

Gender and Emotions in Family Care
Understanding masculinity and gender equality in Sweden

Sofia Björk



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND WORK SCIENCE

Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i sociologi vid institutionen för sociologi och arbetsvetenskap, Göteborgs universitet, som med tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsnämnden läggs fram fredagen den 16 juni 2017 kl. 13.15 i sal Sappören, Sprängkullsgatan 25, Göteborg.

Sofia Björk (2016) *Gender and emotions in family care – Understanding masculinity and gender equality in Sweden* Doctoral dissertation at the Department of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg, Box 720, SE 405 30, Gothenburg, Sweden. Written in English, summary in Swedish, 164 pages. ISBN: 978-91-87876-16-5
Online: <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/52231>

Abstract

This thesis addresses care responsibilities in families as an arena for gender reproduction and change, primarily in the Swedish context, which includes a long history of gender equality policies, and broad public support for ideals of gender equality. The overall aim is to contribute to understanding of how gender continues to be given relevance in family caregiving when caregivers, in their efforts to form liveable and emotionally sustainable lives, make themselves intelligible in relation to sometimes conflicting norms and ideals of care, work and gender equality. The analysis draws on interviews with working parents and middle-aged sons and daughters caring for their elderly parents in Sweden.

The theoretical framework outlines how gender is done, both in general terms and specifically for caregivers, to become intelligible in relation to gendered norms. As caregiving is a gendered practice with salient moral and emotional dimensions, negotiations of intelligibility in relation to caregiving also have emotional consequences. Emotions are understood as shaped by norms, while norms simultaneously gain influence through the emotions they evoke and prescribe, thereby connecting micro-level feelings with macro-level structures. The notion of liveability is used to link the concept of intelligibility to emotions. A liveable life is understood as a life supported by norms.

The thesis is based on three studies, designated Studies I-III. Study I focused on fathers' part-time work and negotiations of moral intelligibility in relation to gendered norms. In Study II, sons' involvement in the care for their aging parents was analysed with a focus on masculinities. In study III, working parents were studied to analyse how norms of parenthood, work, and gender equality were made relevant through emotions and how these norms could be negotiated through emotion work.

By examining how gender continues to be made relevant in family care arrangements, despite widely shared gender equality ideals, this thesis contributes to the understanding of stability and change in normative structures. Although ideals of gender equality are widely shared in Sweden, conflicting norms also remain. These norms continue to have impact through the emotions they evoke – even for those who want to liberate themselves from them. The interviewed caregivers had to manage ambivalence between emotionally powerful norms regarding work and caregiving. The ideals of gender equality did not always reduce this ambivalence, and could even amplify it. To cope with their everyday prioritizations the caregivers needed to manage emotions when failing to live up to some norms and ideals. Transgressions of norms had to be made intelligible to make life liveable. The concept of empathic imagination was used to explore how caregivers, by managing their imaginations of the situations and emotions of those they cared for, could also manage their own emotions to make their care arrangements and lives feel liveable. Ideals of gender equality did not herald the end of gendered expectations. Instead gendered understandings of family care could be reproduced through the doing of gender equality. The notions of doing, re-doing, and undoing gender were useful for analysing the complexity of gender accomplishment and how reproduction and change sometimes occurred at the same time. Ideals of gender equality also included gendered emotion regimes which, in combination with ideals of individualization regarding child care and career, generated different emotional situations for mothers and fathers. Since ideals of gender equality are rooted in certain normative positions, they were not as available or as relevant in all positions or contexts.

Key words: Doing gender, re-doing gender, undoing gender, moral intelligibility, masculinities, emotion management, empathic imagination, fatherhood, parenthood, eldercare, sons' caregiving, gender equality, liveability, Sweden.