a larger Western culture and suggests that egalitarian individualism is characteristic of the region. The concept denotes how individualism is universally recognized but co-exists with a strong concern for equality (Gullestad, 1989, pp. 109-110). Her concept of “equality as sameness”, moreover, has become a gatekeeping concept for the Nordic region (Lien, Lidén & Vike, 2001). It refers to the way northerners subscribe to an interactional style in which difference is downplayed and similarity is foregrounded in social encounters. The theory suggests that social interaction increases among people who appear the same and thus feel like equals (Gullestad, 2001, p. 82).

But this scholarship has not gone unchallenged. Marianne Lien, for example, has studied the practice of gift-exchange among northern Norwegians and emphasizes that a notion of equal value, understood as something else than similarity, can be a prerequisite for social integration (2001, p. 96). As further specified by Marit Melhuus, the idea of sameness can imply several things at the same time: both equal value and (cultural) similarity (2012, p. 17). In another vein, Danish anthropologists challenge equality as sameness as a gatekeeping concept altogether by developing the concept of “value-mastering hierarchies” to speak about the necessary inequality that arises between people who do or do not master proper forms of
sociality. It is argued that hierarchy and equality are inherent to each other since differences will emerge when different people master proper forms of sociality to varying degrees (Bruun, Jakobsen, & Krøjjer, 2011, p. 13). It is clear that within the anthropology of the region, there is no absolute consensus about what equality really means, but when discourse on equality is studied in relation to the theme of gender, equality is more often than not revealed as sameness.

**Iceland as a Nordic Welfare State and Its Approach to Equality**

All Nordic states are welfare states, and this has several important implications for their respective citizens. The welfare state represents a context in which access to goods and opportunities are reputedly detached from social inequalities (Vike, 2001, p. 145). Within this context, moreover, family policies are developed from a principle of equality that intends to manage and rearrange gender relations. As an example of state feminism (Hernes, 1987), these policies are designed and implemented in order to standardize a family model where both men and women are caretakers and breadwinners (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006). The right to paid parental leave for both parents and access to governmentally funded or subsidized public childcare are significant policy measures in this respect (Leira, 2006, p. 29).

Iceland’s welfare policies are developed with the aim of promoting equality between men and women (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011, p. 163). Yet the Icelandic system differs somewhat from the general Nordic model in certain ways. Whereas the kinds of welfare services that are offered in Iceland are largely the same as in other Nordic states, the state places greater emphasis on income-testing than their neighbors (Eydal & Ólafsson, 2008, p. 109). Another thing which is peculiar to Iceland is the fact that since 2000, parents have been offered nine months of parental leave, which is seven months less than in Sweden and four months less than in Norway. Of these nine months, three are earmarked for the mother, three for the father, and the remaining three may be divided between the parents as they please. One is entitled to 80 percent of one’s average income over six months prior to the leave (up to a certain maximum, which was raised in 2014). Despite its relatively less generous parental leave system, however, Iceland is the place where the number of fathers taking leave has been growing simultaneously with the length of leave taken by fathers, and this has supposedly put the country at the forefront of the movement towards the mentioned policy goal of realizing equality as sameness on the ground (Lammi-Taskula, 2006, p. 85). The aim of this policy measure was to ensure that both men and women can take care of their children, and therefore
become able to organize both family and professional life. Recent research shows that the political interventions have achieved their intended purposes. Mothers and fathers now share the responsibility for care more equally between them, and it seems that fathers who go on leave are more likely to be involved in caring for their children (Arnalds, Eydal, & Gíslason, 2013). In a recent article, moreover, Gunhild Farstad (2014) has looked closer at how urban middle-class parents actually divide parental leave among them. She finds that Icelandic mothers tend to take six months of leave or spread it out for up to a year (which entails a reduction of the amount of governmental support received on a monthly basis), whereas their partners typically regard three months to be more than enough. Despite the state’s efforts towards the conversion of gender roles, a gendered pattern prevails on the interactional level, and this is a pattern where women seem to remain the main caretakers.

**Thesis Outline**

Before taking an explicit concern with the theme of equality, I shall discuss some issues pertaining to methodology and epistemology, which is the focus of the next chapter. The third chapter deals with the home and practices that go on therein. Then the fourth chapter takes concern with good mothers and how they differ from fathers, whereas the fifth chapter looks closer at fathers and some of the ways that they are similar to their partners. Throughout this thesis I am committed to practices, but not entirely at the expense of narratives. I have furthermore taken a primary interest in that which may be characterized as normative or ideal, as I believe that this may reveal something interesting when it comes to the theme of equality, which will be explicitly treated in the sixth and final chapter.
2 On Method

This chapter seeks to lay bare the central methodological grips I took during fieldwork, as well as some of the epistemological assumptions that have conditioned my conduct and writing. Both reflexivity and transparency are necessary in order to show how my data came to be, and how something so pregnant with meaning as social reality has been delivered in this thesis. I begin with the theme of the city as context and move towards a conclusive presentation of my main interlocutors. I am painstakingly aware that there are elements and aspects of the research process that I do not reflect upon, and this is largely due to space limitations. I nevertheless hope that the reader will be left with an impression of knowing me, my interlocutors, and how we interacted to a satisfying extent.

The City as Context

It may seem superfluous to state that anthropologists’ fields are no longer necessarily rural villages in far-away places. Yet even though urban anthropology in homely fields has a long history, it is still the case that many professionals voice the opinion and/or operate as if anthropology conducted in “one’s own backyard” (Howell, 2001a) is and should be an exception (cf. Lien, 2012, p. 305). Without making the opposite claim, that “homework” should be elevated above other forms of fieldwork, it is important to recognize that “Insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding” (Clifford, 1986, p. 9). If anthropology is to remain as “one inclusive discipline, in which all research questions [are], in principle, of equal interest and relevance to all active researchers” (Howell, 2011, p. 146), it is important to forever imagine new fields and research questions as anthropological.

One may grant Gullestad the claim that we no longer sharply distinguish between what is urban and what is rural, but that the distinction “survives as a continuum with the complex interaction of several different factors” (2001, p. 29). Modern cities offer conditions for fieldwork that are quite different from those that traditional anthropological methodology sprung out of (see Hannerz, 1980). The larger the scale, the more important each and every choice made by the anthropologist will be for her ethnography (Lien, 2015b), as there is only so much a single researcher may come to experience over a given period of time. In a small
and isolated jungle village, for example, it is possible to speak and interact with each and every inhabitant within a year, but this is impossible in a city like Reykjavik, or, worse still, Buenos Aires (Sletner, 2015).

**City-Time**

Time, or the perceived lack of time, was a factor that conditioned my fieldwork in important ways. Contrary to what anthropologists conducting fieldwork in tropical villages typically report (cf. Eriksen, 2001, p. 202), time is a measurable and scarce resource for most city-dwellers. A day comprises of twenty-four temporal units to be spent more or less wisely, and in conspiracy with certain cultural and personal factors, this served to complicate my ambition to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in Reykjavik. Had it not been for the fact that I spent time with people on parental leave, I am quite sure that I would have returned home with much less informal interactional data than I eventually did. Yet time did not cease to exist as an important factor structuring my research. I quickly learned that an interview could be more or less easily scheduled with most people, as they managed to find the time—typically in the late afternoon; “sometime next week, maybe?”—for an hour or two of inquiries. As I will discuss later, this did not prevent some of them from eventually spending more time with me.

Every visit I paid to the families among which I have conducted participant observation was agreed upon in advance. A new appointment was typically made at the end of a current one, and sometimes I was asked to send a text message the day before I would return so that they would remember that I was to join them in their busy lives the next day. There was no consistency as to when I was to show up and leave, and I stayed for varying amounts of time depending on how they decided to spend their day. I seldom asked if I could join them if they were going on scheduled visits to friends or family members. Up until the very end of my stay I suspected that my interlocutors felt it would be inappropriate for them to simply bring me along to other private arenas on which they had less authority. Similarly, I attempted to respect their private lives by scheduling visits between nine in the morning and eight in the evening. Thus, there are limitations to my research related to more than the fact that I came to spend more time with women than with men. The latter is a point I will return to, but here I wish to stress that whatever illusion of holism I succeeded in fashioning, one must not forget that all ethnographic texts, this one included, is the result of contingent and limited encounters between equally embodied, and differently situated, knowers (Csordas, 1990; Haraway, 1991).
A Problem of Sociability

Another factor that is immediately unfavorable to a foreign ethnographer keen to move beyond the collection of narrative data is that cities are “places where strangers meet, remain in each other’s proximity and interact for a long time without ceasing to be strangers to each other” (Bauman, 2003, p. 104). This can make it difficult to imagine one’s field in the first place, but I furthermore believe that Reykjavik, as a Nordic and Icelandic city, offers conditions that are uncongenial to ethnographic research in yet another manner. This pertains more to the cultural domain and what an interlocutor once referred to as “the Iceland-factor”.

The strategy of hanging out in public places in order to meet potential interlocutors proved useless in Reykjavik. This, one may argue, says something important about Icelanders. Never during the many hours I spent in public places did a local approach me. In fact, most of my interlocutors were amused by the idea of a foreigner frequenting a given public place and expecting Icelanders to take an interest in them, even if the wretched soul directly approached a native. “People would laugh at you and think that you are crazy”, Sóley once said when we were discussing the matter. She, Jökull, Rafn and I were strolling up Laugavegur on our way to their home after having had lunch downtown. “We don’t like to talk to strangers”, Jökull added. Sóley then turned to explain about her high school exchange stay in an American south-state city. The story she told was one in which her antagonists, the Americans, were people she experienced as overly and almost inappropriately extroverted and hospitable. They contrasted Sóley, who commented on the peculiarity of being reduced to an introvert. According to Icelandic standards, Sóley is indeed a sociable and outgoing person.

There seems to be an acute need for a vocabulary that describes this problem. The word “private”, one may argue, falls short because it fails to account for how one interacts with people who are not strangers. Gullestad has launched the concept of egalitarian individualism in order to speak about an interactional style where class and lifestyle differences are “kept tactfully out of the interaction” (Gullestad, 1992, p. 193). The concept is useful because it sheds light on why interaction with strangers is limited. Yet parts of the phenomenon I describe remain shaded, as egalitarian individualism is incapable of accounting for the fact that even though outgoingness is commonly regarded as a valued personal trait among Icelanders, the desire to interact with others is seldom directed towards human beings of whom has no or little previous knowledge. This is a form of sociability in which sociability is primarily directed inwards, towards one’s group, whereas sociability outwards, towards
strangers, is limited (but not due to hostility or skepticism). That one is judged to be “crazy” for transgressing these “outwards” boundaries underscores the argument that sanctions follow if one does not master the proper ways of interacting (Bruun et al., 2011).

One may argue that this form of sociability is a common cultural trait among other Nordic nations as well, but it seems that it is particularly evident among Icelanders. Icelanders are not cold, as they sometimes suggest about themselves during moments of reflexivity. Perhaps the fact that most Icelanders of the younger generations have grown up and lived solely in the relatively small city of Reykjavik is an important reason for their sociability in the sense that they have seldom been exposed to situations where they know no one.

On another note, perhaps the difference in sociability between Icelanders and Americans, for example, relates to different socio-cultural expectations about friendships. Whereas “middle-class American friendships are not generally expected to bear the weight of a deep and diffuse obligation to care”, it appears that Icelandic friendships are generally “built to brave really rough waters” (Taylor, 2010, p. 35). This implies that the establishment of relations among Icelanders entails more personal investment than it does for Americans, which may partly explain the former’s hesitations when it comes to initiation of contact with strangers. Whatever reasons lie behind Icelandic sociability, it nevertheless translates into another factor that effectively complicates the task of a foreign ethnographer. It was indeed difficult to get to know people, and the process required inventiveness. The problem, however, is of course not Icelandic culture in itself, but the methodological conventions of anthropologists, which neither emerge from nor is modified according to the conditions of urban Nordic fields.

**On Being Odd and Non-Exotic**

One’s identity matters wherever research is conducted. This is perhaps particularly true when it comes to ethnographic research, simply because one’s own person becomes the most important research tool (Hume & Mulcock, 2004, p. xviii). As Kirsten Hastrup (1990b) points out: in radically different cultural contexts, an anthropologist’s ethnicity may in itself become so exotic that other aspects of her identity is effectively backgrounded. Thus, even the female anthropologist may come to occupy an honorary male identity position in an “exotic” field as its autochthonous population attempts to grant her a culturally acceptable status. Such flexibility, however, is not present when a Scandinavian anthropologist conducts fieldwork in another Nordic country. One’s gender identity, for example, suddenly becomes important and
may become a paramount criterion for access, especially if this concept is understood as the
degree to which rapport is developed.

I was and still am a homosexual Norwegian man in his early twenties from a working-
class background. I am also intellectually sympathetic towards theoretical perspectives
imprecisely referred to as postmodernist and feminist. During fieldwork, these factors served
to position me vis-à-vis others and to condition my perspective, which will always be limited
and cannot be value-free. This conventional feminist principle holds true for my interaction in
the field as well as the writing of this thesis. That said, I believe that especially gender and
sexuality conditioned the unfolding of fieldwork in important ways.

As I was eager to study a rather feminized field in a cultural setting similar to my own,
it is unlikely that my identity in terms of gender and ethnicity conferred upon me advantages
like the ones Hastrup describes. Being male, I was slightly out of place in the sense that I
often visited arenas where only mothers tended to gather. Being Norwegian, moreover, I was
simply non-exotic or ethnically boring, like a local friend of mine once indicated when he said
that “a Norwegian is like a cardboard box” (normaður er eins og pappakassi). As such, it is
only reasonable to assume that my identity as a man precluded access to vital knowledge
about my interlocutors and feminized field. Indeed, can a man, with what his gender identity
implies for the position from which he will speak, observe and participate, effectively study
women? The negative answer, which would posit that “it takes one to study one” would be
unacceptable since it “ultimately casts doubt on the whole project of anthropology” (Moore,
1988, p. 5). Anthropologists have always studied others than themselves, but the mentioned
negative assumption is still frequently made. During fieldwork, however, I spent more time
with women than I did with men, and came to know the girls slightly better than their
boyfriends. Therefore, I ally myself with Moore when it comes to the mentioned issue.

One may argue that my identity as a homosexual man, which I am sure most people
identified without any explicit confessions on my part, mitigated presumed barriers put up by
my gender identity. Without arguing that men and women are fundamentally different and
that homosexual men always make good girlfriends, I count myself lucky to have many
female friends, which I believe is related to my sexuality on some level. Like Don Kulick
reports from his fieldwork among Brazilian transgendered prostitutes: “My status as a self-
acknowledged viado [queen] implied to the travestis that I was, in effect, one of the girls, and
that I was not interested in them as sexual partners” (1998, p. 15). I similarly experienced that
I socialized somewhat differently and, perhaps, more easily with some of my female
interlocutors after having come out of the closet, to use a culturally potent trope.
Gaining Access

It was difficult to get to know anybody by simply attending organized activities, not least because such activities were gendered in a way that was immediately unfavorable to me as a man. Before fieldwork, I had planned to get to know people by contacting maternity groups, but upon my arrival I soon discovered that such initiatives are privately organized through closed Facebook groups, which made them difficult to locate and access. I was thus compelled to search elsewhere in order to get in touch with people transitioning into parenthood. Upon advice from local contacts, I contacted a municipal healthcare center and asked for help. This did not go as smoothly as I had hoped for, partly because I discovered that my project had to be approved by the National Bioethics Committee (Vísindasiðanefnd) in addition to the already obtained research permissions from the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (Norsk sammfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste) and the Icelandic Data Protection Authority (Persónuvernd).

But a couple of weeks later I revisited the healthcare center one last time in order to collect a list containing the details of five couples that had agreed to be interviewed in connection with my project. When I sat down to call the couples on the list provided, however, it turned out that one of the couples was not Icelandic and another never replied. Thus, I conducted lengthy semi-structured interviews with a Cuban woman, an Icelandic woman, and two other Icelandic couples. It turned out that the Icelandic woman, Aðalheiður, became my rescue. Upon the conclusion of our conversation, she said that several of her friends were also having their first child right now and she offered to put me in touch with them. Aðalheiður wrote down their phone numbers on a piece of paper and I thanked her for the interview and the contact details. Before leaving, moreover, I asked her if she attended any organized activity with her daughter and, if this was the case, could I perhaps join as an observer? She seemed rather surprised by my query, but invited me to join her in a mummy gymnastics class (mömmuleikfimi). Sóley and Emma, two of her girlfriends whose contact information I had just received, would also be there. I decided to hold off on calling them and instead ask them in person whether they would be willing to be interviewed. When the day arrived, they said they too were more than happy to talk to me. As such, snowballing is an excellent term for how I came to recruit interlocutors.
How did I get inside the private homes of these people? After seven weeks in Reykjavik, which included one round of interviews and preliminary participant observation at the gym, I was still struggling to establish more permanent relations. One piece of advice given during a preparatory lecture at the University of Oslo was that we, as anthropologists in the field, should never engage potential research subjects in lengthy discussions about anthropology and epistemology. We were told that this would simply frighten them and preclude the realization of our ambitions. It turned out, however, that the opposite became my solution.

In a state of despair, admittedly, I decided to call five of the couples I had interviewed to enquire whether I could please stop by to ask them about something I had not asked them before. This would not be an interview, I explained, but a simple question that I would like to pose in person. Consequently, the most awkward situation I put myself in also turned out to be the most yielding one. When I met with my interviewees a second time around, I sat down and explained my ambitions as an anthropologist, as well as how ethnographic fieldwork differs from other research traditions. I did this because even though they accepted me as a social scientific researcher instead of giving me another social status (Briggs, 1970), it was clear that they imagined this role to be about the collection of narrative data alone. I therefore asked them if they would be willing to allow me to follow them in their everyday lives, thus granting me access to their private homes.

Everyone gave their consent spontaneously, but some also asked what it was that I found interesting about something as dull as their everyday lives. My selling argument was a paraphrasing of Renato Rosaldo, that the more frequent than not indulgence in commonplaces makes us forget that culture is in fact an ever-present potentiality and something which “encompasses the everyday and the esoteric, the mundane and the elevated, the ridiculous and the sublime” (1993, p. 26). The realization that they were as cultural and exotic as the people they imagined anthropologists to be generally preoccupied with, in combination with an explanation and discussion about anthropological research, facilitated my access to the field. I experienced, in other words, to benefit from authentic intellectual engagement with my interlocutors. By aiming for honest dialogue and open interaction, both mine and their understandings were critically approached to the effect that my ambitions as an ethnographer conducting research in a Nordic city were realized (cf. Hollan, 2008, p. 487).

As one moves beyond the collection of narratives and begin to interact with interlocutors in their everyday life, other epistemological questions become relevant. I follow
Frida Hastrup (2011) in her argument that the capacity for theorization is a general human privilege and that unanalyzed social reality cannot exist. This means that anthropological analysis and theory always coexist with local analyses and theories. Anthropological perspectives are not in competition with local theories, as if the former is better than the latter; they are simply other versions of the same reality. “Folk models and anthropological models”, as Pálsson argues, “need not agree” (1991, p. 81). Furthermore, by acknowledging the "generative role of encounters" (F. Hastrup, 2011, p. 437), one comes to see that the meetings between different persons are at once a moment of revealing of different perspectives and the merging of these into new social realities and ethnographic spaces (Pink, 2008). The field I am about to describe was not something I detected or could somehow analyze from the outside. Acutely aware of this, I never attempted to be “objective” or “scientific” in interactions with interlocutors, but rather aimed at being a complete person meeting with other complete persons (cf. Wikan, 2013, p. 19).

**The Field as It Became**

The material I came to gather in Reykjavik comprises of twenty-five interviews with forty individuals, observations in the house management school Hússtjórnarskólinn í Reykjavík (Húsó), observations in a Hjallastefnan (Hjalli) daycare, and participant observation among five Icelandic families to be presented below.

Three of the mentioned interviews are group interviews with nine girls who were students at Húsó, divided into groups of three. One interview is with a nurse at one of Reykjavik’s fifteen healthcare centers, another with a midwife employed at the same place. One interview recorded the narrative of a Cuban woman. Three interviews are interviews with altogether four lesbian parents. Four interviews are with the parents of children in Hjalli, and the rest of my verbal data stems from interview sessions with mainly heterosexual middle-class couples that had recently transitioned into parenthood. Five of these couples and the unfolding of their everyday lives also became the most central stage upon which participant observation was conducted. I gave all interviewees the opportunity to choose where to meet. Consequently, most interviews were conducted in my interlocutors’ homes, but sometimes cafés or other settings were preferred. A recording device was used in every case after having obtained consent to do so.

In Húsó I spent two full days following the school’s everyday routine. The school has
suddenly become very popular, unlike a generation ago. In 1977, it changed its name from Húsmæðraskólinn í Reykjavík, or the Housewife School of Reykjavik, to its present gender-neutral name. Despite its employees’ insistence that the school is not only for girls, this is how it is perceived by the larger Icelandic society. The semester I visited, all of the twenty-four students were girls, most of them having just finished four years of high school.

Hjallastefnan is an educational organization started in 1989. It is first and foremost known for its focus on gender equality, partly practiced by dividing students into separate groups based on age and gender. Boys and girls interact for approximately a fourth of a normal day. Hjalli was founded by Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir, who is also the visionary behind the school’s pedagogical program (see Ólafsdóttir, 1996 for a detailed description). I spent altogether fourteen days in one of the Hjalli daycares in Reykjavik. While visiting, I took part in some of the activities that a regular day consists of, like serving the children food or looking after them on small excursions, but mostly observed, interacted with teachers, and made an effort to talk to the parents of the children, as I was interested in their ideas concerning parenthood and pedagogy. Individual institutions decide who is admitted, and the middle-class—or, like one interlocutor put it, people who are “environmentally-minded” and “have money and often some sort of stature in society”—make up the majority of admittances.

The five families among which I conducted participant observation consist of couples that had transitioned into parenthood within the last six months prior to our first meeting. Four of these five couples know each other rather well and have contact on a day-to-day basis. The women of these units belong to the same clique (saumaklubbur). It is quite common to be part of several such cliques, and in this case, the origin was that the women had attended primary school together. Moreover, one of these four couples is a lesbian couple in which one of the partners is from Belgium. Their self-identification as lesbians was not expressed through an understanding of themselves as significantly different from their heterosexual friends, which urged me to refrain from excluding them from the study. The fifth couple, however, Lilja and Sigurjón, has no relation to the others and is slightly different in certain respects, as will be outlined below. I was eager to spend time with them as well in order to learn about an alternative situation, and what proved to be surprisingly similar understandings and practices.

As indicated, the participant observation of which I speak refers to a series of visits to the private homes of these families, who all lived in one of two of the most central quarters of Reykjavik. I usually visited a couple once or twice per week and spent everything from two to six hours in their company during each visit. I experienced that they quickly grew accustomed
to my company, which facilitated my participation in more and more arenas in which their lives unfolded. More often than not did their everyday lives revolve around commonplace activities like spending time at home, strolling downtown with the baby, attending baby swimming classes, and visiting cafés with family and friends. Additionally, I attended a maternity group meeting, a mummy gymnastics class and a baptism. I also interacted with three of the mothers through the smart phone application Snapchat\(^7\) whenever I was not in their company.

I now turn to present the five families with which I interacted the most. They appear to varying degrees in the following chapters, but this does not mean that what I have learned from seeing everybody’s ways and views has not been equally important. What is more, I wish to stress that the people I present are not a representative sample of the Icelandic population or even the Icelandic urban middle-class. It is true that they might be said to belong to this particular social stratum, and in this thesis they have also become interesting as

\[^7\] Social interaction is no longer limited to face-to-face meetings, but Internet facilitated platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat are mediums through which much social contact is initiated and sustained. In fact, I did not have Snapchat before I was encouraged by Perla to download the application “so that we can update you on what’s going on when you’re not here. We mostly send each other pictures of our babies.” To the limited extent that I refer to Snapchat messages, however, I take them to represent glimpses into the lives of my interlocutors that they somehow felt it was important to share with me and other friends. Snapchat is a smartphone application, a program, which allows one to send pictures or short movies, with or without small texts and icons, which disappear and cannot be watched again after up to ten seconds. Messages may be sent to one or several contacts if one so chooses.
examples of highly reflexive persons whose ways and views may shed further light on the theme of equality.

Lilja and Sigurjón

Lilja was 23 years old and had spent a couple of years preparing an application to the medical program at the University of Iceland. Her boyfriend Sigurjón was 29 and works as a doctor, but has not specialized yet. Together they have their first-born daughter Alda. Since Lilja has been a student and only worked part-time next to her studies, she was not entitled to much financial support during her maternity leave, and Sigurjón therefore provided the family’s main income. They decided that she would take six months of leave, whereas he only took two weeks due to financial reasons. Since Sigurjón was working throughout most of the time I conducted fieldwork, I spent most of my time with only the mother and their child.

Aðalheiður and Freyr

Aðalheiður was 29 years old, only some months younger than her boyfriend Freyr. She is a pharmacist and he is an economist. Aðalheiður took six months of leave and Freyr took three. Aðalheiður was the one of my interlocutors who seemed most eager to go back to her professional life after she became a mother to their daughter Síf. While she was staying at home with the baby, she had set up a home office and continued to be part-time employed. Since they had several friends who had transitioned into parenthood more or less simultaneously, Aðalheiður did not attend a maternity group. Instead they both maintained a social life by spending time in the company of friends and family, who mostly lived within walking distance from their home.

Sóley and Jökull

Sóley and Jökull were both 29 years old. Their firstborn son is called Rafn. Sóley is a physiotherapist and Jökull is a doctor. They had plans to move abroad in order for Jökull to finish his specialization. Sóley, who is a highly physically active woman with much experience in professional women’s football, is very dedicated to her job and considered studying for a master’s degree in physiotherapy. They had jointly decided that she would be
taking nine months of parental leave and that he would be taking three. Their time off overlapped, and they came to be one of the couples that I spent the most time with.

**Perla and Ágúst**

Perla and Ágúst are married. She was 29 years old and he was 34. She was pregnant the first time I met with them. Three weeks later she gave birth to a baby daughter, Yr. Having two master’s degrees, Perla works as an assistant professor in addition to being a PhD candidate. Ágúst works as a director and is a graduate student of creative writing. Perla and Ágúst had agreed that he would be the one who took most parental leave. Whereas she took three months, he took six. The reason for this was largely the flexibility her job and studies permitted. Perla was perhaps the one among my interlocutors with the most interest in my research project. “I think what you do is very important”, she exclaimed when I came to ask them if they would be willing to become part of it. She too became one of the persons that I came to know best, and I am sure that our common academic interests had something to do with this.

**Halla and Emma**

Halla is a long-time friend of Aðalheiður, Sóley and Perla. She was 29 years old and worked as a restaurant manager. Emma, her girlfriend and birthmother of their son Hannes, is Belgian. She decided to move permanently to Iceland when she fell in love with Halla. Emma has studied different topics, but eventually ended up with a degree in programming, the field she presently works in. Both Halla and Emma will take six months of parental leave. Only a small part of their individual leave periods overlapped. Unlike Halla, Emma does not have a large social network in Iceland and does not speak fluent Icelandic, although she understands most of what is being said. The girls speak English to each other, but use their mother tongues when interacting with Hannes. Emma said that she sometimes feels lonely in Iceland due to the nature of her job and what she termed “the Iceland-factor” discussed above. Yet in contrast to the partners of Halla’s friends, Emma has become one of the other girls and this relieves her feelings of loneliness in Iceland.
3 On Housework

Gender equality is more often than not talked about and measured by reference to what men and women do respectively. Typically, men and women’s performances of housework and paid work are compared, and a high measure of equality is found if men and women perform similar practices to similar extents. In this chapter I focus on the private sphere in general and work performed in homes in particular. The meaning of the word “work” is contested, but the way Icelanders use it suggests that it is a general concept denoting heterogeneous arduous practices that are explicitly understood as part of the processes through which human needs are satisfied. All kinds of work are therefore socially reproductive in one sense or another (cf. Bear, Ho, Tsing, & Yanagisako, 2015), but it is perhaps particularly characteristic of domestic work. Hence, housework may provide insights about general social relations and larger cultural arrangements. Yet the concept of housework defies simple definitions. As Melhuus and Brochsgrevink observe: “When the elements of housework are not problematized, and neither the actual work process nor the product of the work is evaluated in its cultural context, housework becomes an abstract category which disable an understanding of variety and change” (1984, p. 320). One may argue that this insight demands that understandings of the concept must be context sensitive. Thus, the overall aim of this chapter is to approach an understanding of what sort of practices that are conceptually included and excluded from the semantic domain of housework in the specific ethnographic context that I have operated, and to identify certain gendered patterns in the performances of practices that goes on in private homes. Finally, I attempt to shed light on the current state of affairs by engaging scholarship on the gendered nature of the organization of society in general and Iceland in particular. But first a note on the private and the public as analytical tools.

8 Since Icelanders make no semantic distinction that corresponds to the concepts of “work” and “labor” as found in Marxist theory, I have chosen to consistently use the word “work” (vína) as defined above. A discussion about the Icelandic term’s semantics is launched later in his chapter. Moreover, when I engage Arendt’s (1959) concept of “labor” in the next chapter, I do so as an analytical solution to the problem of naming some of the practices that this chapter identifies as nameless, and not because I have a theoretical interest in Arendt’s critique of Marxist conceptualizations.

9 All translations from Norwegian are mine.
Concerning the Private and the Public

The concepts of the private and the public are not necessarily universally valid analytical tools. What is denoted by the concepts may vary greatly across time and space, and the distinction they imply may even be nonexistent in certain places (Strathern, 1990). Moreover, the concepts that are typically associated with the private and the public respectively—be that “man” or “woman”, “children” or “work”—are not uniform concepts and they need not bear any experiential significance (Moore, 1988, pp. 21-41).

In Iceland, however, like in most Western societies, a semantic distinction between the private and the public exists. This is the case even if it is not explicitly invoked in all conversations about the themes with which this chapter is concerned. Consequently, while I seldom engaged in conversations where people would explain what they were doing in their homes versus their jobs in terms of practices carried out in the private versus the public, they remain valid analytical tools because there is a significant difference between what people do in their homes and what goes on outside of them. This is detectable in subtle changes in behavior, such as the common tendency to make oneself look more presentable prior to leaving the house, or the observance of social taboos, such as not yelling at someone in the grocery store. Whereas the opinions of unknown others become less important in private settings, they constitute the public.

The intimate practice of breastfeeding is welcome in most cafés in Reykjavik.
Yet neither the private nor the public should be understood as enclosed semantic domains, as various grey areas exist or spontaneously arise. As one moves from the theoretical to the empirical one discovers that the private and the public always contain mutually constitutive elements. Therefore, a useful model in this context is Haraway’s (1991) cyborg. A cyborg is at once a machine and an organism, and it may function as a metaphor for the ways conventional contrasts such as the private and the public “can be dispersed and interfaced in nearly infinite polymorphous ways” (ibid., p. 161). The cyborg is good to think with about how a whole is constituted of several parts that function together and cannot be understood apart from each other. These insights are kept at the back of my mind as I attempt to look closer at the private domain in contemporary Reykjavík.

**Doing that which Needs to be Done**

During my first month in Reykjavík I rented a room in the basement of the house of a family of four. The room was small, but furnished with what is considered necessary for a relatively short stay: a bed, a small table, a TV, a mini-fridge, and access to a toilet. It was usually rented out to tourists who only stayed for some days at the time, but since I had asked to stay for longer than what was usual, I was in need of access to a proper bathroom and cooking facilities. This meant that I also came to share kitchen and bathroom with Hlín, her boyfriend Sölvi and their two daughters, Sunna and Bergljót. Over the course of the month that I stayed in their house, I got to know their ways and views rather well. Especially Hlín demonstrated a great interest in the themes I came to Iceland to research, and quite often we found ourselves discussing relevant ideas and experiences when I was using their kitchen. It was never my intention to study Hlín and her family, but she was excited to let herself be interviewed after I had moved out. This was also when I started to investigate what people considered domestic work, the way they talked about it, and who did which tasks.

While living in their home, I had noticed that Sölvi, as opposed to Hlín, seemed quite fond of cooking, and cooked more frequently. Upon asking how often he cooked, he explained that he would prepare dinner two to three times per week, before Hlín elaborated by saying that he typically cooked larger meals during the weekend so that the family had leftovers during the week. In this way, there was no need to spend time cooking every afternoon. Additionally, Sölvi explained, both he and the girls ate warm meals at work and school every day at lunchtime. The situation was somewhat different for Hlín:
I’ll get a warm meal twice a week. Once a week pasta or soup, and bread twice a week. The kids get a warm meal that has fish or meat or something, and one day a week there is pasta or soup or something like that. So yes, everyone comes home at the end of the day and we’ve had a warm meal at lunch. Then you make a snack or it can be nice to pull something out of the fridge to just warm it up. I’d like to be more like my mum […] When I grew up there was always dinner so you’d always be home for dinner and we would always eat together. And I think that that’s very important, so even if we’re having a snack I try to make the most of it in order for there to always be a time that we spend together. And I get Sunna to help and to prepare, and we get a chance to chat about the day. But you don’t always have the time to cook something complicated even if you want to.

Both Hlín and Sölvi were employed full-time, leaving for work early in the morning and returning home late in the afternoon. On certain days, I was asked to use the kitchen before eight or after ten in evening, as the time between these hours would be when the family would have an evening snack, as Hlín called it. On other days I was told that I could use the kitchen whenever I wanted, as they did not intend to cook anything or eat together. What was obvious in their situation was that time was a scarce resource: there was simply not enough time to cook a larger meal every afternoon, and this could also mean that the family did not have moments when they all sat down together each day. Hlín was different from her mother in this respect, as she remarked herself. However, she was different from her mother in another manner as well, because it was Sölvi, the father of the house, who usually prepared larger meals. Hlín’s words may, moreover, be understood as a subtle lament over the fact that in the contemporary Icelandic society it is impossible for anyone to devote themselves to family life to an ideal extent while also being employed full-time.

I got the impression that both Hlín and Sölvi experienced everyday life to be somewhat hectic, which was echoed in Hlín’s statement that they did not “always have time to cook something complicated”. Seeing a clear pattern in how they divided the task of cooking between them, however, I was curious to learn more about how they distributed other tasks that their household inevitably generated. As others would reply in other conversations where I posed similar questions, Sölvi answered that “most of the time, either of us just does what needs to be done when it needs to be done”. Indeed, domestic chores were not something they sat down and carefully divided between them, equally or otherwise. At times, I witnessed Hlín putting on washing machines with clothes that Sölvi later would hang up to dry, or vice versa. At other times, Hlín would both put on and hang up several loads of washing. Most often Sölvi would cook, but at it also happened that Hlín did it, or simply heated some leftovers and laid the table. Neither of them was of the opinion that something
was her task and that something else was his task. To discern who did most of which tasks thus became quite complicated since there were no explicit norms regulating their execution. When Hlín was required to work overtime, as she did from time to time, Sölvi would step in and do all the things she usually took care of when she was present.

Although every family may be said to have an everyday routine, this routine is more often than not rather fluid and subject to change as things that are unpredictable (but not unlikely) occur every now and then. The routine is not important in itself, and nobody simply “does one’s share” as if the limits of that share may be drawn finitely. What is important is to “do what needs to be done” and it is everybody’s task to make sure that it happens.

Weekends, however, were somewhat different for Hlín and Sölvi because their entire family would then be off from school and work. Yet there were few patterns to be discerned even when there was enough time to do what needed to be done:

**Hlín:** We’ve never been really fixed on setting any sort of rule like ‘each Saturday we have to do this before we can do something else’, but with Sunna I always try to set aside a time so that she can do some of her homework, so that most of it is done and she doesn’t have to do it on the week days. On mornings, usually, Sunna will take care of Bergljót: they will have breakfast together and we can sleep a little longer. But we usually try to do some workout, either go out for a run or go to Hreyfing [a gym], so that can take–I mean if… Because one has to be at home when the other one goes out and it can take a lot of time. We also run errands. And we usually go and have dinner with my or Sölvi’s family. So sometimes we don’t even cook at all during the weekend even though we have time then. I don’t know. We haven’t gotten into the habit of cooking like a big fancy dinner during the weekend. Usually on Fridays, the kids and I will try to do something and we’ll call it ‘fjölskyldukvöld’. So we will try to watch a movie together or play cards or…

Hlin continued by explaining how the fjölskyldukvöld, or the family evening, was something she tried to make a weekly habit. It was something the girls were very much fond of, she said, before she added that “I think that’s definitely helpful in the future when they become teenagers, so that they will still want to spend time with you”. Somewhat uncertain whether this was something only Hlin did with the girls, I asked whether Sölvi also took part, upon which I received the somewhat unconcerned answer that that was usually not the case. At that point, Sölvi had left for the kitchen, so I raised my voice and asked him what he did when Hlin and the kids had family evenings. “Oh, I just check on the laundry and read something online. For future benefits of the family”, he replied. When he had spoken, however, Hlin gave her answer to the same question about what Sölvi does when she has family evenings:
“Goes to the gym”. Sölvi, who returned to the living room upon her utterance, took a seat and confirmed her words: “Yes, something like that.”

What I found interesting with Hlín and Sölvi’s talk about their weekends was how simply spending time with the children, as Hlín did on Friday evenings, was never talked about as housework, and, moreover, how there seemed to be a gendered pattern to those sort of practices. While it seems to fair to suggest that both men and women generally do that which needs to be done when it needs to be done—and that this is the rule rather than the exception—there are certain things that women seem to do to a larger extent than men and vice versa. That is, general asymmetries seem to exist even though most couples do in fact share domestic chores between them. This observation was reinforced later during my fieldwork, when I started to visit families and spend time in their homes.

Gendered Patterns

One dark and rainy evening in early April, I stopped by to visit Perla and Ágúst for the first time since Ýr was born. Their apartment was filled with what I experienced as a sense of calm and reassurance. Lights were dimmed and voices kept low; the newborn was asleep as I entered their apartment. In a state of unmistaken happiness, Perla told me about her experience of giving birth and the many pains and pleasures that had presented themselves now that they had become parents. She told me, among other things, that she had already put Ýr on the list of admission to one of the city’s Hjallastefnan daycares. At this point, she was hoping to skip the step that a childminder (dagmamma) typically represents (Farstad, 2012) and wanted Ýr to be admitted to Hjalli at the age of 18 months. With tongue-in-cheek, she asked me if I could put in a good word for her, as she knew that I was currently in contact with a Hjalli daycare myself as a part of my research project. I was amused by the idea that I would thus be implemented into the informal system of favors that every Icelander appears to be part of.

In terms of generalized reciprocity (Sahlins, 2004), this system is one in which one uses one’s contacts to attain something desirable. In this case, what was desired was a place for a child in a specific daycare; another time I experienced that my friend Björk was able to obtain on my behalf a ticket for a sold-out concert in Harpa Concert Hall by calling a friend who worked there. This is commonly referred to as klikuskapur, which may be somewhat imperfectly translated to “cliqueness”. Every Icelander, I came to learn, conducts him- or herself in this manner. It is a way of being in Icelandic society and a way of relating to the
people it comprises of. Nobody keeps score of favors that are executed, but it is implicitly understood that one’s gratitude for whatever favor another person does on one’s behalf should not just be expressed by explicit gratitude, but also through willingness to return the favor at some later point in time. Perla, for example, was obviously making a joke, but she also knew that if I talked to the principal of the daycare, the principal would perhaps be more inclined to prioritize Ýr when reviewing applicants. Before leaving, however, Perla elaborated on my musings about klikuskapur by way of an example: would I like to know how Sóley got a place for Rafn with a particular childminder? I nodded eagerly and Perla explained that there only existed three childminders downtown. Obviously the waiting lists are constantly long. Sóley, Perla said, called one of them in order to inquire about the possibility for admission, but had received the rejecting answer that she should call back later. Some days later, however, she had struck up a conversation with a woman she knew from a previous job whilst she was grocery shopping. It turned out that this woman knew another childminder that Sóley also had contacted and been rejected by. The woman told Sóley to call that childminder back after a few days. Sóley did as she had been encouraged to do and this time she was successful. Her acquaintance had certainly pulled some strings on her behalf. When I later asked Sóley to tell me about how she had gotten a place for Rafn with one of the busy childminders downtown, she confirmed Perla’s story. Without second thoughts, she too referred to this as klikuskapur.

Interestingly, these women’s male partners are present and caring in almost every thinkable way, but it is mostly women who work their social networks in order to secure a place for their child with a given childminder. The same observation was to be made in relation to the problem of clothing one’s baby. It appears that only women who give or lend other women baby clothing. Freyr’s sister, for example, presented Aðalheiður, and not her brother, with an impressive amount of barely used baby clothing for them to dress Sífr in. This is not to say that it would be considered weird or inappropriate to present the clothing to Freyr, but for some reason Aðalheiður, the mother, was the person Freyr’s sister naturally approached with the gesture. In turn, I also experienced that only the mothers took upon themselves the job of sorting and folding the clothes they had received.

There is always an indefinite number of things that needs to be done around the house and in relation to the family. As Hlín and Sölvi’s word testified, most tasks are more often than not simply carried out by either partner without negotiation. No wonder most people had difficulties discerning whether he or she did most of this or that. Yet what is common to all of the above examples is that certain gendered patterns exist, and this is likely true about more types of practices than the ones I have observed. However, particularly that which has to do
with small children seems to be practices that women are more or differently involved in. Why this is seldom acknowledged in conversations about what is done around the house is partly because certain things are neither understood nor experienced as housework, which implies that the category of housework includes relatively few things. This became particularly clear during my visitations to Húsó, as the teenage girls explained their rationales for attending the former housewife school.


Before I arrived in Iceland I naively assumed that what is taught at Húsó would somehow indicate the borders of the domain of domestic doings. It is after all a house management school. But it turned out that the school’s students were of another opinion. This revealed itself as I made small talk with the girls about why they had chosen to spend an entire semester doing this instead of something else. “We are not only learning about housework”, a girl named Arna said as she was stitching together a pair of blue baby trousers. “We learn stuff like sewing and knitting as well”. This short reply and others of a similar kind revealed an understanding of much which is taught at Húsó, including textile handicraft, as something existing outside the semantic domain of housework. This was underscored by how the girls related to and talked about the different subjects offered at the school. Whereas sewing as a subject was less popular because of the amount of concentration and knit-pick that went into it, knitting was seen to be related, but also the most popular subject due to the fact that “everybody” picked it up quite readily and was able to produce impressive products. “We just sit around the table and chat when we knit”, Arna replied to my inquiry about why she considered knitting to be her favorite subject. Indeed, the more hours I spent in Húsó the more I came to see that the girls were actually constantly knitting and enjoying it; not just during scheduled knitting sessions, but also in breaks or when being interviewed by me. Cleaning, however, a subject that every day began with, was in comparison never described as fun. Rather, this was considered very boring, but useful. Usefulness was another main reason why the girls chose to attend the school. Generally, they reasoned that the school represented an opportunity to dedicate oneself to something that is at once useful and fun. As indicated, this did not mean that they considered every subject to be both things, but each and every subject seemed to fit rather neatly into either category. The exception was perhaps cooking, which
was generally talked about as something that was useful to learn on the same terms as
cleaning, yet still considered fun by many of the girls.

In other words, there seemed to be a significant semantic separation between different
practices. They were either grouped in categories of things that were considered useful or fun.
Whereas the former was univocally considered to be things that it will be useful to be able to
do when they one day start households of their own, the latter stood forth as hobbies.
Furthermore, there was a convergence between the things that were talked about as useful and
the things that was considered to be housework. Upon asking three girls some general
questions related to this theme, the following conversation took place:

**Anna:** Hm, my parents, like my dad, he doesn’t know how to cook at all. But then he
just tries to do something else instead. And I think they do things quite equally.

**Elfur:** Yeah, in my home it’s like my dad who knows how to cook, but he works like
late hours so my mum does it usually. But during the weekends, when we are eating
some kind of meat and fancy food or something, my dad cooks. And they usually
clean together.

**Helga:** On Sunday maybe. Cleaning together one day a week.

**Elfur:** Yes.

**Kristian:** Okay. Once a week. Is that common?

**Helga:** Yes, it’s fine. And my dad works a lot so my mum always cooks for me.

**Elfur:** But I don’t think my dad knows how to use the washing machine.

**Helga:** He doesn’t?

**Elfur:** No… He has used it sometimes, but everything became pink afterwards.

Cooking, cleaning and washing were first identified as practices it was useful to master, and
later the same practices turned up in a conversation about how their parents divide tasks
between them. Other practices that are also very much related to the household, such as taking
care of or simply spending time with children, however, were never mentioned as housework.
This was the case for most people I got to know.

One may argue that it is precisely the element of care, an emotional dimension, which
enters the picture in the relations one establishes to one’s children and household, has
something to do with this. As Bridget Anderson points out, care is typically seen as “chiefly
women’s work” (although this has for a long time been changing, perhaps especially in
Iceland), and care as work and care as emotion is commonly conflated to the effect that most practices which involve care are perceived less as work and more as emotion (2000, pp. 115-116). Practices that contain this emotional component, moreover, are talked about like hobbies, like fun, rather than work, or that which is explicitly considered to be useful. This is not to say that parents do not consider caretaking to be arduous, but that the project of parenthood is filled with a meaning that is quite different from the meaning of practices that are explicitly understood as work. As shown, the content filling this semantic category appears to consist of relatively few things; the things that are immediately identified as “useful” rather than “fun”. This is in line with what Coltrane (2000, 2010) has found through his investigations of research on housework: neither research subjects nor researchers tend to acknowledge or include practices with emotional dimensions into the understanding of housework. One may also argue that since “it is logically impossible within our culture to calculate emotions” (Melhuus & Brochgevink, 1984, p. 333), this is partly what ensures that these kinds of practices are priceless in terms of being free of charge.

An obvious implication of this semantic delimitation of housework is that people may perceive themselves to be dividing household tasks more equally between them than would be the case if housework was seen as a more encompassing category. Another implication is that much of what goes on in the home is not understood as work. These practices are invisible because more often than not, nobody is there to document their execution and because their products are first seen once the doings are undone (ibid., p. 326), but also because they bear no general name. In turn, this has serious implications for how men and women’s respective efforts are perceived.

**Working Father, “Working” Mother**

One grey Thursday morning in June, a “heat wave”—as my interlocutors ironically called the unexpected nice weather of that month—implied a temperature so pleasant that it still carried promise of a good summer. Similar to what I recognized from my native Norway, people were taking advantage of the heat and spent as much time as they could outdoors. At ten in the morning, I found myself in the company of a friend called Hallgrímur, with whom I had planned to spend some hours. Suddenly, however, I received a text message from Sóley. She wrote that Jökull, who was no longer on parental leave, had gotten a lot of sleep during his nightshift at the hospital and was not in need of sleep now that he had come home from work.
She wrote further that they wanted to go out for lunch. Perhaps I would like to join them earlier than we had planned? I was very much tempted to yield a positive response, but was also reluctant to leave my friend that I had just met up with. I therefore replied that I was already out running some errands, but would write her as soon as I knew whether I would be able to meet them earlier.

Three hours later I was back home and called Sóley to find out where and when to meet them. It turned out that they had just arrived a restaurant by the harbor on my side of the city, and we decided that I should come join them immediately. It took me about ten minutes to reach my destination where I found Jökull and Sóley seated outside, almost whispering as they talked in order to not wake up Rafn. I had not seen any of them for a couple of weeks as they had made a trip to a summerhouse (sumarbústaður) with her family, and I had spent some days after their homecoming in another town.

I took a seat, ordered food and inquired about their trip. I also asked about how Sóley found it to be alone on parental leave now that Jökull had finished his. Sóley thought for a second or two before she admitted that she had found it quite difficult in the beginning. Especially the tasks of cooking and entertaining Rafn were hard to combine without assistance, she said. It took her approximately three days to get accustomed to this new situation that had required her to learn how to time cooking sessions in the kitchen in a way so that the food was ready before Rafn started to scream for food himself. Since Sóley was still breastfeeding at the time, this meant that more often than not all other activities had to be postponed when Rafn was being fed. Unlike the last time I had met her, Sóley was currently breastfeeding four times each day, which implied that Rafn now ate more “food which is not me”, as Sóley tended to say. This had furthermore resulted in the fact that he slept much more during the night. Usually he would wake up only once per night these days, Sóley said, but she was quick to remind me that there were exceptions, of course. In reply I referred to a Snapchat message that she had sent me the weekend before. It was a picture of Rafn with the text: “This one misunderstood and woke up four times tonight” (Þessi var aðeins að misskilja og vaknaði 4x í nótt). We all laughed. Unlike cooking, babies cannot be timed, and although Sóley would have loved to sleep more that particular night, we all knew that unexpected and, indeed, undesired irregularities in sleeping patterns were part and parcel of the transition into parenthood.

The conversation around the table flowed in such a manner that it soon became opportune for me to turn to Jökull and ask him about how he felt about returning to his job after a couple of months of being at home and following the family’s self-generated schedule.
Jökull said that he was glad to be working again. He indulged in a monologue about how his days at the hospital typically unfold. It was sometimes tiresome, he said, to come home to a baby who was up and running in the walking-chair, especially if he had worked a night shift and not gotten any sleep. But tonight he had gotten to sleep from one until six in the morning. This was more sleep than he probably would have had if he was at home, he added laughingly.

Our lunch was over and we moved on to enjoy a takeaway coffee in the parliament garden before I later went grocery shopping with Sóley. We talked about several interesting topics that day, but the conversation from our lunch is memorable for what it indicated about how much of that which a parent on parental leave does is quite arduous, but is nevertheless semantically disassociated with work; from that which Jökull does when he goes to the hospital to earn money. When Jökull’s parental leave ended, Sóley had to manage both cooking and Rafn, and this was very challenging in the beginning. The tasks are not irreconcilable, of course, but they require a lot of different kinds of effort. That is, it is not only psychologically and physically straining to manage a household and small a baby like Sóley did, but it requires specific emotional efforts. Jökull’s job, or any other job for that matter, does also require different kinds of effort, but sometimes he can come home and be rested after a nightshift, whereas Rafn might have woken Sóley up three or four times that very same night. Her emotional involvement with the baby is likely to guarantee that she will arise from bed and calm him down every time he screams. When the morning comes and she is tired, she is solely responsible for Rafn and the household and will be so for hours. Unlike Jökull, however, she has only been “working”, whereas he has definitely been at work.

Admittedly, English was spoken in the above anecdote and this may have influenced how practices were talked about. As I will show next, however, attending to how terms and concepts are applied in everyday Icelandic will reinforce rather than reject my point.

“Work” at the Level of Verbal Language

The observation that practices with an emotional dimension are not included in the domain of domestic doings is supported by an investigation of how words and concepts are used in everyday speech about the numerous practices that life inevitably generates. In Icelandic, the verb áðvinna corresponds to the English verb “to work”. The related noun, which translates into “work” in English, is vinna, or the more formal atvinna. The latter may also be translated into “occupation” and is less frequently used in everyday language. This furthermore means that whereas atvinna may only be used about work that yields a salary, the word vinna may be
somewhat more broadly employed. One’s job or profession may also be characterized with the word *starf*. This word may thus be used in a similar manner to *atvinna*. *Staða*, however, refers to one’s position. This means that *starfð mitt*, or “my job”, may for example be to teach mathematics to high school students, but *staðan mín*, or “my position”, is a teacher. Thus, the words *atvinna* and *starf* may not be used to talk about the unpaid tasks that are carried out in private homes. The word *vinna*, however, might be used for this purpose, but to what extent is this common and possible? One may speak of someone who is *heimavinnandi*, which means to be “home working”. It denotes practices pertaining to children and the home, but it is never used to characterize that which goes on when one spends quality time with children or what somebody does when he or she returns from his or her paid job in the evening. A person who is *heimavinnandi* does not have a paid job outside of the home. He or she is a *húsfadað* or a *húsmóðir*, best captured by the English term “housewife”. It is therefore possible to use the term *heimavinnandi* for someone on parental leave, but it is more correct and common to say that someone is on child birth leave or parental leave (*að maður sé í fødingarorlofi eða foreldraorlofi*). In practice, someone who is on leave is on leave from his or her paid job (or school). When someone is on leave, moreover, that which he or she does within the home and in relation to the baby is no longer talked about as work.

This became clear in the vignette about the lunch with Sóley and Jökull. The job from which he or she is absent monopolizes the language of work. This does not mean that much of what is carried out in the private of one’s home is not acknowledged as arduous, but it is not regarded as work. One implication of this way of wording is that several practices performed within private households go unnamed. These domestic doings are as important as other doings in the great scheme of things, but when they remain nameless they also remain invisible to the effect that the person who carries them out may receive credit for less than she has put in of efforts. What is more, if such practices were to be implemented into the domain of domestic doings, how would one measure such efforts? Or, rather, is it possible to measure this type of emotional work? Is having a family evening more emotionally arduous than the act of changing diapers or the practice of breastfeeding? I cannot attempt to answer these questions here, but will rather close this chapter with an investigation of how the described circumstances may have come into being.
Gendered at the Roots?

By approaching the public and the private and “man” and “woman” as ontological metaphors—that is, as “ways of viewing events, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities or substances” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 25)—one may come to see more clearly how such concepts and the physical phenomena they denote intermingle with each other in revealing ways. Moira Gatens (1991) does so and exposes how it is not the case that “metaphysics, theories of human nature and epistemology, are sex-neutral.” Rather, she argues, such theories tend to supply the basis for the biases that manifest themselves and are grappled with on the socio-political level (ibid., p. 2). Gatens’ theory is that (Western) thinking over the last four centuries has been structured by a set of oppositions such as mind/body, reason/passion and nature/culture, which “interact with the male/female dichotomy in extremely complex and prejudicial ways” (ibid., p. 4). Her main argument is:

“The apparently sexually neutral human subject turns out to be implicitly a male subject whose ‘neutrality’ is conceptually dependent on the ‘shadow’ conception of the female subject. […] The male subject is constructed as self-contained and as an owner of his person and his capacities, one who relates to other men as free competitors with whom he shares certain politico-economic rights. While he has rights to privacy and self-improvement, he relates to women as though they were a natural resource and complement to himself. The female subject is constructed as prone to disorder and passion, as economically and politically dependent on men, and these constructions are justified by reference to women’s nature. She ‘makes no sense by herself’ and her subjectivity assumes a lack which males complete. She is indistinguishable from a wife/mother” (ibid., p. 5).

Gatens moves on to identify this conceptualization as inherent to modern capitalism, which finds its foundation in liberal thinking:

“On the liberal view, there is a prior claim on women’s bodies/capacities that tie them to nature and to a natural order, which precludes them from participating in the social order. The products of women’s labour fall outside the scope of public production, and women, along with the family, are ironically cast as the consumers of the productiveness of the public sphere. […] Thus, it would seem that from the beginnings of the capitalist era women are conceptualized as naturally unsuited to the production of social value and hence falling outside the body politic” (ibid., p. 127).

This theorization parallels the scholarship of the Norwegian anthropologist Jorun Solheim (2007). Solheim argues that the transition to modernity in Europe in the mid-1700s implied a
semantic split between the familial and work, and the private and the public (ibid., p. 19).

Also concerned with gender, Solheim underscores what Gatens has already brought home by explaining how the transition to modernity, with all that it implied in terms of industrialization, urbanization and centralization processes, engendered a transformation of the economically active woman into an self-sacrificial and nurturing “angel of the house”, defined in opposition to her husband who also became her protector (ibid., pp. 70-71). It furthermore involved a transformation of the man, who was formerly seen as intimately connected to his babies, according to historians (see Kramvig, 2007, p. 224). Prior to the transition to modernity, then, the household was at once a reproductive and a productive unit, which means that men and women’s relations to the home meant something entirely different than it does today.

Due to a lasting cultural emphasis on farming and the social organization of Icelanders, who lived in farmsteads scattered all over the island for centuries, the onset of modernity was delayed in Iceland (K. Hastrup, 1990c). However, according to Hastrup, a process similar to the one described by Solheim seems to have taken place. She observes that when Reykjavik transformed from a seasonal fishing village into a town and later into a city, women became marginalized: “Implicitly, there is, I argue, an equation between the city and the men’s wild, where women had no natural place. As women they are socially invisible in the new urban surroundings” (K. Hastrup, 1990b, p. 281). Hastrup explains this process of marginalization in terms of a symbolic disassociation between women and the male domain of nature. Since Reykjavik grew out of a place that was symbolically associated with the domain of nature in terms of fishing, women have no place in the urban surroundings. Although this particular explanation owes much to Hastrup’s enchantment with structuralist analysis at the time, her observation that women became muted with the transition to modernity is probably right. It is, however, more likely that the reason for the mentioned turn of events lies closer to the one suggested by Gatens and Solheim: with Iceland’s transition to modernity, women’s social roles became increasingly restricted to household management.

Today, however, one may argue that political activism on different levels, in Iceland and elsewhere, has had a lasting influence on the relation between men and women, as well as their respective places in the public and the private spheres. In contemporary Icelandic society, at least among the urban middle-class Icelanders I acquainted, “nobody thinks that a woman should do everything at home”, like a woman called Lísa stated quite explicitly during a conversation about gender roles and distribution of housework (see chapter 6). Such opinions began to go mainstream the 1970s, when the second wave of feminism sought to turn women
into “social men” by having them enter the political decision-making center (Kristmundsdóttir, 1989, p. 86). The Icelandic women’s movement would not accept the restriction of women to household management, and its views has had a strong influence on official politics as well as actual lives (K. Hastrup, 1998, p. 161).

In other words, what Solheim referred to as the angel of the house was, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf (1966, p. 285), so tormenting to Icelandic women that at last they killed her. There is an absence of angels in the contemporary households of Reykjavik, and this is greatly related to the successes of the Icelandic women’s movement (see Kristmundsdóttir, 1989). All of the Icelandic fathers I acquainted in Reykjavik change diapers, dress their babies, feed them, play with them, and love them, much like their female partners. In turn, their female partners all have higher education, professional careers, vigorous social lives, and the same rights as their male partners. These are truly households of peers (Gullestad, 2001, p. 313). Angels, it seems, are no longer born. The people who are born, however, are born into a society where the character of the household and its relation to whatever is on its outside remains fundamentally unaltered. One may thus ask whether society is gendered at its roots. Old ideas about the private and the public still appear to structure the management of everyday lives, and this may partly account for the lasting invisibility and namelessness of the arduous practices that particularly women perform in relation to children. The fundamental characters of the private and the public spheres persist, and many of the practices that go on within the former are still not understood and experienced as work in the same vain as the work that goes on in a hospital, for example. This remains true even though housework—especially that which is related to children—may at times be much more arduous than professional work. In effect, these practices, as well as the things that come about through or with them, are obfuscated. A regrettable corollary, one may argue, is that it becomes difficult to see how men and women in couples where both have professional jobs and share responsibilities for housework nevertheless remain different in significant ways.
4 On Mothers

One may argue that the invisibly and namelessness of certain practices that are carried out in private homes makes it difficult to see what comes about with those practices that continue to go unmarked. This chapter, therefore, takes an analytical cue from Arendt’s proposal “to think what we are doing” (1959, p. 5) and poses a most direct question to the ethnography of urban middle-class mothers: what is it that their doings do?

The ambition to be a good mother is common to all of my female interlocutors. Even though its realization is inevitably idiosyncratic, it is a project that virtually every expectant mother commences long before birth, and it eventuates certain circumstances that conspire to constitute Icelandic women as similar to each other in at least one way that makes them different from their partners. A focus on the identity of the good mother as expressed within hegemonic discourses concerning childcare allows for an exploration of how the becoming of this woman as a mother is also a becoming of several other things. “To be one is always to become with many” (Haraway, 2008, p. 4, emphasis in the original). Following Dorinne Kondo (1990), moreover, I understand subject identities as crafted in the sense of being constituted by practices within discourse, but I am nevertheless keen to demonstrate how this idea, which admittedly produces a theory about the subject as “more than one”, must in the
case of Icelanders marry with an understanding of the subject as “less than many” (Mol, 2002, p. 82). In this regard it becomes possible to inquire more specifically about what kind of person the Icelandic birth mother, for example, become. One interlocutor, Perla, will be in focus in this chapter, although ways and views of other mothers will at times intervene to throw light or shade on certain observations. After a short visit to Sóley and Jökull, I shall begin by exploring Perla’s relationship to the healthcare system and its discourses, and move to show how her becoming as a good mother is also a becoming of several other things.

**Beginning with Belief**

That a baby represents a solemn obligation is something that rang true for all of my interlocutors. A corollary to this was that they committed themselves to do what they perceived to be in their babies’ best interests at all times. This became clear as I gradually familiarized myself with the daily routines of these parents, but sometimes it was also explicitly voiced. Once was during a visit to Sóley and Jökull. We sat in their living room and discussed the events of Easter and compared Icelandic and Norwegian traditions. A baby crying in the hallway suddenly interrupted our conversation. Jökull arose immediately to get Rafn, who had been sleeping in his stroller in the ground floor hallway. We could hear him from where we sat in the first floor apartment because the front door had been left open. Before long, Jökull returned with the lively and curious baby in his arms. Rafn would be awake for the next hours, but he did not, unlike his parents, find any interest in talking to me. He was dressed in a blue overall, and Jökull and Sóley cooperated to undress him. While he was holding the baby around his waist, she gently removed his arms from the overall so that Jökull could lift the boy up and out of it altogether. Then Sóley arose to get a white blanket, which she tossed around her shoulders before she unbuttoned her black blouse and made herself comfortable on the sofa. It was time for breastfeeding. After she had put Rafn to her chest, her attention was again directed towards Jökull and myself before she suddenly stopped and put the baby to her other breast. When she was ready to engage in conversation again, they explained that Rafn had so far been a somewhat demanding baby, at least when compared to some of their friends’ children. At that point he had a tendency to wake up at six in the morning or even earlier, which meant that this had become the hour when their days began. Usually, only one of them woke up with Rafn each morning so that the other could sleep a bit longer. It is important to show consideration and help each other so that both can
be as comfortable as possible, they explained. Jökull said that he preferred when Rafn fell asleep at eight in the evening and woke up at six in the morning to the times when he fell asleep at ten and woke up at eight. In this way, there was more room for “me-time” in the evening. Sóley nodded compassionately and added that this also gave them more time to be together as a couple, which she considered to be very important. Then she laughed, looked at Rafn, and concluded that he was anyway the boss of their lives. While talking, she reached for a bowl with small chocolate eggs dressed in colorful foil on the coffee table. There were also three folded pieces of paper in the bowl. She picked up one of them and read aloud: “The baby is a good example of minority rule” (*Ungabarnið er gott dæmi um minnihlutastjórn*). A very appropriate saying, she added. She laughed and turned to Jökull, currently sitting on the floor with half of his body stretched out towards Rafn, placed between Sóley and himself. He kissed his son on the forehead, and the boy seemed utterly satisfied with being at the center of everybody’s attention.

As this episode shows, both Sóley and Jökull were committed to Rafn’s wellbeing, and both of them may in fact be characterized as subject to their baby’s minority rule. This is part and parcel of what it means to be a good parent among my interlocutors. Yet this common circumstance compels mothers to yield somewhat different efforts than their male partners. In this chapter, therefore, I use Arendt’s understanding of labor, as distinguished from “work” and “action”, in order to talk about (mothers’) bodily practices and engage in a discussion about the things that become with the becoming of good mothers. For Arendt, labor is the doing enforced by one’s biological processes, that which yields the means of consumption through which this process is sustained (1959, pp. 98-99). The products of one’s labor must be consumed, incorporated, more or less immediately lest it spoils in vain (ibid., p. 109). Whereas the body labors, it is our hands that “work”. Work is that which produces things, those objects in the world which are used yet not consumed. Even though everything eventually perishes, the products of work loses its durability rather than being destroyed through usage (ibid., pp. 136-137). And “action”, finally, is that which springs from the condition of being a person among others, the practices through which one reveals oneself as a somebody; a “disclosure of ‘who’”, which “is implicit in everything somebody says and does” (ibid., p. 179). From this perspective, only a mother’s labor directly effects the becoming of the baby at the beginning of its existence. Through her necessary and urgent efforts at sustaining her own life, the baby, who develops in and from her body, becomes with her as she becomes a mother. Yet the pregnant and breastfeeding woman possesses the intellectual capacity of evaluating what to consume and what to not to consume. By
abstaining from the consumption of certain things, she will labor to become a good mother as the baby becomes with her.

**Contact with the Healthcare System**

Of course, a woman in transition to motherhood does more than simply labor. Furthermore, these other practices, while not unrelated to her constant laboring, do more than what has been indicated so far. In the case of expectant mothers, the pertinence of the Icelandic healthcare system establishes itself already in the early phase of pregnancy. From this point on, both the mother and the state resume responsibility for the expected baby (cf. Ravn, 2004, p. 102). Pregnant women will typically establish contact themselves by calling the healthcare station between the sixth and eight week of pregnancy and make an appointment with a midwife who will follow them throughout the antenatal period. Before the twelfth week of pregnancy, the expectant woman will have an appointment with the midwife, where her blood pressure, height and weight is measured. At this point she is also given information about lifestyle considerations, pregnancy care services and maternity benefits. She is offered screening tests and an ultrasound, and the midwife ensures that the pregnant woman understands what these procedures entail before she undergoes any of them. There is an attempt to uncover whether the woman is in need of additional care, and, if she is a smoker, she is offered help to quit. The pregnant woman will meet with “her” midwife ten times if she is a first-time mother, and seven times if she has had children before.

This procedure indicates that frequent contact with the healthcare station is common to all expectant Icelandic mothers, and that contact is particularly intense in the case of women who experience pregnancy for the first time. Furthermore, this is something that all women, irrespective of whether they are becoming mothers again or for the first time, do on their own accord. One may in fact choose to refrain from contact with the healthcare system, but this is very rare, if ever happening at all. “I don’t know of anyone”, said a senior nurse (yfirhjúkrunarfræðingur) at one of Reykjavik’s nine healthcare stations upon my inquiring about this topic. “And”, she added, “I think that people even think it is mandatory because it has existed for such a long time in Iceland. But we are not talking about that. And people like to have this contact and to know if everything is going fine.”
Indeed, to be as certain as possible that things are going well with one’s baby is perhaps the first priority of any expecting woman with the ambition to be a good mother. All mothers among my interlocutors had gone to the described checks at the healthcare station—to not do this was never discussed as an option. To want what is best for one’s child is an interest that typically translates into an unquestioned belief in the advice given by healthcare professionals. “I just followed the advices the midwife gave”, Aðalheiður answered when I asked about her preparations for motherhood. Like her friends, she had quit eating sushi and drinking white wine (that is, raw fish and alcohol altogether), and even though she experienced abstinence to be somewhat difficult, there was not a doubt in her mind that she would do so. Such changes when it comes to labor, which are made upon the discovery of pregnancy, are not radical but significant because they affect the becoming of not just the mother, but also the baby who becomes with her. Icelandic women’s belief in expert advice urges certain practices and effectively discourages others. A mother who demonstrates such desirable practices is someone acting in accordance with established knowledge about what may best ensure a child’s well-being, and she is thereby also perceived as a good mother.

During an interview with a midwife who conducts pregnancy controls at the mentioned healthcare station, I came to learn that home delivery is currently increasing in popularity in Iceland. When Perla was still pregnant, I asked her if she had ever considered a home delivery. She replied:

Expectant mothers receive a pamphlet called “Food and Pregnancy: Information for Women of Childbearing Age” (*Matur og meðganga: Fröölækur fyrir konur á barneignaaldri*). It states that “Pregnancy is a time of change in the life of every woman” and gives advises on everything from what to eat and how to exercise when expecting a baby. It further states that research has shown that alcohol and tobacco directly harm the foetus, and that it is best to quit both during pregnancy. The pamphlet also recommends reduction in caffeine intake in order to reduce the risk of miscarriage. One should not drink more than two cups of coffee or four cups of tea daily.
No, I never thought—well, lately I’ve been thinking and reading about it, but that was never an option for me personally. I think there is a reason why we have such a high rate of... Well, everything seems to go so well. But I think that it has partly to do with the fact that we’ve got a really, really good healthcare system. And the hospital and all the staff there are just doing really, really well, and for me it’s just a matter of security. I obviously hope that everything will go well—and I could in theory have the baby at home—but if that’s not the case I want to be in a hospital environment where, you know, there are doctors and people who can assist. So it’s just a matter of security, both for me and the baby.

These words testify to a general faith in the healthcare system which seems to parallel a positive attitude towards the benevolence of the state, which is in fact quite common among Nordic citizens (cf. Kolshus, 2010, p. 407; Vike, 2004, p. 54). But contact with the healthcare system does not end with birth, and the woman who has recently become a mother continues to craft herself as a good mother through sustained contact with healthcare personnel. First-time parents in Iceland are offered home service (heimaphjónusta) in terms of being visited by a midwife (or a nurse) every day for the first ten days after birth. When this period is over, another midwife comes again when the infant is two and four weeks old. These visits have different functions and meanings. Whereas the first ten visits, which are optional, are mostly about the mother, her well-being and breastfeeding, the two last visits are part of what is called ungbarnavernd, or “infant protection”, which consists of altogether 14 appointments taking place over the course of four years. These are concerned with the baby and its development, and they may be understood as events where the practices through which the mother’s becoming as a mother is morally evaluated, gender differences are propagated, and the baby is progressively becoming a specific kind of person. Home visits, in other words, afford elucidative glimpses of several of the things becoming with the becoming of good mothers.

Heimavitjun við fjögurra vikna

On the day that Ýr is four weeks old, I am visiting Perla and Ágúst in their home. A midwife will soon be coming to check on the little one. Perla is not exactly sure when the midwife will show up, so no particular preparations are made. She breastfeeds Ýr and converses with me; Ágúst is preoccupied with something on his MacBook. Suddenly, our attention is caught by a distant knocking-sound. Someone is at the front door downstairs. Ágúst is in the bathroom, so

10 “Home visit in the fourth week”.
I go down to see who it is. It is the midwife, who looks somewhat surprised or confused as I open the door. I shake her hand and let her in. On her way up she explains that she thought she had come to the wrong house, and Perla, who is still breastfeeding, explains that I am an anthropology student doing participant observation in their home, and asks if it is okay that I stay and observe. “That is not a problem” (Pað er allt í lagi), the midwife says, and I resume an observer’s role by placing myself on a chair behind the dinner table. The midwife puts her backpack on another chair and immediately asks Perla how things are going. Perla explains that the baby sometimes has problems with breastfeeding from the same breast; that she quits it and breathes somewhat strangely. The midwife recommends her to take short breaks while breastfeeding if this happens. Ágúst, who has resumed his position on the sofa, moves closer to Perla and puts his arm around her. She is the one who does the talking, however. She goes on to ask about the baby’s skin, before the midwife relates to her a question about sleeping. While she is talking the midwife heads for the bathroom where she thoroughly washes her hands. Perla puts Ýr on the couch; Ágúst bends over and kisses his daughter’s front head. The midwife returns from the bathroom and opens her backpack. From it emerges equipment to be used for measuring and weighing. I remove a teapot and used teacups from the dinner table and take a seat on the couch. Perla asks if the midwife would like some tea. The midwife replies that she would love a cup when she is done. When the table is tidy, Perla gets a small mattress from the bathroom, puts it on the table, and lays Ýr on it. The midwife compliments the baby’s length and weight and asks if she has smiled yet (Er hún búin að brosa?). Perla answers that she is not completely sure, and the midwife once again looks at Ýr. “This is smiling” (Petta er bros), she says. Perla and Ágúst’s faces light up; they have both learned something new about how to interpret the body language of their child. The midwife measures the baby’s length with a tape measure. She comments on the baby’s skin, carefully presses her tummy, and explains that it is good to massage it. She turns to wrap Ýr in a white piece of cloth so that it looks like the image of the baby who is brought by the stork, and hangs her on a hand held weight. “She has been gaining weight very well” (Hún er búin að þyngist mjög vel), the midwife confirms. Ýr is gently lowered back on to the mattress on the table and turned around so that she is lying on her stomach. Now the midwife surveys the skin of the baby’s face and back, and gives advice on how to remove dead skin. Perla is told to apply some oil with a piece of fabric and later remove dead skin by gently scraping it off. While the midwife is finishing her examination, both Perla and Ágúst lower themselves towards their daughter and speak softly to her: “Hi! Are you good? You are good!” (Hæ! Ertu dugleg? Pú ert dugleg!) “She is just perfect!” (Hún er bara perfect!) the midwife exclaims
when she has finished the examination. She turns to Perla and asks about her breasts. They are tender, Perla says, and she is recommended to lay a piece of wool (ullstýkki) on them. While the conversation lasts, the midwife puts away her equipment and records the measurements on a form. As her pen is lifted from the paper a final time, she tells Perla that they are to come to the healthcare station for another check in two weeks. Perla accepts this and goes on to talk more about sleep and how to keep the baby sufficiently warm. The midwife listens carefully, but comes over to the coffee table and helps herself to a cup of tea. Perla seats herself in a red armchair next to the dinner table with Ýr in her arms. Ágúst takes a chair and sits down next to them. He gives Ýr a pacifier. The midwife, who has taken a third chair, assures them that it is good for the baby to use the pacifier. Perla asks the midwife about how it is going with the yoga, and I understand that the midwife also gives yoga classes to pregnant women—an activity which is quite popular among pregnant women in Iceland. The midwife puts her feet up on another chair. Ágúst turns towards the baby and looks her in the eyes. A sound emerges from the little one. Perla explains to the midwife that Ýr sometimes makes noises that they find hard to interpret. It is more of a statement than an utterance requiring an answer. The midwife does not reply. Everybody is quiet for a minute before the midwife breaks the silence: “A small human being. With its character and personality. That will soon become evident” (Lítil menneskja. Með sin karakter og persónuleiki. Það kemur fljótlega í ljós). Her tone indicates that this was a concluding remark, one implying that she is about to leave. A few minutes later, she is walked to the front door.

* The above vignette demonstrates how home visiting midwives, as representatives of the Icelandic healthcare system, are engaged with in practice. It is evident that Icelandic women receive special attention from the state as mothers (cf. Gurdin, 1996), even though the described event was one in which the baby was at the center of attention. This, however, suggests that the father could have been consulted about general matters concerning the baby to a larger extent than Ágúst was. The midwife only interacted with Perla and Ýr, and her visit may therefore be understood as a practice through which mothers become somewhat different from fathers. The event may in other words be seen as an activity through which the family becomes a family in terms of a “miraculous triangle”, to use the Icelandic musician Björk’s words, in which every part has a very specific identity in relation to another part. The baby, moreover, is everything for Perla and Ágúst, but in itself it is not that much. It has to
become a small human being with its “character and personality”, and this happens partly through the midwife’s presence and doings. Through an act of interpretation, for example, Ýr becomes a smiling baby. Likewise, it is sometimes difficult to interpret the sounds that she makes, as Perla says, but through continuous acts of interpretation of such signs, the baby will become a human being with all the capacities that this entails. The midwife’s measurements, moreover, enable the enactment of the baby as a healthy baby, which is a baby who is “gaining weight very well”, among other things. The same acts reveal that Perla’s becoming as a mother has been, and continues to be, the becoming of a good mother. Earlier, Perla had told me that she had difficulties with breastfeeding during the first days after birth. At that point, she decided for herself that she would give up after two weeks if continued hurting as much as it did in the beginning. Now, however, it turns out that Perla’s “toil and trouble”, the labor of her breastfeeding, has paid off because the baby becoming with her has so far become a healthy baby. Furthermore, during the midwife’s visit, Perla’s eagerness is expressed through her discussions with the midwife. Her inquiries and curiosities may also be analyzed as part of her practice of good motherhood as they emanate from her desire to ensure her daughter’s well-being. The particular manifestation of this desire, however, also indicates that Perla possesses specific kinds of knowledge about what sort of practices may ensure such goodness and thus constitute her as a morally good mother. Somehow, Perla simply knows that it is good to seek advice from the midwife and that it is important to get the breastfeeding right.

Common (Scientific) Knowledge

Foucault’s concept of governmentality (1991b) speaks of the art of governing populations. This art of governing uses the family, among other things, in order to achieve goals of improvement through various techniques of power other than the law itself. Disciplinary power, Foucault explains, is crucial in this respect as it represent modes of control through which a population is managed in “its depths and details” (ibid., p. 102). This is a kind of power that operates through observation, normalizing judgment and examination (Foucault, 1991a, p. 170). Through fear of reactions if they are caught misbehaving, people come to manage themselves in specific ways. A case in point is a mother, so important to the family, who must act in a certain way in relation to her child if the state’s goal of ensuring its population’s longevity, for example, is to be achieved. In this respect, her attempts at being a
good mother will come to entail certain kinds of knowledge that affect practices through which her good motherhood is established. The idea that knowledge and power imply each other is therefore useful because it permits the question about what kind of knowledge underlies the practices that constitute Perla’s good motherhood. To become a good mother means to conduct oneself in a very specific way, and this became evident one day that Perla, bringing Ýr, and I went to Loft Hostel to have a coffee and read.

We have recently left Kírsúberjatréði, a downtown design store, where Perla has bought a christening gift for the baby of one of her girlfriends. It is a beautiful spring day, and Perla explains that she has recently grown very fond of Loft because of its location on the top floor of a building located in the western end of Reykjavík’s main shopping street. It is her new favorite place, she says, as she can easily bring the baby with her (there is a lift up to the café and reception area), and because it is simply wonderful to spend mornings in the sun on their outside porch.

When we reach Loft, there are only two other guests seated outside, a man and a woman. We grab a table by the wall in the sun, two tables away from them, and Perla places Ýr, who is asleep in the stroller, in the shadow beneath another wall. We go inside and order something to drink. I order a black coffee and she orders an Egil’s Maltextrakt, which is a non-alcoholic ale with malt and licorice that is considered to be good for the production of breast milk. Perla has previously told me that she has cut down on caffeine ever since she

As is common in Iceland, Perla leaves Ýr sleeping in the stroller outside the downtown store before she goes inside. This is one of many practices understood to be good for the baby.
became pregnant and will continue with this while she is breastfeeding, so I do not inquire why she does not order a coffee even though we are out “having a coffee”. When served, we seat ourselves outside. Perla extracts a book from her black leather purse. She shows it to me, asks if I know it, and says that she will analyze and use it in her PhD dissertation. She often comes to cafés to pursue her academic and professional duties, she explains, and tells me that the same goes for Ágúst, who is currently writing at another café somewhere downtown. He has been doing this for years. Recently, they have arranged it so that he goes alone to some café in the mornings, and she does the same in the afternoons. This way, Perla elaborates, they can both get things done without having to attend to the baby, but it is of course possible to combine both projects, as she is currently attempting to do. Now, however, she gets little reading done, and I know it is partly because I am accompanying her. Instead of studying, we chat about this and that; about breastfeeding, about immigration policies; about whatever.

While talking, we suddenly detect the scent of cigarette smoke. It comes from the other two guests. I have seen them smoking continuously ever since we came, but not until now, when a sudden breeze carries the smoke in our direction, has it affected us in any particular way. Neither does it now, I think to myself, but Perla looks their way, presumably to confirm where the smoke comes from. She does not say anything. Instead she arises to check on Ýr, who is still fast asleep. Some minutes later, the smoking couple leave, and Perla comments on their smoking. Babies and cigarette smoke do not go well together, she states. The assertion is not intended as a controversi al statement, so I dismiss it as trivial, but nevertheless jot it down. Indeed, that smoking is harmful is common knowledge to both of us. Perla continues by saying that she used to smoke when she was younger, but quit gradually when she met Ágúst. He hates smoking. She admits that she fell prey to peer-pressure as an adolescent, and with her friends she would go to Príkið, a nearby bar, to drink coffee and smoke after school. Her narrative suddenly jumps back a decade in time, and she tells me about a trip to Italy in 2005, where she was surprised to find that Italy was more progressive than Iceland because they had already banned smoking in public areas. Iceland followed in 2007.

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Today it is prohibited to smoke inside bars and cafés, but in privately owned outdoor areas, such as where Perla and I were seated, it is still allowed. Perla therefore knew that she had no right to ask the smokers to go somewhere else, even though their smoking noticeably troubled
her due to her concern for Ýr. As part of her efforts to confirm that she is and continues to become a good mother, it is natural for Perla to order a Maltextrakt and comment upon the other guests’ smoking. The same goes for me who brushed her comment aside as trivial. We have both internalized a very specific kind of knowledge: a scientific knowledge, which has become common knowledge, and our selves are compellingly constructed in accordance with it. The advice about reducing the intake of caffeine during pregnancy and breastfeeding resonates with Perla because they form part of a discourse she has already internalized. Her avowed promise to ensure her baby’s well-being is therefore kept virtue by her abstinence. Especially when she asserts that babies and cigarette smoke do not go well together, it becomes evident that she is speaking with and from within a scientific discourse, however arbitrary it is in itself and how controlled it is in society (Foucault, 1999, p. 9). The point, however, is not so much how she reacted as the fact that she reacted. As indicated, it is the norm, rather than the law, which keeps Perla from smoking, but the law still kept her from sanctioning the woman who smoked near her baby because smoking outdoors is not illegal. Her reaction is therefore interesting in itself because it exposes a specific scientific discourse as integral to the practices through which Perla becomes a good mother. Icelandic mothers who are morally good do neither smoke nor consume excessive amounts of caffeine.

Perla will labor no matter what because her life depends on it, but the internalization of common scientific knowledge about how motherhood should be practiced will affect her laboring. Thus, while Ýr is considered too young to survive on anything that does not come directly from Perla’s body, Perla’s labor will automatically also affect the growth and sustenance of her baby. This somewhat blurs Arendt’s stringent distinction between the three types of fundamental human activities because Ýr, who is partly a part of the products of Perla’s laboring, is more akin to the products of work in terms of being something tangible and durable in the world. It also elucidates how labor in itself is not simply a type of activity that is carried out solely due to necessity. Or, if it is, it speaks of necessities that are immanent to more than the sustenance of life processes in themselves. It appears not true that “only labor,” as Arendt claims, is “outside the range of wilful decisions or humanly meaningful purposes” (1959, pp. 105-106). For actual human beings embedded in a greater moral economy, it matters how one labors, not just that one labors. It matters for Perla, it matters for Ýr, and it matters for the Icelandic state.
Motherhood as Open-Ended

Perla’s maternal body cannot simply be regarded as a body that is willingly instructed by hegemonic discourses of a scientific kind. Several kinds of power-knowledge are always operative in the constitution of any semantic category, and it is not the case that a specific knowledge always yields the same kinds of practices in different people. Explicitly building on Derrida (1976, 1978), Kondo argues that meaning can never be fixed because the construction of meaning always takes place in within a range of different discourses:

“The ‘identity’ of the subject is multiple, produced within discourse, and potentially contradictory, and though there can be ‘a temporary retrospective fixing’ of meaning and identity, no ready form of coherence can be posited in advance” (1990, p. 36).

The first time I met with Perla and Ágúst, I asked them to elaborate on the ways they had prepared for parenthood. They explained that they had not contented themselves with the information they have received from healthcare authorities, but also, as is fairly common for middle-class parents transitioning to parenthood (Brembeck, 1998, p. 196; Ravn, 2004, p. 24), investigated several books on pregnancy, childcare and children’s development. They showed me two books and mentioned a third one about “everything from food to sleep to health” that neither of them had read, and which Ágúst characterized as “parenthood for dummies”. Perla was eager to explain that the first book, whose title may be translated into The Years that No One Remembers, “is sort of psychoanalytical” and “about the importance of bonding the first two or three years” of the baby’s life, whereas she had explored the second book, Dreamland, in order to learn more about the baby’s sleep habits. To be prepared for parenthood seemed very important to both of them, and at that point there was little except from her change of diet once she became pregnant that seemed to differentiate their parental roles. But suddenly Perla arose from the dinner table around which we were sitting and fetched a third book from the coffee table behind us. “And then I just—I’ve read this as well”, she said, and presented me with a book on hypnobirthing.11 She laughed and explained:

So this is just the idea of not being scared of giving birth. Because this is sort of—obviously, there are three hormones that are at work during birth: it’s oxytocin, which opens up the birth canal, and endorphin, which is sort of pain-relieving, and then adrenaline, which obviously comes when you’re scared. And it’s just the idea not

11 The books I refer to in this paragraph: Árin sem enginn man (Kjartansdóttir, 2009), Draumaland. Svefn og svefnvenjur barna frá fæðinga til tveggja ára aldurs (Skúladóttir, 2006), and HypnoBirthing: The Mongan Method. A Natural Approach to a Safe, Easier, More Comfortable Birthing (Mongan, 2005).
having the adrenaline taking over, because that can slow things down. So, yes, it’s very much similar to what you do in yoga. It’s just breathing and relaxing and that kind of stuff.

“It’s a really long book for that”, Ágúst commented before Perla continued by explaining that she had borrowed the book from a friend. She also gave her motivations for doing so:

I very much believe in science and everything that science has done for us, but I still try to keep an open mind. So this is more me trying to be open-minded for alternative thinking. I’m more on that side; trying to stay informed about other possibilities, rather than believing in this and being scared of hospitals and all that kind of stuff.

I ask whether they both have explored this, and it becomes evident that it is not something Ágúst has been intrigued by:

Ágúst: Well, I’m not the one giving birth so…

Perla: Actually, they talk about the importance of the other person, but/

Ágúst: Well, I haven’t finished any of these three, so I’m not going to start while I’m in the middle of all of this.

Perla: Yes, well, this is very much me trying to keep an open mind. It’s not like I’m going to try to give a—I don’t know how to phrase it—a ‘hypnobirth’.

Ágúst: Why not?

Perla: Well… Well, we’ll see. I’ll do my best to go through this as painless as possible. There is this, apparently, which was put in for the other person to read [she points to some pages in the book]. So, my friend was going to do this hypnobirthing class, a whole class. And then her baby arrived two weeks earlier… So she got this book, didn’t read it, and only went to one class.

Despite having explored the book on hypnosis, at this point Perla is not sure whether she will conduct a so-called hypnobirth, and the book remains a manifestation of her efforts “to keep an open mind”. I continued by asking whether there was anything they felt had been specifically valuable with reading these books:

Ágúst: I think it’s all quite valuable. We know nothing, so obviously it can all be of value.

Perla: Yes. I think that there wasn’t really anything that I had no idea about. These two are actually quite contrasting, they build on different schools of thought, and I
thought it was quite interesting to see different approaches. This is more if you have problems with the baby, for example if it doesn’t sleep. You know, she won’t go to sleep on her own, or she keeps waking up, or stuff like that. Then this is something you could go to and try the methods it suggests. This one, however, is a really good reminder of, you know, how to attend to your kid. You know, just be with it. It’s just really important. I think it’s very basic. I don’t know, I was actually quite… I liked both of them. But for me, there was not one thing that was better than something else.

By expanding the picture of what kind of practices through which a good mother emerges, one is also confronted by actions that disturb the notion that good mothers are simply acting in accordance with hegemonic discourses that they cannot or do not reflect upon. “To keep an open mind”, like Perla attempts to do, is not at par with the naturalized scientific knowledge that is also formative of her identity as a mother. Perla’s concern for her expected baby is manifested in her exploration of alternative discourses. Her enactment of good motherhood, therefore, can be better understood as “heteroglossic discursive practice” (Dwyer, 2000, p. 50), which refers to the way several kinds of discourses are in constant conversation—or argument—with each other. The existence of such heteroglossia is revealed by the fact that certain beliefs and practices can and are judged to be either true or false, depending on whose perspective one takes (Foucault, 1999, p. 21). This means, moreover, that actions cannot lead to an “outside” of the power-knowledge in which one is implicated and constituted. One can, as Perla partly does, position oneself outside hegemonic common knowledge, but this “outside” is always and inevitably “inside” other discourses (Butler, 2011, p. xvii). Perla’s motherhood, constituted through her maternal practices, cannot simply be reduced to what is known about hegemonic scientific discourses.

What is more, her consultation with different books that “build on different schools of thought” clarifies how Perla’s becoming as a good mother is a process of both intellectual and bodily fine-tuning to a multitude of discourses. Perla’s labor as it unfolded during pregnancy was intrinsically connected to her capacity to think, evaluate and question. This is an observation that challenges the traditional distinction between mind and body, in which it is possible to think without a body, or to be a body without the capacity to think. When the meaning of motherhood is deconstructed and analyzed in terms of the multitude of practices through which a mother comes into being, it is exposed as open-ended in terms of not being fixed. There is also an opening up of an analytical space, so to speak, which allows for the observation that a laboring body must involve a contemplative mind and vice versa. Since Perla’s conduct is not simply informed but also made possible by the many discourses in which she is implicated, it is possible to argue that Perla’s labor, however “natural” it may
seem, never exists outside of culture. Consequently, her practices do not only dispute the conventional distinction between mind and body, but that between nature and culture as well.

**Gendered “Is”, with Characters and Personalities**

The ways and views of Perla and Ágúst do not only reveal that the identity of a good mother is always somewhat undetermined. What also emerges from the presented ethnography is that Perla, as the parent who will give birth and breastfeed, has different interests from Ágúst when it comes to preparations for parenthood. Indeed, why would Ágúst read a book about hypnobirth? “I’m not the one giving birth”, he says, and he is absolutely right. He therefore has little pragmatic interest in knowing how to breathe for the sake of reducing stress while delivering. He has not finished reading any of the books, not even the parts intended for the partner of the birth mother. Moreover, that he thinks it is all “quite valuable”, whereas she regards it all as “very basic”, indicates a difference between them that goes deeper than their respective consultations with these different books. How to become as a good mother is something she has prepared for (or been prepared for, albeit not necessarily explicitly) for a long time. If labor is as much an intellectual activity as much as it is embodied, the difference between Perla and Ágúst’s different laboring speaks of their current becomings as a mother and a father as a further becoming of gender differences (see Ravn, 2004, pp. 28-29 for a similar interpretation). Perla and Ágúst may be similar in several ways, but their genders, which partly emerge through their positioning in relation to Ýr, will necessarily speak of significant differences when it comes to what that person does within the context of the family. And this, it seems, is particularly true at the onset of a baby’s life.

Yet to know that Perla is a woman and Ágúst is a man, and that they both live in Iceland, is not enough to know them as mothers or fathers. The practices through which they constitute their parental identities are neither reducible to what may be generally known about Icelandic men and women, nor to what may be discerned by identifying hegemonic and alternative discourses. As remarked by the midwife who conducted the control of Ýr, the baby was born with a unique character and personality. The remark is significant because of what it says about Icelanders’ “cultural ideas about the nature of the person and his or her relation with others” (Lutz, 1988, p. 33). One is a man or a woman, a father or a mother, but these identities are also imagined and lived as transcended by a character and personality that is unique to the given individual. This idea is part of the liberal humanist system of thought that
may be called Euro-American individualism, in which social personhood corresponds exactly to the individual, understood as a single member of the human species (Ravn, 2004, p. 13). In this respect, notions of each person’s independence and freedom are positively valued (Gullestad, 1992, p. 198). Each Icelandic person, moreover, comprises of an infinite number of complex identities (the identity of a mother, a girlfriend, a daughter, etc.), which may each be understood as a contested field of power. Yet it is not the case that complexity in terms of fragmentation lends itself to every aspect of that person. “It is”, as Kondo notes, “important to realize that conflicts, ambiguities, and multiplicities in interpretation, are not simply associated with different positionings in society—though of course this is a critically important factor—but exist within a ‘single’ self” (ibid., p. 45, emphasis in the original). An Icelander is always an “I”, and this subjectivity is conceived of as rather static depending on the context. This “I”, moreover, may be deconstructed upon analysis, but deconstruction does not alter the fact that every person is conceived of as possessing a uniqueness that transcends each of the infinite aspects of one’s identity. Perla is always one person, both physically and in terms of character and personality, and all of her many identities are always contained within this singularity. She is thus like the cyborg as phrased by Strathern: “neither singular nor plural, neither one nor many” (1991, p. 54). With the labor implied by her becoming as a mother, Perla becomes someone who is significantly different from Ágúst, and this difference is a difference she shares with other women transitioning into parenthood. But Perla’s laboring, as well as other practices through which she crafts herself as a good mother, also reveals how she becomes someone else than Ágúst in terms of something other than gender identity. And this someone, finally, is also always somewhat different from other mothers.
5 On Fathers

The previous chapters largely confirm Andrea Doucet’s observation that the “early phase of parenting is one where the biological and social differences between women and men are magnified” (2009, p. 92). Yet to what extent may a scrutiny of this early phase also reveal important similarities between contemporary men and women? This chapter focuses on men as fathers. Both men and women think of themselves as subject to the minority rule of their babies, and this generates several questions about the masculinity of these men as fathers. To what extent is their masculinity caught up with a compulsion to protect and provide? Do men bond with babies on the same terms as women? And, if that is the case, is this desirable? Can their constructions of masculinity be regarded simply as counter to constructions of femininity? The centerpiece of this chapter is a longer vignette from a baby swimming (ungbarnasund) class that I attended with Sóley and Jökull. Such events are revealing not only of how fathers relate to their babies, but they may also be analyzed as reflective of certain larger societal arrangements that my interlocutors were inevitably part of. I begin, however, with an exploration of how masculinity may be conceptualized and studied.

Theorizing and Researching Masculinity

Masculinity is inherently difficult to define. It is neither something one simply possesses nor a coherent composition of ideas. Rather, it “draws and impinges on a number of different elements, domains, identities, behaviors and even objects” (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994, p. 12). There are always “several different constructions of acceptable masculinities within the same ethnographic community” (Loizos, 1994, p. 75). The notion of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) is therefore useful because it allows for the discerning of standards against which other expressions of masculinity may be defined. Thus, it draws upon the insight that there exist many masculinities that may be hierarchically positioned in relation to each other.

As pointed out by Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994, p. 3), moreover, the problem of power enters into every relationship, but notions of patriarchy and male dominance are not appropriate or useful analytical tools. That is, one cannot simply assume that men dominate women or other men, but must arrive at such conclusions through empirical investigation. What Bear, Ho, Tsing and Yanagisako (2015) write about capitalism is also applicable to the notion of patriarchy: it is not an already determining structure or logic, but its concrete
manifestations must be sought through explorations of how its social relations are created at the interactional level. I therefore take inspiration from Raewyn Connell’s theorizations rather than directly apply them. I am skeptical of her definition of hegemonic masculinity as:

“the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken for granted) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 2005, p. 77).

Even though my analysis is inspired by Connell’s theorizations, I approach the subject matter in a way that begins at the interactional level in order to arrive at an understanding of my interlocutors’ masculinities. This strategy emerges from a conviction that any understanding of what is masculine and feminine must be subject to empirical investigation. Being masculine can mean very different things at different times and in different places. Notions of male, men and masculinity are always ethnographic concerns, not essentials with referents that remain stable through time and space (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994, p. 10). I agree with Connell, however, that masculinity and femininity are opposed in principle (2005, p. 68), but no person may be identified as a certain type of masculine or feminine and reduced to such categorizations. As discussed in the previous chapter, people’s identities are always less stable and more permeable than conventional Western notions of personhood suggests. Masculinity thus implies a multiplicity whose different aspects may be competing and contradictory at certain times or not at all at other times. Usage of words like “masculinity” and “men” typically imply the opposite of “femininity” and “women”. While this may be the case on a conceptual level, realities are seldom that straightforward. Sometimes, a distinction is neither relevant nor possible.

As pointed out by Jeff Hearn (2004), the concept of hegemonic masculinity is theoretically problematic because of inconsistent applications and confusion over what it actually stands for. He suggests that a better strategy would be to focus on the hegemony of men, which would be to look less at “forms of masculinity” and more at “the agenda for different ways of being men” (ibid., p. 60). In what follows, I shall pursue a strategy in line with an ethnographic tradition where the practices I witnessed are allowed to say something general about the masculinity that my male interlocutors embody. I broadly refer to masculinity as notions of being a man, and I use the concept of hegemonic masculinity to denote normative and comparatively desirable notions of this kind. My exploration is limited in the sense that I mostly had access to my male interlocutors in contexts where their identities as fathers and heterosexual partners took precedence over other aspects of their
identities. What I will explore in this chapter is thus similar, but also somewhat different, to the object of interest in the previous chapter—the good mother.

**From the “Aliens’” Point of View**

During my time in Reykjavik, the Icelandic fathers generally spent less time at home with their babies than the mothers did. I did not come across any birth mother except from Perla who took less than six months of leave, but in the case of fathers the picture was much more complicated. Statistical research reveals that fathers tend to take their earmarked three months of leave, which they sometimes take with their female partners or after the women have completed their periods of leave (Arnalds et al., 2013). Interview studies further add that fathers tend to think that three months of leave is enough, and this is related to what the parents perceive to be the baby’s need for care during the first year (Farstad, 2012, 2014). My experiences from Reykjavik largely support these findings. The time I spent in the families’ homes was either spent with a mother alone or with the mother and the father together.

Coming from a place quite similar to Iceland, I sometimes found it hard to distinguish between the things that were interesting or remarkable and those that simply provided a background from which elements of interest should protrude. In order to withstand home blindness (Frøystad, 2003), it proved rewarding to take various “alien” perspectives seriously whenever I happened to come across them.

One of these perspectives came from a woman called Zamira, who lived with her husband Javier. When Zamira compared Iceland to her native Cuba, she firmly stated that “everything is different here” and related this to the fact that men can even join their partners in the delivery room in Iceland. She thought that “here, women and men are the same”, and even though her husband did not take more than two weeks of parental leave, she was of the opinion that he was “doing like the Icelandic men, except from being with the baby for three months. He would like to do this, but it was difficult in his situation”. Javier had recently started a new job and a longer leave would result in little money and unpopularity with his boss. What is interesting, however, is Zamira’s claim that he is doing like Icelandic men. This is in line with what Árdís Ingvarsdóttir (2014) found in her study of foreign men who fathers children with Icelandic mothers: the fatherhood of foreign men can be subject to great influence from the immediate social context in which it unfolds. Javier, it seems, was influenced by the Icelandic way of parenting. Ultimately, this says something about his Cuban
background and, significantly, something about how Icelandic men are perceived as fathers and family members. It is perhaps not the case that men and women are “the same”, but this statement does have relevance to the way Icelandic fathers must be understood.

“To protect and provide, that’s his main role”

Other foreigners echoed Zamira’s astonishment over Icelandic men’s roles in relation to the household and the family. One of the parents I got to know through recurrent visitations to the Hjalli kindergarten was Haukur, aged 34 and father of three. Like many other fathers, he was always the one to pick up his sons before the kindergarten closed. And, like most people who are not on parental leave, Haukur was a busy man. Nonetheless, he prioritized a lengthy interview one morning in his lawyer’s office in downtown Reykjavik. Haukur demonstrated a lot of engagement in his children’s lives, and especially our conclusive talk about why he and his wife had hired an au pair to help them with everyday tasks was revealing:

Haukur: We try to be equal. Try to. It’s supposed to be like that, we try to have, you know… We both work as hard as we can, doing what is the best for the family, and in my opinion it doesn’t matter if you are working at home or if you are working in an office as long as you are working so that the family can live. It doesn’t matter if you are bringing up the children, making food, cleaning the house, or getting money paid from some client. It’s all for—if one was taken away the family couldn’t work. So these are all tasks carried out for the family and they have to be divided. And these were too many so we got an au pair to help us. She is from Africa and she thinks this is all like—the first day she came home with us, and I was taking the boys home and my wife was staying in Reykjavik, she was like: ‘Are you taking the boys home by yourself? Like yes? Like, that works and that’s okay?’ Yes. Because in her society they learnt in school that the man is supposed to do this, but he is not supposed to do this. And that the woman is supposed to do this, but she is not supposed to do this.

Kristian: Is there anything else that she has been surprised or very shocked about that you do, for instance, or that your wife does?

Haukur: Yes, when I do stuff in the kitchen. I make food and I bring the plate from the table to the dishwasher. She is not used to this. Men do not—and I’ve asked her a lot about it—work in the kitchen, they are not doing anything in the kitchen in Kenya. And they don’t have to get anything at home, they say ‘please give me this’ and the wife will get it for them. They just get what they want. That is the rule, she says. And they don’t have to clean anything. They don’t have to play with children. They just work to have an income. I asked her: ‘Okay, and when he finishes his work, after dinner, then what is he supposed to do?’ ‘Relax’, she said. ‘And when does the woman relax?’ ‘She doesn’t. So that’s what everybody thinks. That’s what we learn in school.’ […] To protect and provide, that’s his main role.
Kristian: Okay. That’s obviously very different. And what do you do after work, when you come home and ‘not provide’ anymore?

Haukur: Play with the boys, change diapers. Well, now I try to spend as much time as I can with the youngest one so that she will know me. I want to be more at home, but I can’t. So I try to hold her as much as I can and spend time with her and play with her and, well, if the au pair has a day off or when we didn’t have an au pair, I had to clean the house, put stuff where they belong, give the boys a bath and… It’s just non-stop work until the boys go to sleep. If they are good and calm, then we might be able to sit down and usually I don’t go onto the internet while they are awake. But if they are calm, then I can sit down with them and watch TV with them, or play with them or play chess with them. Play lúdó. Try to spend time with them until they go to sleep. Because, I think, children need to spend more time with their parents. But it’s difficult, you know, when the only “me-time” is between ten and midnight.

I never verified Haukur’s au pair’s generalizations about Kenyan men. Her statements remain a narrative reproduced by an Icelandic man, but that is also partly what makes them interesting. Added to what Zamira had to say about the ways and views of Icelanders, these words serve at least two purposes. First, they allow both Icelanders and others to construct Icelandic men as more or less similar to their female partners through comparison with other men elsewhere in the world. Second, by seeking the perspectives of foreigners, one comes to see how the equality-oriented Icelandic identity is dependent upon the positive efforts of men as much as women’s efforts. When seen in relation to the foreigners’ perspectives, moreover, it seems fair to suggest that the notion of equality, as well as the actual realization of relations worthy of bearing that label, contains a critical element of sameness, but nevertheless cannot be reduced to it. This is why Haukur also says that “it doesn’t matter if you are working at home or if you are working in an office”. Being on maternity leave, Haukur’s wife is at home and engaged in labor that Haukur cannot perform. It is rather through his efforts at the office that he contributes, as well as in the evenings, when his job is finished for the day. As a father, he is thus similar to what he knows about Kenyan men who simply “protect and provide”, but he is also very different as a man and a father because his masculinity is partly constructed through caring for and spending time with his children. Although fathers’ labor can hardly be said to be generative of the same things as mothers’ labor, fathers are also very much present in their babies’ lives. This is not to say that gendered patterns do not exist when it comes to who does what with babies and children, but rather that my male interlocutors were also very much keen to contribute in their homes and to be present for their children. A reason was that they too claimed to experience strong emotional bonds with their babies.
Bonding with Babies

Parenthood may be seen as an important part of what it means to lead an adult life (cf. Howell, 2001b). As Sigurjón once said, parenthood is more often than not seen as a natural next step in life; a step ideally taken after one has completed a higher education and established oneself with secure employment. Children mean access to various social arenas on which much adult life typically unfolds (cf. Melhuus, 2012, p. 30).

Melhuus (2001) argues that there has been a paradigm shift when it comes to the way children are related to, even from the moment of conception. The embryo, she says, has been given ontological status as an emergent person and there is now a focus on life’s inalienable character (ibid., p. 63). Rayna Rapp (2000, pp. 124-126) makes a similar argument when she observes that sonogram technology confers personhood upon the fetus, partly because gender is determined at the twentieth week sonogram appointment. The midwife I interviewed estimated that approximately 80 percent of those who come to see her choose to know the gender of their baby at the twentieth week into the pregnancy.

The words of Lilja and Sigurjón are interesting in relation to this. Before she had been pregnant for twenty weeks, the couple made a trip to the US and wanted to buy some clothes for their expected baby. Since they did not know the gender of the child, however, this was not a straightforward affair:

Sigurjón: Well, we bought some sort of gender-neutral colors, or we tried to at least. Turned out to be more difficult than you thought it would be. If you wanted to avoid really strong colors like pink or, you know, this deep blue or something, it wasn’t much to go around. There was some purely white stuff, but not a lot. And there wasn’t great variety in terms of totally neutral colors. I guess we could have bought some pink or blue, or something like that.

Lilja: But it’s not really fitting to dress a boy baby in really pink clothes.

Sigurjón: I guess that’s why we didn’t do it. So that was an incentive to know the gender. You also want to know, you know, to get this feeling that you are connected to the/ 

Lilja: Yes! Yes. My mum told me that she didn’t know the gender of any of the babies. Well, she did know for the last child. She knew it was a girl. And she said that she kind of connected more with the baby when it was still in her belly. She felt this connection before the child was there because she knew the gender.
“Yes, definitely”, Lilja replied when I asked whether she felt something similar to what her mother felt, and this rang true for several interlocutors, including Sigurjón. When the gender is disclosed, there seems to be a shift of focus from the parents’ relationship to the union between the parents and the baby (Melhuus, 2001, p. 63). One may suspect that this is the reason why the baby can remain the constant center of attention for both parents when it finally arrives. Once during a visit to Aðalheiður, for example, she remarked how she was never the kind of woman who always dreamt of becoming a mother, but when Síf was born she experienced something that she compared to falling in love. Suddenly she cared less if she gave less priority to friends and social gatherings, she said, and made a general statement about becoming a mother: “You want to spend time with your baby and don’t think of it as a sacrifice”. Aðalheiður and other mothers did not consider spending time with their babies at the cost of doing other things to be a sacrifice, because they had come in possession of something considered even more powerful than other social relations. It is relevant to ask if the same applied to their partners.

As mentioned, mothers and fathers tend to take different lengths of leave, but most fathers spend some time at home immediately after birth. All of my female interlocutors’ partners did this to various extents. Some did for a week, others for an entire month and a few even longer. Many do this in order to be a support for the exhausted mother and to be with the baby. Initially, I was curious about the extent to which men establish and experience a bond with their babies, and, if that was the case, how they did this. Whereas the bodily labor performed by mothers was often referred to as that which establishes and reinforces the bond between birth mothers and their babies, not much was said about fathers. When I finally inquired, Jökull explained that bonding with Rafn was for him a matter of intimacy. Perla agreed to this and added that breastfeeding is therefore not something she sees as the cause of such bonds, but one of several significant ways through which women establish bonds with their babies. The birth mother has a “head start” by virtue of being pregnant, giving birth, and because of breastfeeding. Men and mothers who do not breastfeed resort to other techniques. When I asked Lilja about this, she showed me pictures of Sigurjón holding Alda to his naked chest and told me that he sometimes did this during the first weeks of Alda’s life in order to establish and reinforce an emotional bond with the baby girl. When I subsequently inquired whether my other male interlocutors did something similar, their answers were negative. Yet they all claimed to have emotional ties to their babies that are as strong as the bonds experienced by their breastfeeding partners. They claimed that the parent-child bond arises and strengthens naturally through interaction and intimacy with the baby, and this was also
why they wanted to take parental leave in the first place. Interestingly, Freyr reported on feelings of frustration about the fact that he as a father could not spend as much time with his daughter as Aðalheiður, because Síf could only be breastfed by her mother.

**Closing up on Masculinity in Iceland**

Recent research suggests that at the turn of the century the “Commerce-Viking” emerged as a new hegemonic masculinity in Iceland (see for example Einarsdóttir, 2010; Þorvaldsdóttir, 2010). My research, however, did not find men who glorified the conquest of finance worlds. Like Helga Björmsdóttir (2011) shows, the idea of this man is something that many Icelandic men attempt to distance themselves from. This is in line with what another gender researcher claims: “The era of masculinities or ‘the age of testosterone’ came to a drastic end in October 2008 with the bankruptcy of three of Iceland’s major banks and a subsequent economic collapse” (Þorvaldsdóttir, 2010, p. 426). The reason for this is that the image of Commerce-Viking is closely associated with the 2008 financial crisis, and it is largely this type of man who is blamed for the way things turned out. Rather, Björnsdóttir’s interlocutors claimed that being a “real man” was related to the ability to build one’s own house and provide for one’s family. This indicates that the abilities to protect and provide are also essential features of current hegemonic masculinity among Icelanders. Yet Haukur was not wrong when he attempted to distance himself from his idea of Kenyan men who simply protect and provide. That characterization is too insensitive to the way Icelandic men perform and experience fatherhood, partly expressed through a need to be with their children through play.

As noted by Doucet (2006, p. 41), who studies Canadian fathers that are primary caregivers, gendered bodies do not always matter in parents’ interactions with children. There are in fact many things that both mothers and fathers can do with their babies that may be understood as bonding events, and my interlocutors were quite aware of that. Baby swimming, I argue, is one such example (see below), but most strategies are much subtler. As Haukur’s words testify to, to simply “sit down with them and watch TV with them […]” Try to spend time with them until they go to sleep” are strategies through which he and other men bond with their children. Intimacy is generative of parent-child bonding, regardless of gender (Uvnäs-Moberg, 1998; Uvnäs-Moberg & Petersson, 2004). This is both something the men

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12 According to Kramvig (2007), the close connection between masculinity and breadwinning is historically related to the transition to modernity (see chapter 3). With the semantic split between the familial and work, the private and the public, as well as women’s association with the former and men’s association with the latter, providing an income for the family became key to masculinity.
want and something that is expected of them. To be a proper father, therefore, one needs to play (cf. Doucet, 2009). And through such play, these men are enacted as good fathers.

Given that parental sentiments may be powerfully “shaped by overwhelming economic and cultural constrains” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 341), a tentative argument is that in the privileged Icelandic context, where fathers are expected to be devoted to their children and supported by the state to be so, men and women are increasingly approaching each other when it comes to how they exercise and experience motherhood and fatherhood. It is interesting, therefore, to closely investigate one of those many bonding events for what it further reveals about men as fathers.

### Ungbarnasund

During the first months of a new-born’s life the parents are very much home-centered in the sense that they spend a lot of time in their apartment, and, when they go out, they largely do so together with the baby. Socialization with unknown members of the larger community in terms of partying, for example, becomes less intense, but the recent parents’ parents (especially grandmothers, it seems) become important in novel ways. Likewise, it becomes more common to engage with friends and other people with children in activities or events where children can be included. One such example is baby swimming. To go for a swim (fara í sund), which may just be to sit in a hotpot (heitur pottur), is a common leisure activity that many Icelanders pursue on a regular basis. Aðalheiður and Freyr, for example, went to their closest pool several times each week, although their trips to the pool became somewhat less frequent with Síf’s arrival. That there are seventeen swimming pools in the Reykjavik metropolitan area testifies to the activity’s popularity. Baby swimming courses, however, are more frequently held in smaller and warmer pools not open to the general public. One may commence such a course when the child is three months old, and a class usually lasts for eight weeks. It is not uncommon to attend subsequent courses. Both parents are welcome to join, and it seems that weekend classes, and to a lesser extent evening classes, are more often than not attended by mothers and fathers.

All of my interlocutors attended baby swimming, except from Perla and Ágúst because Ýr was still too young. The one I accompanied the most to baby swimming classes was Lilja. She would attend alone on Tuesdays, when Sigurjón was working. Upon being asked why she takes Alda to baby swimming classes, Lilja paused, thought for a second or
two, and answered: “It is fun for me” (Ég hef gaman af því). She considered baby swimming to be a social event where she could talk to other mothers in the pool and the locker room, as they always had something to discuss because of their similar situations. Yet she also reasoned that it is good for the child to visit different places, and added that it is a fun activity which is developing (proskandi) the baby. She did not consider other attendants to be her friends, but trips to the pool nevertheless represented an important social event for both Lilja and Alda.

On Tuesdays, at least before the work-day has ended, it is mostly mothers that attend baby swimming classes alone with their babies. The reason is not that fathers do not want to participate, but, like Lilja’s mother once theorized, it is difficult to get time off from work to do so. One might be excused to attend one’s child’s delivery, but not a baby swimming class. Yet when fathers do attend, they are at times present in such a manner that only their gendered bodies disclose any significant difference between them and their partners. This view was confirmed when I once attended a class with Sóley and Jökull.

Sunday Morning Baby Swimming

At ten in the morning on a Sunday in May, Sóley carefully opens the door and gives me a hug as I enter their apartment. The place is unusually quiet, almost as if their day has not yet begun. There is no sound coming from the TV in the living room or the radio in the kitchen, and I cannot hear anyone talking to Rafn. I can nevertheless see that they have started to prepare themselves for the baby swimming class which begins in half an hour. Sóley starts to pack a backpack, while Jökull, still in his pajamas, entertains Rafn on the unmade bed in their bedroom. They swap responsibilities, and soon she is the one who holds Rafn whilst Jökull slips into the bathroom. Before long he reappears fully dressed and with another backpack in his hands. Sóley dresses Rafn and they jointly put him in the car seat. A few seconds later, we are at the back of their apartment building and enter the car.

We drive for approximately ten minutes and arrive at a hospital department farther east in the city, a place used for rehabilitation of people with minor injuries. Sóley immediately heads into the women’s locker room, whereas Jökull and I remove our shoes and enter the pool area, which is a great hall with one lager pool and a smaller, shallower pool with warmer water. Along the big pool’s right side stands a series of baby changing tables. Jökull carries Rafn straight to one of the tables. He gently removes the baby from his chair and puts him on the table in order to undress and wash him before he is dressed in a blue
swimsuit. Somewhat naively, I ask him if he is not going to put diapers on, but am told that they do not use diapers here. Jökull smiles and says that the last time they were here Rafn actually pooped during the class. Jökull had simply left the water in order to change him.

Sóley emerges a couple of minutes later. She receives Rafn into her arms and takes him to the smaller pool with warmer water. Jökull leaves to change. In the small pool, Sóley talks to another woman who is also in the company of a baby. When Jökull returns he takes Rafn and enters the bigger pool where the instructor, a woman in her early thirties, calls the babies’ names in order to check who is present. I place myself on a chair by the poolside in order to follow the event. Soon there are thirteen parents in the pool; seven mothers and six fathers. These are five couples and one man and two women who are each alone with a baby.

They all gather in a circle and sing a welcoming song before the first activity begins: gently moving the babies back and forth across the water surface. The instructor demonstrates with one of the participating babies before everybody else tries it. This is done a few times and each couple alternate on who is carrying it out. After some minutes the instructor demonstrates what they are to do next. This time Jökull holds Rafn. He follows the instructor closely with his eyes and appears highly focused as he must also concentrate on holding Rafn correctly in the water. Sóley, who seems just as focused, turns to retrieve a toy that Rafn is supposed to chase in the water as Jökull ushers him across the surface. Rafn is quick to seize the toy that his mother has placed a couple of meters in front of him. Jökull, who is really the person behind the heroic achievement, gives the baby a big kiss on his cheek, hugs him, and
thereafter lifts him up into the air before he is lowered down into the water again. Then Sóley does the same thing. They switch carrying out the exercise a couple of times. The focus is constantly on Rafn: when Sóley is the conductor, Jökull participates by placing himself behind the floating toy, lowering his head to the water and staring into the baby’s eyes in order to direct his focus the right way. The other couples do the same thing. Those without a partner circulate alone with their babies.

The next activity is to fully submerge the babies under water, or to have them dive (kafa). The instructor demonstrates how to hold the baby correctly by gripping it underneath its armpits. Then she counts to three before she blows the baby in the face and lifts it up, up above her head, and lowers it rather fast into the water, where the baby swims a short length before it is lifted up again. All parents follow her instructions closely before they attempt for themselves. Jökull is the first to go. He does exactly as the instructor showed, and Rafn emerges above the water with a confused look on his face. Sóley, who has been observing from the side-line, smiles and cheers at him. It is her turn and she too follows the instructions to the point, yet this time Rafn begins to cry as he swallows some water. She gives him to Jökull and turns to fetch a toy that she holds up in front of him in order to cheer him up. Rafn continues to cry, however, and the instructor joins them in order to show them how to carry out the exercise. Jökull attempts again, but the crying persists. While they try to calm Rafn down, a new activity commences, but Sóley and Jökull keep to themselves. They join the next activity, however, which is to let the babies float on their back across the water surface whilst singing a nursery rhyme. All parents, mothers as well as fathers, join in on the singing.

Forty minutes have passed and the parents gather in a big circle to sing a final goodbye song. When this is over some parents leave for the locker rooms and others re-enter the smaller pool. Sóley heads for the women’s locker room, and Jökull and Rafn join three other parents in the warm water. Some of them exchange a few words. Jökull, with a quiet Rafn in his arms, takes a seat in a corner, closes his eyes, and waits for Sóley.

Sóley returns after ten minutes and leaves her purple Marc Jacobs beach bag next to me, who is now seated on a chair closer to the smallest pool. She goes to notify Jökull of her return. He leaves for the locker room with Rafn, but comes back within short with the naked baby whom Sóley wraps in a white towel. As Jökull disappears once again into the men’s locker room, she takes Rafn to the changing tables where he is given a new diaper and dry clothes. When Jökull is back, she has seated herself in order to breastfeed. As we wait for them, Jökull tells me that they do not come to these classes in order to recruit new friends. If they talk to anybody, it is mostly people they already know. I think of Lilja, who regards this
as a social event, and ask why it is they come here. It is good for the baby, Jökull explains. He builds muscles and develops his motor skills. It is particularly good if one continues to go swimming after having completed a class like this. He thinks for a second or two before he concludes that baby swimming is in fact quite social; one gets out of the house and does something with the baby.

**Different but Similar**

The reason to point out that baby swimming is not first and foremost a social event that parents attend to recruit new friends, is to reveal it as another manifestation of the baby’s minority rule, or how much of both parents’ lives are caught up in constant efforts to do what is best for their baby. Yet baby swimming is also an event that affords a glimpse into fathers’ constructions of masculinity. This is not a masculinity that is constructed in opposition to femininity or notions about what good mothers do. My interlocutors never talked about showing emotional responsibility and caring as acting motherly. Fatherhood, moreover, was not understood as the opposite of motherhood, even though mothers and fathers are differently gendered. As the example from the baby swimming class shows, both parents are keen to show love and affection for their babies. The steadiness with which fathers change diapers or hold their babies correctly in the water, for instance, speaks of how such practices are essentially ungendered. More than a little practice has gone into their excellent executions, which are not merely episodic instances. One could therefore argue that to insist on fathering and mothering as intrinsically different due to the parents’ different gender identities is to insist on the essential reality of the male/female dichotomy, instead of seeing them as one of many metaphors that are activated in the everyday construction of identities (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994, p. 9).

The masculinity of these men as it is exercised in relation to their babies resembles that which comes to mind with the word “mothering”. When interlocutors do not understand nursing or caring for children as essentially feminine practices, however, it becomes plausible to argue that such ways have become increasingly androgynous—that is, neither particularly male nor female. This kind of convergence of parental roles, moreover, allows for a suggestion that it might be more relevant to talk about “parenting” instead of “mothering” or “fathering”. As Doucet puts it:
“While my argument remains, [...] men are not mothers, and fathers do not mother, there are times and places where men’s caregiving practices are so impeccably close to what we consider mothering that gender seems to fall completely away, leaving only the image of a loving parent and child” (2006, p. 246, emphasis in the original).

The word “parent” thus speaks of greater sameness than difference when it comes to how mothers and fathers largely engage with their children (although gendered patterns exist, see chapter 3). A reason for this is perhaps the immense importance put on the baby itself. When it arrives, it arrives with numerous perceived needs that pose a great many challenges for its parents, perhaps especially for novices. Both the mother and the father are dedicated to meeting these needs. The tasks are many and they have to be divided, as Haukur said. What matters is not so much gender roles, as implied by the language of mothering and fathering, but that a unit of two cooperate to meet the demands of the minority ruler.

With regard to this, one may ask whether Jökull and Sigurjón, who did not attend any baby swimming class, represent different or opposing masculinities. As indicated, they are different in terms of how much time they have chosen to spend with their babies during the first months of their lives. This further implies that different paternal practices may coexist side-by-side in any society, as fathers are different in terms of personalities, careers and partners (Brandth & Kvande, 2002). It is almost as if Sigurjón could be labelled “traditional” because he represents a breadwinner who abstains from taking much parental leave and, therefore, does not join Lilja in bonding events like baby swimming. Yet Jökull and Sigurjón are not
necessarily very different in terms of the masculinity they embody. The class on Sunday provides a strong case for the argument that most mothers and fathers are equally engaged in such events—when they have the time to participate. Play seems to be just as important for these men as the compulsion to protect and provide, but there must be a time and a place for everything. Early Tuesday afternoon would not be a good time for Sigurjón and Haukur, for example, but Sunday morning could work for them as it works for Jökull. What makes Sigurjón and Jökull different, I believe, are rather the days during the week that their respective families attend baby swimming, as well as their families’ economic situations. This resonates with Connell’s thinking about the possibility for change from what she defines as hegemonic masculinity: “How many men actually take on full-time care of babies depends […] on economic arrangements that make it affordable; the point here is that many households think this is the right thing to do” (2005, p. 227, emphasis in the original).

**Understanding Men through Homosexual Women**

Lesbians who are not birth mothers are good to think with about fathers.

When Halla and Emma returned from Belgium after a month of visiting Emma’s parents, they had begun feeding Hannes oatmeal porridge. There were two and a half weeks left of Emma’s six months long maternity leave, and it was therefore important to establish a firm feeding routine in order to accustom Hannes to his birth mother’s absence. Some weeks later, however, their efforts had not yielded complete success. I visited Halla at her parents’ house, and after a longer walk, a nap, and some play, it was time for Hannes to eat. Halla, who had been making porridge in the kitchen while I was playing with the baby in the living room, placed Hannes in a chair by the kitchen table and began by giving him a taste of the porridge. She tried again and again, but the entire affair went rather badly. Hannes cried hysterically and was ostensibly not taking a liking to the food that his mother was serving. Halla therefore put him on her lap in order to calm him down. She turned to me and explained that he ate earlier than usual that morning, and that Emma was late from work—not a good combination. Sitting on Halla’s lap, Hannes ate two spoons and cried, two spoons and cried. Halla sang to calm him down and once again he did, yet he continued to weep. She gave up her attempt at feeding him, but his weeping continued. She became somewhat frustrated, and the baby, still weeping, had food in his face and all over his clothes. Her sweatshirt matched his. She put the dishes in the kitchen sink, reached for her phone and dialed Emma’s number.
Where was she? When would she be home? When the short conversation was over, I was told that Emma was on her way and that Hannes would soon be breastfed.

Halla brought Hannes downstairs and changed his clothes. Soon she returned and went to wait by the large living room window, which has a view towards the road leading up to the house. A few minutes later, Emma’s car came into sight. It did not take long before she was inside the house, and Halla immediately explained that Hannes was hungry and needed to be breastfed. Emma’s face lit up at the sight of her son. She leaped to the bathroom and quickly washed her hands. Back again, she took the baby in her arms and seated herself in a comfortable armchair. As if she was hypnotized, she stared at Hannes while he groped hungrily for her breasts. She put him to her chest, and they remained like that for a long time. Emma whispered something to him in Flemish. I, seated in another armchair, did not understand, but I am quite sure that her words were soothing words of love—her tone gave me an indication. She glanced down at Hannes and caressed his hand. There was almost complete silence; I could hear the wall-clock ticking in the kitchen.

When Emma returned to her professional life, Halla was the one to resume the responsibility of spending her days with Hannes. Things were turned on their head. Halla’s hours alone with Hannes now implied strolling, playing and feeding, and this was not always easy because Hannes had not grown accustomed to baby food. It is obvious that this was not always easy for Halla either, even though the described incident may have been more dramatic than other feeding sessions. During moments of frustration, however, Halla could not easily calm Hannes down by breastfeeding him, but this was something that Emma could still do when she returned from her job. That Halla was bound to do something different is obvious, but it reveals something else that is pertinent.

Imagine that Monique Wittig is right in claiming that lesbians are not women because they have no relation to men (1992, p. 32). Who is a woman and who is not is of course a question only ethnographic research can answer, and, in Iceland, lesbians are considered women as much as their heterosexual girlfriends. But what is discovered when gender disappears as an analytical variable due to the picture’s lack of gender differences? Halla and Emma are the same in terms of both being women, yet they are different in a way that corresponds to the other couples with which I have engaged. Emma is the birth mother of Hannes and she is therefore implicated in the becomings described in chapter 4. Halla is also a mother, but she interacts with Hannes much in the same way as the male partners of her female friends.
Womanhood can never be reduced to or explained by the potential for becoming a (birth) mother, and, in the context of parenthood, it is perhaps not the difference implied by one’s gender that makes a decisive difference when it comes whether two partners exist as equal to each other. I shall elaborate on this point in the next chapter. What I wish to posit here, however, is the idea that much of what we tend to think about when we think of equality is in the hands of fathers, or more precisely, the partner within a unit of two who does not give birth. As Sóley pointed out in the introduction of this thesis, men are freer than women at the beginning of their children’s lives because these fragile beings do not depend on their fathers in the same immediate way as they do on their mothers. This is to a large extent related to (scientific) discourses on what is good for the baby. It is more up to fathers, therefore, to facilitate similarity if this is desirable for the realization of equality.

As implied by the discussions in chapter 4, if the birth mother chooses to abstain from the labor that her situation compels, this would be equivalent to overthrowing the entire minority rule of the baby, as his or her life more or less depends on such efforts. This is why Lilja and Sóley, for example, come off as more similar as mothers than Sigurjón and Jökull do as fathers. Because of the disturbing element of gender, moreover, it is difficult to see how Halla, a woman, sometimes is more similar to Jökull, a man, than she is to Emma, who is both a woman and a birth mother.

In Norway, Brandth and Kvande (2001) have found that fathers really want to stay at home with their children, and when they abstain from taking their earmarked period of leave or take little or nothing of the quota that a couple may share between them, it is most often because long absences from their jobs are considered unfavorable. The same goes for Sigurjón as both he and Lilja know that the family would not survive financially if he took a longer period of leave. Thus, to protect and provide is perhaps quite important to the hegemonic masculinity that middle-class Icelandic men relate to and partially embody. What kind of men and fathers would they be if they had no ambition to provide an income for their family? This is in line with what Brandth and Kvande (1998) have concluded. Fathers whose parental leaves overlap with their partners’ often want to distance themselves from their own breadwinning and emotionally distanced fathers, but men’s successful integration of fathering and masculinity nevertheless depends on their lasting connections to traditional masculine ideals, such as having a paid job. Indeed, neither emotional negligence nor free riding would be part of an acceptable masculinity for the fathers I got to know.

As a corollary, it becomes difficult to argue that masculinity and femininity are two exclusive and opposed domains, at least when considering the ways and views of living
human beings who imperfectly embody conceptual types. The ways and views that constitute good fatherhood, and, in consequence, a part of desirable masculinity, are not opposed to the ways and views that are characteristic of good motherhood. These men are not considered feminine when they are present and emotionally involved in their children’s lives in ways that imply more than simply to protect and provide. Masculinity, as Connell correctly points out, is a relational concept which receive its meaning in relation to femininity (2005, p. 43). Yet, on the basis of the ethnography of this chapter, I am disinclined to argue that masculinity merely exists “as a social demarcation and cultural opposition” to femininity. It rather seems that it sometimes receives its most important meaning through distancing from other (that is, subordinated) forms of masculinity (see Kramvig’s (2007, p. 236) account of Brandth and Kvande’s (2003) research for a similar argument). I am not reiterating Zamira’s statement, that Icelandic men and women are the same, but claim that they are similar in significant respects.
6 On Equality

The previous chapters have investigated various practices in an attempt to discern some of the ways that men and women become both different and similar to each other. What has been indicated, and which will be further elaborated in this chapter, is that even if notions of sameness loom large in talk about equality, equality is not something that simply arises out of situations where men and women do equal amounts of the same things, whether inside or outside of homes. So what, then, is this equality that people say they experience? When exploring academic dealings with this ostensible contradiction, one realizes that it represents a theoretical problem that different researchers have yielded different explanations to. Two examples concerned with family life and equality among urban Norwegians will be explored. What is interesting about these studies is that they ponder paradoxes that I also came across in Reykjavik, but end up with quite different conclusions from those I shall eventually draw. In the end, I shall set the stage for an alternative conclusion by appropriating the existential philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir (1997), whose insights are vividly captured in the following:

“If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change. Proletarians say ‘We’; Negroes also. Regarding themselves as subjects, they transform the bourgeois, the whites, into ‘others’. But women do not say ‘We’, except at some congress of feminists or similar formal demonstration; men say ‘women’, and women use the same word in referring to themselves. They do not authentically assume a subjective attitude” (ibid., p. 19).

“To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him also: mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other as an other” (ibid., p. 740, emphasis in the original).

*The Second Sex* remains one of the most comprehensive works on the subjects of woman and equality until this date, and it may in fact be read as an ethnography (Okely, 1986 in Moi, 2008). Here, Beauvoir’s words are introduced in order to say something about Icelanders’ way of existing as equal. I shall pave this way by exploring how my interlocutors conceive of equality and feminism, and, conclusively, by theorizing their ways and views in a somewhat unconventional manner when problems of articulation arise.
The Multifaceted Concepts of jafnrétti and feminísmi

Whenever the theme of equality was strategically introduced or naturally became the topic of conversations, I often came to hear declarations of equality as someone evaluated his or her position vis-à-vis his or her partner, but reluctance to claim that equality is the state of affairs between everybody in the greater context of the larger Icelandic society. At the same time, most people seemed to be of the opinion that contemporary Icelanders, especially those of the younger generations, are more oriented towards equality, or more equal, than older generations and, notably, people of other cultural backgrounds. “I think that our generation is more conscious of it than our parents’ or our grandparents’ generation,” said Edda, who is a friend of Sóley. Similarly, Ágúst once claimed that inequality was only hearsay to him: “It’s just something that I hear about. I don’t witness it and I don’t run in those circles and I don’t exist in that world.” What world is this world of equality as opposed to that world of inequality? And how relevant are notions of sameness and difference to conceptions of equality and related understandings of feminism?

Jafnrétti

The concept of equality (jafnrétti) as it is used in everyday conversation and public discourse is multifaceted. Ostensibly, everybody has a slightly different take on what equality is, and it seems fair to suggest that this is partly related to one’s parents’ political affiliations when growing up, what type of education one has undergone, and one’s relationship status. Single women, for example, generally seem less intent to stress that men too benefit from equality. When that is said, everybody I engaged with made it clear that equality is important to them. Whenever I directly posed the question “what is equality to you?” the answers I received were complex and sometimes contradictory, but nevertheless similar in a lot of ways. What I take concern with here is the Icelandic concept of jafnrétti as it emerged through talk, in order to discern an explicitly discursive and general understanding of equality. This makes it possible to evaluate words in relation to action on a later point.

What is common to all of the forty individual narratives that I collected about gender and equality is first and foremost an emphasis on judicial aspects of the relations between men and women: everybody should enjoy the same legal rights and have the same opportunities, irrespective of their gender. Central to the idea of equality was also the view
that men and women should not be treated differently in terms of receiving different pay for the same jobs, for example. On the level of norms, moreover, most people regard it as paramount that neither men nor women are expected to do this or that by virtue of their gender. This point also contains another dimension. For example, most people disputed conventional feminist policies such as gender quotas on the basis that a woman should not be prioritized over a man for a position they were both competing for simply because she is a woman. One’s gender should cease to be relevant, most people argued, when it comes to evaluating competence—an idea reflecting the belief that abilities and competences do not necessarily have a gendered dimension. In this respect, men and women are seen as the same and individual differences are often believed to transcend those pertaining to gender.

What appears undisputed, moreover, is the idea that men and women are intrinsically different. Typically, it is pointed out that men in general are physically stronger than women and therefore more suited for certain jobs. The idea that men and women think somewhat differently is also common, and therefore it becomes possible to argue, like many people do, that men and women bring different things to the table:

**Jökull:** I think it’s also really important, like Sóley was saying, that you have to embrace people’s qualities and skills/

**Sóley:** Yes!

**Jökull:** And some of these skills are related to their gender. And I don’t think that’s a bad thing/

**Sóley:** Definitely not a bad thing.

**Jökull:** And it can also be that it is totally not related to the gender, but a lot of things, I think, like how some women think and/

**Sóley:** We think differently and it’s a good thing. Maybe we can just make something good of it. Like, I bring something to the table and you bring something to the table and/

[...]

**Jökull:** I don’t know, I don’t think it’s necessarily desirable to have women and men being exactly the same, but, of course, equal and respected, that’s most important.

**Sóley:** That’s what’s most important. Then people could do whatever they want. Like, if women want to work in a coalmine or just whatever, then cool. I think it’s important that there is respect.
Jökull: And obviously gender becomes less important. It’s more like your personality.

Kristian: When does it become less important?

Jökull: Like, you know, when it comes what you do. Like if you are more feminine or more masculine, the gender is kind of… It doesn’t really matter.

Most people do not try to fit individuals into a simple gender binary, which would make it possible to predict behavior on the basis of knowing their gender. Therefore, it is generally argued that certain men are more feminine and certain women are more masculine. This mediating component also makes it possible to hold the mentioned opinion that ability, competences and motivation cannot be explained simply by recourse to gender.

Most people contrasted equality with inequality by talking about the amount of women versus men working in a given professional sector. Equality, it was suggested, has to do with an equal distribution of men and women within a given professional field, and men and women’s positions within this field. There is not equality in the health sector, for example, because most of those who work there are women, and most of those who occupy positions of power are men. Similarly, it was generally considered a good idea that both men and women are daycare teachers (leikskölikennarar), as these may contribute with different qualities. Yet many held the somewhat contradicting opinion that this is important in order for children to see that men are also caring and emotional.
A common assertion was that even though one considers oneself to be equal to one’s partner, there probably exist people who are more equal because they “do everything fifty-fifty”. In other words, equality contains a quantitative dimension in terms of being something that is talked about as if it can be measured by looking at the distribution of domestic doings (see chapter 3). Halla, for example, considered herself to be equal to Emma and concluded as such by referring to their division of housework: “We are very fifty-fifty people”. On the basis of this it is possible yet difficult to argue that the Icelandic version of equality is embraced by Gullestad’s concept of equality as sameness (2001, p. 82). It is true that the discourse on equality is to a large extent structured by importance given to sameness, but, as earlier chapters have shown, the men and women of the couples with which I am concerned are not so easily labelled “the same”.

Feminismi

Contrary to equality, the understanding of what it means to be a feminist (feminista) seems to be essentially contested. Most people I talked to considered themselves to be feminists. This was something they would state in my presence as it naturally sparked dialogues about the issues I was researching. To many people, being a feminist had little to do with activism and explicit condemnation of this or that. Their identities as feminists emerged more through talk about what kind of policies they support and the political parties they would never consider to vote for in the municipality elections held in Iceland during my stay (notably, right-wing parties such as Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn and Framsóknarflokkurinn, which won the elections in the end). An extension of the period of parental leave, for example, was something most of my interlocutors desired. Ironically, however, the least mainstream views and understandings were held by people who had undergone formal education in feminist theory. Gígja, for example, was a single mother of two children in the Hjalli daycare I visited. She was at the time an undergraduate student in a humanistic discipline at the University of Iceland. She believed in equality in terms of “some sort of freedom”, she said, but asserted a pessimistic view that amounted to the impossibility of its realization. Equality, she said, requires a feminist revolution that fundamentally shakes everything from the structure of languages to ideas about gender. This was something she would “go down fighting” for.

Even though it was common to refer to oneself as a feminist, certain people preferred to be called jafnrettisinnuð, or equality-minded. Lilja and Sigurjón’s words were illustrative of this:
Lilja: I am definitely a feminist. But in Iceland, ‘feminist’ is kind of a negative word. Which is bad, because… Well, this feminist organization here in Iceland hasn’t been doing a lot of good work and it makes the general population just… They are not very much liked by many people. So/

Sigurjón: They are probably fighting the wrong battles, I think.

Lilja: Yes. I think they are fighting the wrong battles.

Kristian: What battles are they fighting? I don’t know too much about them.

Lilja: Well, the things that end up in the paper and the internet that everybody’s talking about are things like whether babies should be dressed in pink or blue. Or if you should call a member of parliament, a rúðherra, a rúðfrú if it’s a woman. And you know the green and the red men who signal you that you can cross the street or not? They argue that that should be a woman. That’s kind of beside the point, they should be fighting other battles more related to equality and pay, like, difference in wages.

[…]

Lilja: So, maybe we should not call me a feminist, but a jafnréttisinnuð.

Sigurjón: Equality-minded.

Indeed, sometimes people distanced themselves from feminism but agreed with what is perhaps the essential goal of the current Icelandic feminist movement: to realize equality. Yet the fact remained that the feminist movement’s less conventional political strategies, like the ones mentioned by Lilja, received a lot of negative publicity and that this in turn influenced public opinion of feminism as a supposedly coherent domain. But, like Sóley and Jökull, most people were not ready to discard the feminist label:

Sóley: Yes, I would say I am a feminist.

Jökull: Yes. You know, it’s a hard thing to define—‘a feminist’—but absolutely I am.

Sóley: I think the word ‘feminist’ has become something bad. Like, because/

Jökull: It’s also because they have to/

Sóley: They have to go extreme/

Jökull: Yes, they have to be extreme in order to/

Sóley: To get something done, to change something. But I would like—for me to be a feminist is just to be, or want… Because as a woman, I don’t want to be a man. Like, when I was 10 I wanted to be a boy, but I don’t want to be man and I don’t want to do
exactly the same; I love that we are different, and I’ve got some strengths that he
doesn’t and maybe he has got some strengths that I don’t. And he is physically
stronger than me, and, like, I don’t want to be there, but I definitely… It’s about
respect for me. It always comes down to that. I want the same respect as him, even
though we are not the same. And I want my work to be respected as much, and I hate
that when—because sometimes when I’m at work, I usually wear gym clothes and I’ve
got a pony tail and kind of look like I’m 13 or something, and I can sometimes feel
that when men come in who are around 50, they look at me and go like ‘wow, what is
she going to do? Like, she’s a school girl’. So that’s what I don’t like.

What feminism means remains somewhat contested, but it contains ideas that overlap and
with and diverge from ideas that pertain to the concept of equality. For most people, it seems,
this kind of inconsistency is not problematic at all. As demonstrated by the words of Sóley
and Jökull, it is possible to hold the opinion that one is a feminist, to think that men and
women are fundamentally different, but nevertheless argue that equality means that gender
ceases to be relevant when it comes to the realization of opportunities and desires of
individuals. To the extent that feminism involves a concern for equality, most Icelanders may
be called feminists. But may they be called equal? On the one hand, one could argue that the
desire to come off as equal, simply because it is considered politically incorrect and
backwards to not be so, is a primary motivation behind the tendency to view oneself and
one’s partner as existing as equal in relation to each other. This is part of the essence of the
perspective I investigate below, which would argue that my interlocutors are not equal even
though they say they are. On the other hand, although no one aspires to a completely
egalitarian division of housework and other kinds of practices, which would be the logical
conclusion of the idea of equality as sameness, one could take them at their words and
subsequently attempt to understand how it is perfectly logical to assert that they are “fifty-
fifty people”.

Dealing with the Equality of Others

It is possible to argue that the topic of equality is as hot as ever on the agenda of the
mainstream media as well as that of academic scholars, but that the concept in itself receives
little attention. It is rare to come across scholarly texts on gender that begin with a question
about what equality is, and a flexible understanding of the concept seems somewhat unheard
of. Thus, if equality is something rather than something else, and this something remains
stable though time and space, it should be possible and quite easy to stand on the outside, so
to speak, and evaluate whether a given group of people are equal or not. This kind of ethnocentric approach to equality, I argue, may be subject to the criticism that anthropologists and post-colonial feminists have traditionally launched against Western mainstream feminism. Representatives of the former camps have repeatedly made the obvious but critical point that women represent no monolithic entity. There is, as Chandra Mohanty (1988, p. 64) claims, an ethnocentric universalism at the core of much Western feminism, among both politicians and academics. They tend to take the needs and desires of white (read: Euroamerican) middle-class women to be universal, and based on this they develop strategies for emancipation on behalf of everybody else. This tendency, one may argue, can also be detected in the scholarship of Scandinavian researchers with a commitment to equality. Two examples of this are studies conducted by Helene Aarseth (2011) and Marit Aklestad (2011). Both are interesting and valuable in their own right, and I only refer to them as examples of the mentioned tendency. My aim is to show that academics who operate with the concept of equality in a taken for granted way may actually commit a denial of others’ subjectivity, and that this is at par with what may be considered the sine qua non of the anthropological mission: to understand the socio-cultural logic behind that which is encountered in the field. In relation to this, I believe that Saba Mahmood, who has studied conservative Muslim women in Egypt, poses a universally relevant question: “how would one imagine the politics of gender equality when situated within particular life worlds, rather than speak from a position of knowledge that already knows what the undoing of inequality would entail?” (2001, p. 224; see also Abu-Lughod, 2002 for a similar argument).

**Not Quite Equal**

Both the sociologist Helene Aarseth (2011) and the anthropologist Marit Aklestad (2011) have conducted research on the topics of equality among urban middle-class families in Oslo. These studies are particularly interesting because they both take issue with themes and contexts that are very similar to the one I have worked with, and because they tap into the tendency I have identified above.

Aarseth investigates the “equal family’s motivations”. She approaches her empirical material as situated within the context of the what she calls a Nordic equality project (likestillingsprosjekt) that promotes “new fathers” and work solidarity (arbeidsfellesskap) (2011, p. 9), much like I have argued is the case in Iceland. She argues that we are witnessing a transgression of conventional life-projects that seems to create new forms of motivations,
which in turn engender a new romanticism of the equal family (ibid., p. 10). There is, however, little evidence that Aarseth understands equality as something else than a measure of the extent to which men participate in the home and women of small children work full-time (ibid.). She observes that her female interviewees report to have a knack for housework seldom found among their male partners. This typically makes them the initiators of household projects and “unable to relax” if the home is untidy, even though their partners contribute just as much to the actual performance of domestic doings (ibid., pp. 51-52). This finding allows Aarseth to conclude that her interlocutors, despite their own experiences of existing as equal, are only in the process towards equality.

A similar thing happens in Aklestad’s study, in which she attempts to “unravel parenthood as a cultural system of meaning by taking issue with parenthood’s internal tension between ideas tied to individualism and equality, and ideas tied to kinship and children’s best” (2011, p. v, emphasis in the original). She observes, among other things, that “mothers realize themselves more than fathers though the ‘good motherhood’ in the initial part of parenthood, when the child is an infant” (ibid., p. 45). The mother, Aklestad suggests, is at home more than the father in this period because this is considered to be in the child’s best interest (ibid.). As shown in chapter 4 and chapter 5, this rings true for my Icelandic interlocutors as well. However, Aklestad also investigates the issue of equality and finds that her interlocutors consider themselves to be equal. But due to some mysterious reason, equality, Aklestad notes, is “forced to give way to the desire for children” (ibid., p. 34). Her interlocutors are aware of this, it seems, but nevertheless insist on their equality. Aklestad further notes how it is a dominant cultural value to be more or less equal, and that this makes it difficult to explain a situation in which the mother spends more time in the home and with children (ibid.). She attempts to resolve this conundrum by concluding that they exist somewhere in the middle of a tension between individual values that belong to the domain of equality and familial values (ibid., p. 18). These domains, she argues, exist as parallel systems of values in the Norwegian cultural context (ibid., p. 21).

On the face of it, both Aarseth and Aklestad’s conclusions seem plausible. They resemble each other in terms of presenting different ways in which to explain how their interlocutors’ subjective experiences of equality are incorrect. However, one could argue that both researchers fail to attend to the ways that equality is lived among their interlocutors. It is necessary, I believe, to deconstruct the assumptions underlying the concept of equality and continuously rethink these assumptions in relation to the cultural practices and discourses that combine to constitute unproblematic life situations. When this is left undone, one risks
denying the subjectivity of one’s interlocutors by not being sufficiently sensitive to their ways and views.

**False Consciousness?**

When researchers conclude that interlocutors who claim to be equal are only in the process towards equality or between equality and what’s best for the child, their conclusions come close to saying that these people are victims of false consciousness. Like I asked a woman called Lisa (see below), I asked Sóley and Jökull: “Do you feel that you are equal in your relationship?” “Yes”, Sóley answered immediately upon my inquiry. “Yes, definitely”, Jökull added. Later, in a conversation about equality in Icelandic society, Perla said about herself and Ágúst: “In general, I think that we lead a very equal personal life. We have a very sort of– or maybe not equal, because Ágúst does much more housework than I do, for example”. “But that’s just because I have more time”, Ágúst added. Likewise: “I think it should be equal between fathers and mothers”, Halla said after having professed that she experiences herself to be equal in relation to Emma. And do not forget Haukur’s strong desire and perpetual efforts to be equal to his wife (see chapter 5).

I argue that these individuals are equal when they say that they are, and if one takes this at face value it may be possible to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to exist as equal. Next, I will turn to show how I too experienced problems of articulation that were similar to those reported by Aklestad as her interlocutors insisted on their equality despite the fact that it was obvious to everyone that mothers and fathers were different. By attending to the ways, and not just the views, of my interlocutors, I came to experience that they are in fact equal to each other and not victims of false consciousness. This is also where Beauvoir’s existentialist vocabulary comes in handy. It allows for a wording of this experience which is much more sensitive to the idea that equality is something that may underlie a range of different ways of organizing everyday lives.

**Taking Fairness Seriously**

Sociological research have shown that even though there exist so-called gendered gaps in housework and other types of work, a lot of people nevertheless tend to experience their situations as fair (Coltrane, 2010). The element of fairness also materialized in my
conversations about equality. Particularly one interview with a woman called Lisa stood out in this respect. Our conversation is reproduced below. I felt compelled to pose the questions I posed due to an emergent realization that on the discursive level equality is largely about sameness, but on the practical level equality as an experience seems to arise even when two partners do quite different things. As Sóley and Jökull said before, men and women are not the same and this is not in itself a bad thing. One may be equal to each other despite bodily gender differences and differences pertaining to who does what.

“Fair between us”

Lisa is a friend and former colleague of Halla. She is 28 years old, a mother of a young daughter and girlfriend of Guðmundur, who is two years her senior and father of their child. The interview I conducted with Lisa and Guðmundur was at once my most failed interview and the moment when something sparked; when the understanding of equality that this thesis is about began to emerge. I suspect that if I did not conduct this interview in which I “asked all the wrong questions”, “went too far” and which I “got nothing out of” (as I told myself upon its conclusion) my subsequent participation, observation and talking in the field would have been conducted to a much greater extent from the mainstream perspective I have commented above.

Before conducting the interview, I sat at Hlemmur, the central bus station of Reykjavik, and contemplated how I might improve my interviewing technique and thus get more out the questions I typically posed. My contemplations resulted in the decision that if I detected that my interviewees had an asymmetric division of household and care work, I would ask the question “how can you be ‘equal’ if you do not do the same?” And so I did. During the interview, however, things did not go as smoothly as I had hoped for. This is what Lisa had to say:

When I think about my parents, my mum like cooks and does mostly everything at home. She always cooks, my father doesn’t know how to cook and stuff like that. It’s a little bit different. My grandmother gave me a parenting book instead of giving it to the two of us. I thought that was funny.

Kristian: Not as a joke?

Lisa: No. I don’t think so. But I think it’s a lot different now. I think that nobody thinks that a woman should do everything at home. I don’t think so.
These words were not simply testifying to a general attitude, I think. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, it is not the case that women do “everything at home”, that the home is first and foremost considered a female domain. But this does not mean that men and women do exactly the same things within the home. I continued by asking about Lisa’s conception of equality:

**Lisa**: Hm… Something about like the car and… It’s like who takes care of it, you know. You know, it’s a little bit like a… Do you mean like I said, that the—something else, like, you know, just the car, or do you mean like that?

On the one hand, it seems that Lisa was concerned with providing the answer she thought I was after. This might explain her difficulties with wording her conception of equality, which seems to have do with a question about who does what. I replied that any interpretation of my questions would do; I sought no specific answer. Lisa accepted this and lowered her shoulders, at least for a while. She began to tell me about how her family’s days unfold, and I learned, among other things, that Guðmundur goes out several afternoons per week in order to play volleyball with friends. When he does this, Lisa is always at home babysitting their daughter. Later during the same conversation, I thus asked Lisa if she felt that she and Guðmundur are equal in relation to each other, to which she replied:

**Lisa**: We are equal. At home and…

**Kristian**: …in your relationship?

**Lisa**: Yes.

**Kristian**: Even though you don’t do the same things?

**Lisa**: Even though we don’t do the same things at home?

**Kristian**: Yes. And you don’t go to volleyball practice and things like that.

**Lisa**: Yes, I think so. Yes.

**Kristian**: So what would equality be then?

**Lisa**: What?

**Kristian**: What would equality be if men and women don’t do the same things? It is perhaps a provocative question.

**Lisa**: Say that again.
**Kristian:** If men and women don’t do the same things, but they are still equal, what does that make equality?

**Lísa:** Hm… It’s like a… Hm… If… If it’s like a… Just a… Fair between us. He goes to volleyball practice and I get to some time to do something else. I… That just is. We are both just fine by it, you know. He goes there, to volleyball practice, and I just do something else.

Lisa was noticeable agitated upon the conclusion of the interview, and I suspect that this was because I had implicitly offended her by asking a question that somehow “revealed” that she and Guðmundur are not equal to each other even though they claimed to be. Yet my final question also pushed Lísa to think for herself about what it means for her to exist as equal in relation to him. If they were not equal on the basis of how they distributed housework, care and leisure activities, then something else must have made this feeling of equality arise. Lísa suddenly experienced that the language she had at hand to express herself, the language of mainstream feminist discourse on equality, could only insufficiently describe how she genuinely feels she exists in relation to Guðmundur. Had I not attempted to look beyond the words (Wikan, 1992, 2013) of her narrative, I would most likely have concluded, despite her words, with Lísa and Guðmundur’s inequality and thus denying their subjectivities.

How can Lísa and Guðmundur claim to be equal if being equal is not about doing the same? An answer might be detected in two points Lísa attempted to communicate. Indeed, when Lísa said that “nobody thinks that a woman should do everything at home” she said something which I take to be the meaning of Beauvoir’s words that to “emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man” (1997, p. 740). Moreover, when Lísa said that equality is about her experience that it is “fair between us”, herself and Guðmundur, she said something I take to be the meaning of Beauvoir’s emphasis on the importance of “mutually recognizing each other as subject” (ibid.). This juxtaposition indicates that Beauvoir’s existentialist approach to equality may tease out a vocabulary with which one may describe the experience of equality among urban Icelanders without denying their subjectivity. By taking individual judgments of fairness seriously, one comes to see how equality, like Beauvoir argued, is partly a matter of subjective attitudes. It is not just about what one thinks of men and women as opposing social collectives, but also, or perhaps to a larger extent, about one’s orientation towards another person.
Equality as an Authentic Interrelation

The representational language to which one must have recourse in academic texts has certain problematic aspects. Examples are words like “men” and “women”, which seem to obscure something vital when it comes to understanding what it means to exist as equal. The point is neither that what these terms denote does not exist, nor that equality may be spoken of only if gender differences completely disappear. The existential anthropologist Michael Jackson approaches the core of this problem when he cautions about the tendency to assume that the “category words with which we discursively differentiate ourselves from others are more than consoling illusions that provide us with a sense of stable identity in an unstable and multiplex world” (2013, p. 21). Indeed, my interlocutors may very well be categorized as men or women, heterosexuals or lesbians, middle-class or working-class, urban or rural, but even though one attempts to nuance them further by adding more and more such category words, these terms can never capture the lived reality of gendered persons (see chapter 4). This relates to an observation made by Paige West, who talks about the emergence of an aesthetic or bodily experience of ethnographic sociability that can hardly be captured in conventional ethnography:

“Ethnographic writing often fails to capture this intersubjective object and space because it is too personal; it is not ‘scientific’. Even though many of us would not say that we are scientists, there is still a bias in the discipline that urges us to present our ethnographic work as data that happened in the past (because we no longer use the ethnographic present), and that is over, now ready for interpretation and analysis” (2005, p. 273).

Again, my point is not that these category terms are approaching outdatedness, but that the experiences of individual men and women in relation to others can only with difficulty be expressed through a text that must comply with so-called scientific conventions. One may argue that these conventions reduce multi-dimensional lives into something two-dimensional, which entails the loss of an element of depth, an “intersubjective time space”, so characteristic of what it means to exist as equal. As West points out, this may be felt during fieldwork, but it can only with difficulty be presented in ethnographic writings because the experience is too personal to be “scientific”. It is important to be aware of this because it effectively obfuscates efforts to see, measure and write about equality.

In the case of contemporary middle-class Icelanders transitioning into parenthood, I believe that Farstad (2014) is right when she says that equality does not have to mean
sameness in the sense that men and women do the same things. With explicit reference to Doucet (2006, p. 27), Farstad argues that “the questions one must ask are: at what time and in what context does gender difference make a difference, and to what extent do differences relate to disadvantages?” (2014, p. 13, emphasis in the original). Yet these questions still fail to account for a deeper dimension of beingness that which equality actually speaks of. When my interlocutors say that they are equal, they speak of a way of relating to one another that goes beyond what may be known about them as men or women and how men and women are similar and different.

“It is difficult indeed for a woman to act on a plane of equality with men as long as this equality is not universally recognized and concretely realized”, writes Beauvoir (1997, p. 568). She thus gives an indication about where to look in order to discern whether equal relations are the case. The idea of something as “universally recognized” speaks of that which exists on a collective plane, of attitudes that are generally prevalent in society at large. In the context of the Icelandic welfare state, these are evident at the level of laws and policies, which are designed to ensure that women are not disadvantaged compared to men (Eydal & Ólafsson, 2008; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011; Arnalds et al., 2013). “Concretely realized”, however, refers to the actual situations of persons in relation to persons, and it is questionable whether anything but qualitative investigations may suffice in order to come close to such concrete realizations.

In addition to the interview I conducted with Lisa, especially one episode that I experienced during a visit to Sóley and Jökull provided a vivid glimpse into what it means for my interlocutors to be equal to one another. This is not to say that they only experience equality every now and then, but that one may at certain times find oneself in situations where a general feeling is confirmed.

It was an ordinary weekday and we were spending time at after having taken Rafn to the healthcare station where he had undergone his first vaccination. Jökull had gone out to buy groceries, but Sóley stayed at home in order to make pancakes and attend to Rafn, who needed to be breastfed after a nap. While stirring ingredients in a plastic bowl, she now and then picked up her phone to check for messages. There had been minutes of silence before she began to tell me about the girls with which she was currently arranging a birthday party. These women, she said, were different from the ones I had gotten to know. Not quite sure what she meant, I looked inquisitively at her before she added that they had a tendency to become upset with each other and did not really speak their minds. She, on the other hand, could not bother with these kinds of things. She could not bother to be exasperated by trifles
or details, and if she was of another opinion she would always speak her mind, although not impolitely. She added that another one of her girlfriends occasionally indulged in this sort of behavior. Once when they had made a trip abroad together with a third friend, she continued, they had been wandering the streets of London looking for a place to eat dinner. Sóley had suggested a random restaurant that they happened to pass by and entered. When inside, the girlfriend had made a subtle comment that she found the place to be somewhat expensive, but did anyway add that it was fine by her if they decided to eat there. Yet Sóley could *sense* that this was not the case, sense how she was upset by the idea of eating there. “Why not just say that you want to eat somewhere else instead of being upset?” she asked me rhetorically in an agitated manner. I responded by saying that I knew what she meant: certain people act as if they play on a different team from the people they engage with, as if there are unspoken and universal rules that must govern every relationship at all times, and that this becomes particularly noticeable in certain women’s relationships with men and vice versa. I immediately realized that I had problems with wording what I really intended to say, but somehow Sóley, standing there with a housewife’s apron and a fork in her waving right hand, understood my reply. This was a moment of resonance (Wikan, 1992, 2013), I believe, as she articulated an answer that directly exemplified what I was trying to say. A while ago, she said, Jökull had come home and told her about two of his male colleagues who had started to talk about their girlfriends in a way that had compelled him to leave the conversation. They had talked about them as women, she said, as someone that you relate to first and foremost as women—as if their gender implied a set of rules about how to act and what to say, instead of simply relating to them as other human beings. She paused before she looked piercingly at me and firmly concluded that this was not how she wanted to relate to Jökull: “I want him to know what I am thinking.”

Sóley’s final words on the subject matter testified to an attitude towards her relation to Jökull that sat them apart from how she perceived that certain other men and women relate to each other. She experiences to be equal in her relation to him, but this is not because or in spite of the currently inescapable fact that she is a woman and he is a man. Rather, this is an experience that transcends whatever similarities or differences that may or may not exist between them. As seen, differences are inevitable and similarities abound as well. Some of these differences are related to gender and certain similarities exist because sameness is at times considered desirable. Yet, to simply look at differences and similarities misses the point of what Lisa attempted to say with the phrase “fair between us” and what Sóley meant when she said that she wants Jökull to know what she is thinking. The point is that authenticity and
reciprocity are crucial elements in the experience of equality, and together they represent a vital element of depth in the relationship that a situation of equality speaks of. Each partner must struggle to be authentic in terms of staying true to his or her character and personality, simultaneously as he or she must engage in a reciprocal exchange of acknowledgement and respect of the character and personality of the other. This requires, as Sóley pointed out, honest communication, even if communication sometimes generates confrontation and conflict, and the result of an argument is continued differences.

Conclusion

In this final chapter I have gone back to Beauvoir, as it is likely to argue that an important element of the theory she outlines in *The Second Sex* has largely been neglected to the sad effect that we sometimes fail to identify equality when we see it. This has been a vital theoretical strategy in order to comprehend Icelanders’ equality.13

Beauvoir is commonly characterized as both a materialist and an existentialist feminist. The former because of her commitments to material relations and structural differences between men and women, and the latter due to her persistent emphasis on the individual and its capacity to choose and create meaning for itself. Perhaps later feminists have turned their back on Beauvoir because, as Toril Moi claims in relation to contemporary French feminists inspired by Derridean deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, they have emphasized difference and rejected “‘equality’ as a covert attempt to force women to become like men” (Moi, 2002, p. 92). And perhaps other feminists have emphasized the material over the existential because it provides quite concrete weapons in the struggle to secure what we have now come to think of as basic elements in any society with a

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13 The two preceding chapters have utilized central poststructuralist insights in order to complicate the notion of the individual, as well as notions about masculinity and femininity. Although the form of poststructuralism that Derrida represents and I have made use of is at odds with humanist notions of subjective truths and, consequently, authenticity, it is possible to marry the two positions. As already stated, the language to which we must have recourse in order to verbally communicate is also the instable language that determines us and, therefore, cannot be said to flow from any authentic subjective interior. Yet in an ethnographic context where *differance* (Derrida, 1976, p. 24) is at best a philosophical concept and logocentrism (ibid., p. 12), or “logophilia” (Foucault, 1999, p. 28)—the idea of the transcendental signified—is more often than not a lived truth to those who speak, a disavowal of the latter should be temporarily suspended to the effect and extent that it allows for people to make do with what they have at hand—that is, language—in order to construct and assert their humanness, which Jackson defines as “the outcome of a dynamic *relationship* between circumstances over which we have little control […] and our capacity to *live* those circumstances in a variety of ways” (2005, p. xi, emphasis in the original). One may, perhaps, call this “strategic humanism” and regard it as a necessary methodological move that is made in the exploration of equality, which is, one might add, a concept that originates from within this philosophical tradition.
commitment to equality. Examples may be equal rights to vote and to work, as well as the right to have an abortion. Yet these aspects are old news in a Nordic welfare state like Iceland. This is not to say that they are unimportant, because individuals can hardly construct authentic interrelations under societal circumstances that deny them such rights. However, the existential aspects of Beauvoir’s theory seem to have been more difficult to put to use. In addition to what has already been suggested, the reason might be that they open up to uncomfortable or complicated insights like the ones that equality may be something quite different than sameness or that it is partly every person’s individual task to be equal (cf. Butler, 1986).

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir, 1997, p. 295). Attention to the existential philosophy that Beauvoir develops and represents—concisely described by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Existentialism and Humanism* (2007)—urges an interpretation of Beauvoir’s most famous words that highlights the perspective that to not become “the second sex” has nothing to do with becoming a man or stripping women of their femininity. Her words, I believe, signal the view that when the individual woman is enabled to choose her own life and actually does so for herself, she becomes free in the way that her brother has been free since his birth, and she thereby alters what it means to be a woman and emerges anew: not as a man, but as his equal. Indeed, in her discussion about the independent woman towards the end of her book, Beauvoir suggests that women can be equal to men, but that this requires efforts at a very personal level: “she must believe herself his equal and be so in concrete fact; she must engage in her enterprises with the same decisiveness” (1997, p. 705, emphasis in the original). Finally, then, if one analyses claims to equality as speech acts, one comes to see that what people do is part of the greater project to continue to be equal in concrete fact.

Equality, in other words, speaks of a specific kind of interrelation between two different people of certain attitudes towards themselves and each other. Gender equality arises when gender loses importance. Like Jökull said, it is more one’s personality that is relevant, in addition to how this personality relates to another personality, with what this entails in terms of authentically recognizing each other as subjects, which does not mean that they cease to be other to one another. For the time being, therefore, the ultimate test for equality cannot simply be to look at what men do versus what women do, as if equality as a good interrelation becomes good by virtue of different individuals doing the same amounts of the same things. Principles defined by and imposed from the outside are little good for understanding or evaluating whether a given couple’s specific situation is one of equality. When circumstances are no longer considered fair because authenticity gives way to bad faith and reciprocity
yields to a denial of another’s subjectivity, equality is no longer the case, not even in situations where two partners divide all housework and labor equally.

**Final Comments**

At the very end, it is interesting to ponder whether further efforts in the old project of emancipation of women is dependent upon what Ian Hacking refers to as revolutionary constructivism (2000, p. 36). Is the heaviest artillery at our disposal a disclosure of the secret that femininity and masculinity are merely metaphysics? The word is out, but it seems that the processes of signification which result in the social identities we call men and women persist. So the word is out, but what to do? Perhaps it is possible to envision and realize freedom without resorting to a utopian vision of the Imaginary, the semiotic, or any other pre-cultural space of perfect sameness or endless heterogeneity.

One does not have to be a structuralist in order to believe that classificatory systems are intrinsic to culture and social life. Certain classificatory schemes may be exposed as dangerous to some of us or all, and thus be subtly modified or abruptly replaced. One may furthermore suspect that whatever new which emerges at whim or through strategy will inevitably also be complicit in new structures of dominance, new kinds of differences and new hierarchies. This is why I insist on the continued relevance of Beauvoir. The answer is not simply the end of the binary gender system as we know it. We must rather continue our efforts at the material level in order to make life better and easier for everyone in need of “a room of one’s own” (Woolf, 1993). And we must groom our children, whether they are boys or girls or neither, to be equal; to make the necessary efforts for themselves. Admittedly, I am greatly inspired by and love to think with the feminists I have alluded to, but I fear that they require too much. It is too much to ask of everyone to abandon their most fundamental ways and views and rather opt for that which some say is currently only detectable in avant-garde writing of fiction where meaning yields to undecidability.

One might do well to ask where we have been and where we are today. Have not important changes taken place in, say, the last century? Here I am thinking of so much more than women’s right to vote. One may argue that these numerous changes, whether they have come gradually or not, have come without a fundamental abandonment of what may be imprecisely called Western metaphysics. Culture is inherently malleable and its potential for change may be exploited for a greater good without locating such goodness outside of it or within something entirely new. Beauvoir knew this, and my interlocutors live such insights.
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Schep


