Socialized choices: Labour market behaviour of Dutch mothers

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Epilogue

In this section I draw attention to a few issues that have received only moderate attention in this study, as well as possible lines for future research and some political implications.

1 The impact of social institutions on mothers’ employment choices

This study is rooted in the sociological perspective of phenomenological sociology. Phenomenology asks us not to take the notions we have learned for granted, but to question them instead – to question our way of looking at and being in the world (Wallace and Wolf, 2006, p.262). The emphasis on the micro level, while investigating the origins of individuals’ diverse behaviour within one shared social system or society, entailed that the influence of macro institutions on mother’s labour market decisions could be described historically and theoretically in this study, but could not be directly, empirically investigated. In this study it is recognised that mothers’ employment choices are constrained and made possible by cultural gender norms, financial circumstances, the availability and character of jobs, the business cycle of the labour market, and childcare provisions. Theoretically, it was assumed that these macro influences in the Netherlands have similar consequences for all Dutch women. In the light of these constraints and opportunities, mothers make choices regarding their amount of time spent in paid work, though admittedly these choices are typically engendered. Following this line, it was believed that a mother’s perception of limiting or enabling external social institutions is intertwined with her own gender values and attitudes, which are partly a result of socialization.

Nonetheless, the interplay between the use or availability of external provisions, for example professional childcare provisions, and mothers’ own values and attitudes is not systematically investigated in this study, even though it does make up part of the (albeit not statistically representative) qualitative study. Moreover, although Dutch mothers are subject to the same Dutch social institutions, these institutions might differ between regions, for example by local insufficient supply of suitable jobs, a lack of childcare facilities or specific local normative standards towards parenting, such as being strongly religious. In time, a mother might adapt her gender and work values and attitudes to these local social institutional settings. On the other hand, the Netherlands is a small country and it is unlikely that large groups of mothers subject themselves to social
surroundings that do not match their own values and attitudes, since this would be contrary to the mechanism of self-selection that emerged in the qualitative study.

2 Hierarchical layers within socialization

Furthermore, this study has only very moderately shed light on the question of how differences in mothers’ attitudes correspond to different socialization processes related to their various socio-economic backgrounds or social classes. Only the educational level of the mothers’ parents, which may act as a proxy for social class, is included in the quantitative part of the study. Empirically, respondents with more egalitarian gender values corresponded to those with higher-educated mothers. Previous research has demonstrated that parental influences differ in accordance with their different socio-economic backgrounds (Kraaykamp, 2009; Lareau, 2007). It would be interesting to investigate the influence of different generations’ socio-economic backgrounds upon mothers’ orientations towards the labour market. By analysing a large Dutch sample, the study of Cloîn (2010) demonstrated that different socio-economic backgrounds only slightly add to the explanation of the diverse employment patterns between higher and lower educated women. Lower educated mothers are more likely to be in paid work if they had a mother who was in paid work herself when raising her child; lower educated mothers tend to work more hours if their mother was higher educated.

Presumably, in-depth qualitative research on parental socialization regarding different socio-economic backgrounds would allow us to gain more insights with respect to this question. For example, Lareau (2007) has shown with qualitative research that the mechanisms of the middle class and working class differ significantly in terms of their transmission of social-cultural advantages. Cumulative differences, like fostering children’s talents by offering structured leisure activities and wider ways of thinking, defined as ‘concerted cultivation’, creates advantages for middle-class children in how they interact with professionals (doctors and educators) and other adults outside the home. It is not hard to imagine that these different advantages among working-class and middle-class children, based on ‘different senses of entitlement or distrust’, further accumulate as they grow older, in particular from the moment such individuals join the labour market. In this respect, it would be interesting to employ (observational participant) longitudinal research that is sensitive to how these differences in socio-cultural inheritances among children influence their social interactions in later life, in particular at specific turning points that affect their later steps in the labour market. Nonetheless, it is clear that this type of research is expensive and difficult to pursue, therefore a second best alternative would be analysing people’s life stories and behaviour, and then relating the differences between their socio-economic backgrounds.
3 Considerations on research based on memories

This research is largely built on collecting and understanding the memories of Dutch mothers. A criticism of this type of research is the selectiveness of memory, which may influence their answers. People may adjust their memories to justify their present behaviour (Kroska and Elman, 2009). In the qualitative research, I found most mothers to be remarkably open and capable of looking back and providing a narrative of their lives. Nonetheless, even if their stories were not accurate, these memories, which were easily accessible to the mothers’ minds, were perceived by the mothers as important. People’s narratives about their own lives do influence their subsequent steps, for example their perceptions and evaluation of the course of their life so far, including favourite or unfortunate occurrences. And just from these memorised stories, I was able to discriminate some specific patterns that were of interest while investigating the discerning origins of the labour market behaviour of Dutch mothers. Irrespective of individuals’ own awareness of the effect of their memories, memories shape present behaviour.

4 Engendered micro-interactional practices

In general, relatively few contemporary social studies have aimed at uncovering the prevalent assumptions in operation on the social interaction process of parenting. This might be due to the present popularity of quantitative studies based on large-scale representative surveys in academic journals, in which the social reality is presented in a well-defined and structured way. This type of research is not particularly apt for revealing routine and contradictory processes that characterise social interactions at a micro level, such as unquestioned and self-evident practices that unintentionally might lead to unfavourable consequences for the people involved. Research of the micro-interactional processes helps to understand and reveal the construction, reconstruction and consolidation of people’s social realities. As is shown in this study, the social interactional order between men and women is especially interesting, since taken for granted divisions of labour might stand in the way of the further emancipation of mothers and fathers, for example in their frequently under-discussed decisions about whether a mother should reduce her number of work hours or give up her work entirely.

This study has revealed certain practices concerning how Dutch mothers display gender compensating strategies, “doing gender”, which helps to sustain their social gender structure (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Throughout the week these mothers equally share the paid and unpaid work with their spouses, but at the weekend they release their partners from household chores and upbringing matters, so that their husbands are able to re-obtain their masculinity while undertaking ‘manly’ leisure activities. In addition, the qualitative findings revealed that Dutch mothers’ awareness of gender issues, social constructs of
masculinity and femininity, appear almost absent. On the contrary, the mothers interviewed rather emphasised the individual or ‘natural’ aspects of the daily divisions of work with their partners. Nevertheless, the stories of mothers clearly revealed social practices and personal perceptions of how things are, must be or ought to be done, along familiar and recognisable gender-lines. More qualitative in-depth research that includes both partners and is especially aimed at revealing the often subtle, complex and hidden engendering social practices, which have unintended consequences for both partners, might help the further emancipation of both. At the same time this approach might put the narrative of free choice into a wider social perspective.

In addition, while in this study I have only addressed mothers, it would be interesting to employ a similar research among fathers to reveal the invisible structures, both shared and personal, relating to their decisions and daily practices towards fathering and their labour market activity. The continuation of engendered practices among parents may unintentionally block their way to becoming equally involved partners in family life. Since fathers’ labour market activity is much more homogeneous than among mothers, a starting point for research could be their different number of hours spent on household affairs and child-raising practices.

5 Collective memories and collectiveness

Finally, a further worthwhile line of investigation would be to understand more about how and which collective or joint memories bind generations. In my research I have only moderately shed some light on how individual memories like ‘father on the sofa’ and ‘a consenting mother’ can be defined as collective memories. Clearly, sensitivity for the social aspect of individuality, the communal experience, has lost popularity in public discourse. Communal experience is that part of experience shared with other people - the objective reality as internalized by individuals as well as by their fellows. I would advocate bringing the social aspect of individuality back into public discourse, giving greater acknowledgment to the social connectedness of individuals. However, we need more social scientific research to disclose the commonality of individual experiences and perceptions – studies that are based, for example, on multiple life stories of people belonging to the same generation, trying to find the collective conceptual levers with which to lift the social, communal and shared experiences and constraints to the surface. This would possibly bring a deeper layer to the public debate, where potential unwarranted and unintentional social aspects of individual life could be discussed in a more substantive manner than is done in most contemporary public discourse. This is especially true of gender issues in general, and mothering in particular.
6 Political relevance

The current Dutch government aims towards evolving cultural development by increasing women’s awareness of the importance of their economic independence. At the moment, 50 per cent of Dutch women are economically independent. Recent research has shown that Dutch women who are not economically independent are often not aware of the financial risks of their situation. They feel independent with their small salary and are not concerned about the possibility that their partner’s income might decrease or disappear through divorce, illness or unemployment (De Hoog and Van Egten, 2012, p.69).

In other words, the government’s message entails that women who are unemployed or have small part-time jobs need to increase their activity in the labour market. The immense public debate that came to life after this political goal was made public reveals that the idea, or worse ‘the obligation’, that mothers should work as much as necessary in order to achieve economic independence, is still disliked by many Dutch people. But maybe even more controversial is the government’s interference with people’s ‘free choices’, since it is assumed that individuals are perfectly capable of choosing their own lifestyle and identity.

Nevertheless, the Dutch government aims at increasing the overall labour participation rate to 80 per cent in 2020, and some of the results of this research might be relevant in the light of these policies.

This study reveals that women who work in order to be economically independent (30 per cent of Dutch mothers) work more hours compared to mothers who are not motivated in this way. In addition, mothers who value their own economic independence can often recall clear messages concerning their financial autonomy from their parents. It can thus be understood that the motivation for economic independence is often already firmly ingrained within mothers during their childhood, through verbal persuasion or unintentional mental codes from parents. This does not imply that messages about the importance of financial independence later in life will have no effect. Nonetheless, in line with the results of this research, I expect that the transmission of this message is most effective during adolescence or in early adulthood. It is also relevant that this research has revealed the importance for mothers’ professional choices of teachers’ guidance. This is reflected in such mothers’ current egalitarian attitudes, and thus their relatively high employment preference. This result leads to the conclusion that the support of teachers during early adulthood, even though their role might be underestimated by teachers themselves, can be salient and enduring in people’s lives. Their help towards young women in choosing the right profession can, later in life, increase women’s career aspirations and participation.

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in the labour market, and this would be even more enhanced if teachers were to include the message of the importance of financial autonomy.

Finally, there is the role of supervisors at work. Previous research has demonstrated the mechanism of engendered (low) expectations of supervisors towards the work ambitions of mothers, leading to a withdrawal of mothers from the labour market. This research has shown that the support of people at work, mostly by supervisors, in relation to mothers’ professional fulfilment, can enhance a mother’s egalitarian values and attitudes. Thus they can indirectly boost mothers’ employment activity. Admittedly, the qualitative findings revealed that it was mostly the mothers with already egalitarian attitudes who recalled stimulating colleagues and bosses, and thus their received support at work merely seems to have intensified their adherence to symmetrical gender roles. Nonetheless, the quantitative research has shown a relatively strong significant relationship between mothers’ perceived career support at work and their own egalitarian values and attitudes. Therefore encouraging communications between employers (or supervisors) and mothers might serve to advance the activity rates of mothers. It is believed in this study that cumulative social actions and interpersonal encounters at the micro level can have creative and transformative effects, and thus carrying the ability to “make things happen” and to break through the accepted and engendered nature of the social order.