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Chapter 2

A feminist reading of Gary Becker's

*A Treatise on the Family*

2.1 Introduction

*A Treatise on the Family* (1981) by Gary Becker aims to develop a comprehensive and universal social economic analysis of the family (3). Becker does this by applying and elaborating what he refers to as 'the economic approach' to the family. Becker stresses in his book the importance of both cultural and biological aspects of behavior and the inseparability of biological and cultural aspects of, for instance, education. How does Becker deal with the sex/gender distinction in this book? Does he apply and/or construct a biological concept of gender differences or does he apply a cultural concept of gender differences or perhaps both? What content and meaning does he ascribe to masculinity and femininity, and does he apply a masculine perspective? If he constructs a hierarchical and asymmetrical perception of gender, how does he do so and what are the consequences for his approach to the family? These questions as well as the issue of what insights can be gained by analyzing and focusing on the text as such are the topics of this chapter.

Instead of merely discussing the results of an analysis of this text, I will follow here the text of *A Treatise on the Family* and indicate and discuss the way Becker deals with gender, while making use of the analytic tools mentioned in Chapter 1 of this thesis. Following the summary of Becker's book in section 2.2, section 2.3 contains an analysis of the text of Becker's Chapter 1 on 'Single-Person Households' and Chapter 2 on 'Division of Labor in Households and Families'. In this analysis the text is followed closely, sometimes word for word. In this section the focus is on Becker's use of sex/gender distinctions and perceptions of gender, which appear to be set in the first two chapters of his book. Section 2.4 indicates the meaning Becker ascribes to gender, after which the remainder of the book is discussed in a more general manner. Section 2.5 addresses Becker's perception of masculinity/femininity and the masculine perspective he applies through the book. Section 2.6 shows how Becker's use of masculine perspective eventually results in a hierarchical and asymmetrical perception of gender in the discussion on the altruistic and efficient family. Section 2.7 contains the conclusions and discusses the limits of the analytical approach used in this chapter.

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17 From here on page numbers in this chapter refer to Becker (1981) unless otherwise indicated.
2.2 A Summary of *A Treatise on the Family*

Becker introduces the family, the central issue of his book, by stating that '[t]he family in the Western world has been radically altered, some claim almost destroyed, by events of the last three decades.' This, according to Becker, has to be understood as being caused by '[t]he large increase in labor force participation of married women, including mothers with young children, [which, EK] has reduced the contact between children and their mothers and contributed to the conflict between the sexes in employment as well as in marriage.' (1)

Becker applies to the issue of family behavior what he characterizes as the economic approach, based on assumptions of maximizing behavior, stable preferences and the coordination of the behavior of different individuals by implicit and explicit markets. In his book he applies the economic approach to issues such as the division of labor in the family, what he calls the 'demand' for children, and the occurrence of marriage and divorce.

He starts his analysis from the base model of consumer theory and then makes a distinction between the market and the household, where time investment results in different types of human capital depending on whether time is invested in market labor or in household labor. Becker sets out to analyze the relationship between the division of labor in the family and family output: he is interested in the efficient organization of the family. He investigates the advantages of polygyny in comparison to monogamy and polyandry, discusses positive assortative mating in marriage markets, the influence of income on the demand for children and the substitution between the quantity of children and the quality of children. Becker also addresses the effects of family background and generational inequalities, which he formalizes by family income, individual endowments, and market luck and the propensity of families to invest in children. When Becker deals with the distribution of family income inside the family, he develops the concept of altruism on the part of the head of the household, who takes financial care of his wife (the beneficiary) and their children, and argues that this form of organization of the family is the most efficient. He applies 'the economic approach' to both human and non-human behavior, to animals in particular. After that, Becker deals with divorce as the failure of marriage caused by imperfect information. In the last chapter of the book on 'The Evolution of the Family', Becker distinguishes between traditional and modern families and addresses recent changes in family organization. According to Becker, 'individualism replaced familialism because many family functions in traditional societies are more effectively handled by markets and other organizations of modern societies.' (244) He completes his book by returning to the point where he started. He stresses that issues such as high divorce rates, labor participation of women, low fertility, illegitimacy, and female-headed households would be offset in case of a slow-down in the expansion of the welfare state and with that a slower increase in divorce, illegitimacy and labor participation by married women.

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18 Polygyny is the marital system in which one husband can have more than one wife. Polyandry is the marital system in which it is possible for a wife to have more than one husband. A person who is married to more than one husband or wife is polygamous.

19 Becker justifies this by stating that 'the application to the biological world of an approach developed for humans does not presume that human behavior is significantly determined by biological considerations - only that non-humans as well as humans allocate scarce resources while competing in various situations.' (1981, x)
The book is a theoretical endeavor to explain family behavior by economic reasoning. Becker's use of data is incidental or as Becker says: 'The evidence is covered much less systematically than the theory, but its breadth accurately conveys my intention to present a comprehensive analysis that is applicable, at least in part, to families in the past as well as the present, in primitive as well as modern societies, and in Eastern as well as Western cultures.' (3)

2.3 Becker's use of sex/gender distinctions

When we read Becker's *Treatise on the Family* (1981) and follow the text closely, it appears that Becker is here constructing a specific perception of gender, which he links to sex differences; he applies a biological concept of gender differences. How does he do this?

*Start from economic theory of consumer behavior*

Becker starts his analysis with a restatement of the orthodox theory of consumer and household behavior.

>'The traditional theory of consumer and household behavior developed by economists ignores cooperation and conflict among members, in essence assuming that each household has only one member.' (4)

Becker elaborates this model by making a set of major adaptations, while he assumes equal applicability of this model to women and men. Based on this perception Becker introduces

>'the simplest version of traditional theory, a single person spends his (or her) given income to maximize his utility function $U$ of goods and services (for simplicity, called "goods") purchased in the marketplace.' (4-5)

He then proposes the introduction of three new elements into this theory: the allocation of time, and the concepts of 'commodities' and human capital investment. He introduces a time-budget constraint, in addition to the money-income constraint. This enables him to describe household or non-market activities in terms of 'commodities', which are provided by the input of time and market goods. By also introducing the element of human capital investment, the total time available can now be allocated to the household, the market, or the investment sector. Optimal investments of income and time are determined by the marginal investment costs and marginal returns on these investments.

Becker aims at establishing a relation between the division of labor in the family and the optimal output of the family: to theorize the efficient family. Merely making the distinction between market labor and household labor, however, will not achieve this because

>'[r]eturns would depend on the allocation of time between the market and household sectors only if human capital affects the productivity of household and market time differently.' (11)
Thus the increase in productivity through time investment in the market sector should differ from that in the household sector. Becker is not explicit about whether the rise in productivity of market labor would be higher, lower or equal to the rise in productivity in household labor. He only explicitly states that it would need to be different in order to be able to establish a relation between the division of labor in the household and its overall productivity. If the returns on investments in household labor and in market labor were comparable on, let's say, one scale, the overall productivity of the family would

'depend on the value of commodity output, but not in any other way on the allocation of time between the market and household sectors.' (12)

In the second chapter on 'Division of Labor in Households and Families', Becker goes on to found the difference between household activities and market activities - required to establish the relation between the division of labor in the household and the productivity of the family - in the difference between the activities of women and men.

'The most pervasive division is between married women, who traditionally have devoted most of their time to childbearing and other domestic activities, and married men, who have hunted, soldiered, farmed, and engaged in other "market" activities.' (14)

Household activities are here indicated as 'other domestic activities' - as such a rather vague description - and linked to women. (If women farm or slaughter, these activities thereby become household activities). To men a set of activities is ascribed which are referred to as 'market' activities. (1) The meaning of the quotation marks is not entirely clear and they vanish in similar phrases later in the text. What does not change, however, is the way Becker remains vague about what he considers as market activities and what as household activities, or on what basis he makes this distinction. Is it based, for instance, on the distinction between domestic and public, between paid and unpaid or whether the activity is performed in or outside the house? Essentially, this distinction ends up being based on the sex of the person who performs the activity. It is this that enables Becker - this is something he will do later on in the text - to claim a universal character for this distinction; men in all cultures and at all times perform 'other market activities' and everywhere there are women who do 'housework activities and the like'. It is thus that Becker sets out here his biological concept of gender.

Becker then goes on to address the various divisions of labor as partly determined by biological differences and partly by different experiences and different investments in human capital. Becker gives the impression that he applies a broader concept of gender differences than the purely biological one. As we will see, however, Becker's argumentation reduces social and cultural differences to biological ones.

20 'Returns on investments in types of human capital that raise either wage rates or effective goods by the same percent as effective household time would be independent of the allocation of time between the market and household sectors (see Chapter 1).' (20)

21 The activities here referred to, such as hunting, soldering and farming, somehow seem to recall a definite past in which the world was clearly divided into hunters (men) and gatherers (women).
Sex difference as the basis of the division of tasks in the family

Becker continues to articulate the relation between the division of labor in the family and family output by assuming, for the time being, that all members of the household are identical - keeping sex differences constant as it were - and elaborates his argument from there. He formulates five theorems and refers to Adam Smith's notions of the advantage of specialized investment and the division of labor (20). Specialization - presented as a value-neutral and incontestable economic dogma - is regarded as producing gain in a similar way in the family as it does in international trade. Becker stresses that the presence of different sexes in the family would even weaken the degree of specialization, and therefore its positive effects on the level of output.

'Theorem 2.5 All but possibly one member of households with more members than independent commodities would completely specialize their investments and time to the market or to a particular commodity. Moreover, with constant or increasing returns to scale, all members of efficient households must be completely specialized.' (20, emphasis as in the original)

After this is posited, the differences between household labor and market labor in terms of returns on human capital and of commodity output still have to be established. This is when the sexual division of labor in the family again comes in.

'Although the sharp sexual division of labor in all societies between the market and household sectors is partly due to the gains from specialized investments, it is also partly due to intrinsic differences between the sexes.' (21)

As indicated earlier Becker has not yet been very explicit about the sexual division of labor in the family. When he speaks of 'the sharp sexual division of labor in all societies between market and household sectors', this division can thus only be considered 'sharp' in the sense that women (and their activities) can be distinguished from men (and their activities).

Becker here indicates that the sexual division of activities is partly due to specialized investments on the one hand, and, on the other, to intrinsic sex differences. Instead of explaining the contribution of specialized investments to the gender differences in activities, he first sets out to explain the importance of sex differences to the specialization of time investment. Besides the reduction of cultural gender differences to biological differences - specialized investments are regarded here as the affirmation of biological differences - we see that Becker articulates here a specific perception of gender.

Becker describes men's biological contribution to the production of children as limited to the provision of (one) successful sperm.

'A man completes his biological contribution to the production of children when his sperm fertilizes a woman's egg, after which she controls the reproductive process'. (21)

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22 The '-' after a quote indicates that the next quote discussed, follows in Becker (1981) directly on the quote just mentioned.
'Men have been less biologically committed to the care of children, and have spent their time and energy on food, clothing, protection, and other market activities.' (22)

Becker's articulation of concepts such as 'biologically committed' and 'in control of the reproductive process' remains tentative. Note that the conceptualization of 'market activities' appears to include on this occasion all care activities undertaken for children except for the biological aspect, which is assigned to women. Women are, according to Becker, biologically committed to the production of children to such an extent that this it does not leave them much time to engage in men's or 'market activities', which here include food, clothing and protection.

Becker subsequently describes males and females as two different groups.

'Women not only have a heavy biological commitment to the production and feeding of children, but they also are biologically committed to the care of children in other, more subtle ways [footnote: A discussion of some different ways is presented in Rossi (1977)]. Moreover, women have been willing to spend much time and energy caring for their children because they want their heavy biological investment in production to be worthwhile. In addition, a mother can more readily feed and watch her older children while she produces additional children than while she engages in most other activities.' (21-22)

Women's behavior is here more than once posited as biologically based; there is no cultural or social component here. The statement about the willingness of women, however, gives the impression that women are not entirely biology-driven. Women's willingness at the same time, according to Becker, conveniently coincides - how does he know this? and what if this is not the case? - with the tasks assigned to her based on her biology. Note that the narrator and focalizer coincide here and that Becker speaks in a monologic voice explaining nature.

Overall, it can be doubted whether Becker's characterization of the relationship between mother and child as a return on biological investment is in accordance with the experience of many women. In other words, the empirical validity of the statement made here can be questioned. The hypothetical character of this theoretical statement limits the value of the 'insights' into these relations thus produced. It is rather the application of the economic approach than the empirical content thus produced that provides this unusual account of the relationship between mother and child with a specific credibility and attraction.

We now arrive at the point in the text where Becker completes his endeavor to establish a relation between the division of labor in the family and the family output: he posits a difference between women's time and men's time. He does this purely by assumption, the difference being stated as an analytical distinction.

'From biological differences emerges the not-very-startling conclusion that the sex of household members is an important distinguishing characteristic in the production and care of children, and perhaps also in other household
commodities and in the market sector. Analytically, these differences can be distinguished by the assumption that an hour of household or market time of women is not a perfect substitute for an hour of the time of men when they make the same investments in human capital.' (22)

Thus the sex difference is linked to distinctions in male and female activities and tasks, and is now linked to time. Men (market activities/time) are considered 'different' to women (household activities/time). Note here that Becker does not indicate to what extent women's and men's time differ in respect to value: whether men's time is more valuable than women's or on what par they could be compared. Even the way the time of women and men differ remains vague.

Completing his argument on the sexual division of labor in the family by referring to 'other biological species', Becker asserts that

'[t]his sexual division of labor has been found in virtually all human societies, and in most other biological species that fertilize eggs within the body of the female'. (23)

Finally, once again, as a final accord, now based on supposedly universal experience as asserted above, Becker states that

'[s]ince the biological natures of men and women differ, the assumption that the time of men and women are perfect substitutes even at a rate different from unity is not realistic.' (23)

2.4 Becker's perception of gender

Becker's perception of gender is further developed as he goes on to discuss the complementary character of women's and men's time.

'Indeed, their times are complements in sexual enjoyment, the production of children, and possibly other commodities produced by the household. Complementarity implies that households with men and women are more efficient than households with only one sex, but because both sexes are required to produce certain commodities complementarity reduces the sexual division of labor in the allocation of time and investments.' (23)

When men and women do things together, this is understood here as complementary activity (which has its basis in their perceived roles in reproduction). This means that when

23 The empirical confirmation Becker provides here in passing is somewhat less than refined. After the eggs or the young animals leave the body of the mother, all kinds of sexual divisions of caring labor between the male and the female do occur. All of these could be used as examples for human behavior.
husband and wife do something together (e.g. drink tea or paint the house) the husband will do the male part of the activity and the wife the female part. Women have a comparative advantage in the household

''if the ratio of the marginal product in the household to the wage rate in the market is higher for women than for men when both supply the same amount of time to the household and when both invest in the same human capital. A woman with such a comparative advantage supplies more time to the household and less to the market than a man, and these time allocations are more different when the time of the two members is less complementary and more substitutable.' (23) --

When women and men do not do things together their time is considered substitutable. The more they do not do things together, the more different are their time allocations. It remains unexplained how and against what rate the time allocations in the different activities should be perceived and valued. Note that the distinction between specialized investments and the allocation of time itself becomes blurred at this point. From here on, Becker starts to link specialized investments to the sex of persons.

'Since specialized investments depend on the allocation of time, the investments of men and women more strongly reinforce their biological differences when differences in comparative advantage are larger and complementarities weaker.' (23-24) --

The circle is complete and Becker here relates biological differences between women and men to specialized investment in time and time allocation: investing more time in a career makes one more of a man, whether you are an accountant, a football player or a secretary. Again, he does so without making any statement about the relative value of market/men's time vis-à-vis household/women's time. We will come to that later.

In the text an affirmation of Becker's argument by reference to 'reality' now follows:

'Apparently, differences in comparative advantage and in investments have been more important than complementarities because women traditionally have allocated much more time to the household than men have.' (24) --

Where earlier in the text the causality ran from comparative advantages to the division of work in the household, Becker now states that there are more comparative advantages than complementarities, because - now comes an empirical statement - 'traditionally women have allocated more time to the household'.

Moreover, since 'more time to the household' is a rather vague concept to base your theory on, Becker here asserts again the conceptualization of the relations between women and men as characterized either by comparative advantages or by complementarity.
'Yet complementarities cannot be unimportant, especially in modern times; women are becoming less specialized in household activities, and men are spending more time at household activities.' (24) --

In this assertion Becker indicates that when women become more active in men's (market) activities and men in women's (household) activities, complementarities must be important. Thus an increase in the amount of household labor performed by men is directly linked to men's biological functions. The work men do in the household can never be the same as what women do, as in that case it would be substitutable and, because women are more productive in the household than men, this increase would contradict Becker's theory. Thus men are regarded as doing only their complementary 'manly' part in household work, and that part (therefore) concerns the quality rather than quantity of children.

Later in the book, in chapter four on assortative mating, Becker explicitly constructs gender relations as based on different and complementary traits. He does this where he formalizes the relations between women and men. He assumes that men and women are related mainly because they differ in the quantitative traits $A_m$ and $A_f$ and that each trait has a positive marginal productivity (71). All traits, which they might have more or less in common, are excluded from conceptualization, since their relations are considered to be based on different and complementary traits.

Investment affirms biology, normal versus deviant
What people have considered over the ages as household activities is not fixed. It differs over centuries, cultures and countries. This is even more the case in respect to what are considered to be market activities or what is 'marketed' at all. Becker does not clarify or define what he perceives as household activities, nor what he considers to be market activities. Having arrived at this point in the text, Becker considers this issue settled, which enables him to refer to biological differences between women and men, differences in household and market activities, and differences in the value of time, to formulate the distinction between specialized investments.

'Since investment differences reinforce biological differences, biological comparative advantage cannot be readily disentangled from specialized investments. There is an additional reason for the difficulty of separating the two.' (24) --

Instead of discussing the contribution of specialized investments (education, training, etc.) to the creation of comparative advantages, specialized investments are assumed to reinforce biological differences and even to coincide with them.

'Since specialized investments begin while boys and girls are very young (rates of return to human capital investments are higher at a younger ages; see Chapter I), they are made prior to full knowledge of the biological orientation of children, which is often not revealed until the teens and even later.' (24)
After having indicated, later in the text, that girls should learn girls' things and boys learn boy's things (whatever these may be), Becker applies to children within this system of sexually segregated education the labels 'normal' and 'deviant'. After that he returns to their - by now apparently established - 'biology'.

*In this manner investments in children with "normal" orientations reinforce their biology, and they become specialized to the usual sexual division of labor. Investments in "deviant" children, on the other hand, conflict with their biology, and the net outcome for them is not certain. For some, their biology might dominate and they would seek a deviant division of labor, with men in the household and women in the market.* (24, emphasis added)

Here biological normality is derived from normative notions about women's and men's behavior and applied as the norm for social and economic behavior.

Until now Becker has been shown to apply a biological concept of gender differences and a complementary and dichotomous perception of masculinity and femininity. While remaining vague about the content of masculinity and femininity - except that women and men are different and complementary - Becker presents gender not so much as a product of social and political relations, but rather as something that precedes culture and that is static, unchangeable and universal.

### 2.5 Therefore men earn more than women...

From here Becker turns to the difference in earnings on the labor market and in the household, and to the biological difference in time.

'Specialized investments and time allocation together with biological differences in comparative advantage imply that married men specialize in the market sector and married women in the household sector. Therefore the market wage rates of married men will exceed those of married women, partly because women spend more time in the household and invest more in household human capital.' (25)

Becker still does not discuss the value of time spent on household work except in vague terms, as for instance where he addresses the production of children. What he does establish is that the experience of women, acquired by their work in the household or by specialized time investment in human capital, does not add to their human capital for the market. Instead of explaining this cultural phenomenon, Becker establishes here that women's human capital investment in household capital is by definition not useful for the market and therefore results in a lower wage when they do work in the market. To support this statement, he provides a table on 'Earnings and hours and weeks worked in the marketplace in the United States, by sex and marital status.' This way he links his theoretical constructs and considerations to actual people, i.e. women and men in the US in 1970 and 1977.
When Becker becomes explicit on the relative value of men's time and women's time, he discusses their relative time value at the market, stating that

'[w]age rates are lower for women at least partly because they invest less than men in market human capital, while the productivity of household time is presumably greater for women partly because they invest more than men in household capital. The time of women is worth less than the time of men at younger and older ages, but is worth more during the peak children-rearing years when women are very busy and productive. Since women are more likely to enter the labor force when their household time is worth less, a false inference is drawn from their lower earnings in the labor force about the time value of all women compared to all men.' (26, emphasis added)

He subsequently provides a graph in which he sets out 'Life-cycle variations in the value of time of men and women' with the axes 'the value of time of men and women' and 'age'. The graph indicates the age at which women leave or return to the labor market. He indicates here that 'the average value of time over the lifetime may not be lower for women than for men, even though women's time is less valuable whenever they work in the marketplace.' (27, emphasis as in the original) Becker thus claims that the value of women's time during the period that the children are small exceeds the value of the time of men in the same age group; in this period women's productivity is higher than that of men. Becker implicitly asserts some kind of valuation here by showing the relative wage rate and the valuation of housewife production in one graph. Becker's perception of productivity in household labor appears to be chiefly in biological terms in the sense of producing children. It appears that the value of household time is merely derived from the outcome. When women work at home the value of household time is higher than their market time. As we will see later on however, the lack of conceptualization and theorization of women's activities - the valuation of household time, its contribution to family output, and the contribution of specialized time investment in household capital to increasing the productivity of household time - eventually ends in the invisibilization of the wife's contribution to family output at the end of the book.

This does not mean that the analytical distinction Becker makes between household work and market work and the time investment therein is in itself not a valid one. Nor does this mean that this distinction does not play an important role in bringing about and reproducing the division of labor in families. The human capital built up in the household is indeed in many cultures considered differently than market work: as worth less than that acquired in paid labor. Moreover, human capital created through household labor is often not considered to add to the human capital relevant for market labor. The way Becker states the household-market dichotomy as a biological phenomenon, however, provides him with an explanation of the resulting division of income between the sexes. Thus he does not end up with something that requires considerably more attention and research, as he uses biology as the ultimate explanation.

'Chapter 3 shows that women have less incentive to invest in human capital than men do when the number of children is the main result of marriage, and
that the incentives of men and women are more equal when the "quality" of children is important. Women do receive considerably less schooling than men in poor countries that emphasize numbers, and about equal schooling in rich countries that emphasize quality [...]." (27) --

To cover cultural differences, Becker introduces a set of additional distinctions (rich-poor countries, quality-quantity of children) that nevertheless give rise to a number of contradictions, especially where the definition of women's productivity is concerned. Where before women's high productivity consisted of producing a lot of children and being 'very busy', having a lot of children is now an indication that the wife has less human capital, which means lower productivity and thus a lower value of time. Concerning families that have only few children (where women are biologically less productive and household time is of thus of lower value compared to women who have more children), Becker states that these women live in rich countries that emphasize quality. The value of quantity is thus replaced by the valuation of quality, which makes women's household productivity again higher than their market productivity. Becker remains vague about how the quality of children is to be assessed, and what kind and how much productive labor is required to produce it.

'Therefore, in poor countries the average value of the time of women tends to be lower than that of men; in rich countries the value of the time of women is more equal to that of men. Explanations of behavior in rich countries that assume a much lower value of time for women may be misled by the much lower market earnings of women [...].' (27)

Further articulating his perception of gender, Becker now turns to the mutual dependency between spouses. According to Becker, specialization creates a dependency on others for certain tasks.

'Women have traditionally relied on men for provision of food, shelter, and protection, and men have traditionally relied on women for the bearing and rearing of children and the maintenance of the home.' (27, emphasis added)

Instead of stating this claim as what it is, namely a theoretical proposition, Becker postulates it as a fact, without providing any empirical foundation. This description of the family contains an archaic24 or, perhaps better, a romanticized image of family life, this notwithstanding the fact that Becker, as we will see, is not romantic at all about family relations in general.

24 It is not entirely clear what Becker is referring to here. If he refers to pre-modern times, his statements are not correct, since women (though often in segregated activities) did not rely on men but substantially contributed to family production and income by doing their share of work (farming, weaving or whatever) just as men did. (See e.g. Clark 1919, Rowbotham 1973, Wiesner 1993.) This would also be the case if Becker would be referring, for instance, to traditional contemporary societies such as those in rural parts of Africa and South America.
2.6 Masculine perspectives in the rest of the book

'Chapter 2 showed that over the years most households in Western and Eastern societies have been headed by married men and women who raise their own children. Wives usually have specialized in the care of children and other household activities, while husbands usually have specialized in providing necessities and in other market activities. Marriage includes a contract that has protected specialized women with limited alternatives against abandonment, neglect, and other treatment by their husbands.' (38)

Becker here sums up the image of the household he has established so far. On the one hand this picture of a family seems sufficiently vague to fit all societies at all times. On the other hand it is elaborated well enough to be applied in the analysis of the family since it provides an explanation of the division of labor in the family, of specialization in household and in market labor, and of the dependent position of the care giver.

Becker gives here a rather one-sided account from a masculine perspective of the discussion on the institution of marriage. There are various views on the aims and grounds of the marriage contract. Explanations left out of this account are, for instance, those in which the marriage contract is regarded as an assurance for the husband that the children he raises are his own and to provide regular sex and dominance over the wife. 25

Shifts in perception of gender

In the rest of the book, Becker elaborates a set of themes around which he applies and extends the perception of the family built up in the earlier chapters. Two shifts in the perception of gender can be seen in the elaboration of Becker's analysis throughout the rest of the book.

The first is that women's time investment in household human capital vanishes from the analysis. Where Becker started out with a distinction between human capital for the household and market human capital, from Chapter 3 'Polygamy and Monogamy in Marriage Markets' onwards he equates 'investments in human capital' with 'schooling for the market'. Thus schooling can no longer contribute to the increase in the productivity of household time and vice versa; an increase in household productivity is no longer considered as an increase in human capital.

The second shift encompasses the disappearance from the analysis of women's contribution to family output. I shall continue here to follow Becker in making this second shift, and subsequently discuss the perception of gender Becker ends up with at the conclusion of the book.

In Chapter 3 on 'Polygamy and Monogamy in Marriage Markets', Becker discusses women's contribution to family output, without however including this in his formalizations. Becker argues here that polygyny can be considered as more or less the basic form of marriage; monogamy is perceived as created by law and polyandry is reported as a form of marriage that does not occur very frequently.

25 See e.g. Bebel 1879, Engels 1884, J.S. Mill 1869.
Moreover, polyandry is also rare and polygyny common among nonhuman species (see Chapter 9), which may suggest that more basic considerations than legal restrictions have determined the incidence of polygamy in human societies. (47)

Becker sets out the conditions under which polygamy would be important and discusses its effects on family output. Becker indicates that polygyny has a positive effect on men's investments in superior skills, and raises most women's income. Considering polygyny as determined by 'more basic considerations than legal restrictions',

'[e]quilibrium requires that the marginal product of wives diminish as their number increases; otherwise, the most efficient man would marry all women.' (49)

We are speaking here of marginal product in terms of producing and raising children. When the quality of children is valued more highly than their quantity, Becker explains the decrease in polygyny by men's larger marginal contribution to quality than to quantity (53). The perceived change in women's contribution to output is not assessed in money terms, but remains a theoretical concept, which is not further operationalized.

Since women's contribution to output consists to a considerable extent of the production and care of children, we can expect some clarity from Becker's discussion in Chapter 5 of 'The Demand for Children'. Becker addresses here the effects of the cost of children and real income on fertility and on the quantity and quality of children. The wife's contribution to her children's endowments through allocating time to caring and rearing activities vanishes here from the analysis. Becker does this by stating that elements such as inherited endowments like intelligence are difficult to measure and, by means of mathematical manipulation, reducing endowments to real income.

'The demand for children can be better discussed after adding a fixed cost of each child, \( p_r \), that includes time, expenditure, discomfort, and risk spent in pregnancy and delivery, governmental child allowances (a negative cost), the cost of avoiding pregnancies and deliveries, and all other psychic and monetary expenditures on children that are largely independent of quality.' (107)

Here the concept of what is characterized as 'the production process of children' is replaced by a demand and supply approach to the number of children.

'Unfortunately, these demand functions [for the quantity and quality of children, EK] cannot be directly estimated. Endowments are difficult to measure, since little is known about the cultural and biological inheritance of many characteristics [...]. However, endowments can be eliminated, and the quantity and quality of children can be related only to own incomes, lagged quantities and qualities, and luck.' (132)
Subsequently the inequality in family incomes and the intergenerational mobility of endowments from parents to children is analyzed as dependent on family parameters, especially the inheritability of endowments, the propensity to invest in children and the incidental and market luck of children. Thus the contribution of women is reduced to and measured by the income of the husband and/or the income and luck of the child. Becker then concludes that:

'[t]he theory readily incorporates the effects of luck, family background, assortative mating, and cultural, biological, and financial inheritance on the distribution of income. Furthermore, inequality within a generation and inequality across generations do not require separate economic and sociological approaches; both can be analyzed with a unified theory of the determination of the incomes of different families in different generations.' (166)

A masculine perspective on power, dependency and altruism in the family

By Chapter 8 ('Altruism in the Family'), the two shifts discussed above are completed and converge. The conceptualization of the family as articulated in this chapter 'follows' (also literally) the analysis in the previous chapters. Becker began his analysis of the family by characterizing husband and wife as partners in a productive process. Having established specialization in different spheres, the difference in the value of the husband's and the wife’s time, the complementarity and dependency of wife and husband and the fact that the main part of the income is brought in by the husband, Becker now formalizes a hierarchical and asymmetrical perception of gender relations in the family.

Subsequently he applies a masculine perspective from which these relations are further discussed. The economic analysis of the altruistic family set out here posits the husband as main character: he is the one who brings in the money, who decides how to spend the money and whose utility function represents that of the family. The husband is the economic agent and the wife’s perspective in this scenario is controlled, if not ignored: both the acknowledgment of her productive contribution to the family and of her economic agency (in the form of a distinct utility function) are missing.

Becker does this by introducing the concept of altruism. This concept, generally associated with women, is here used to characterize the behavior of the husband within the family. Becker formalizes this perception of the family by expressing the utility of the wife in the utility function of the husband. Stated in these terms, all income is perceived as payment for productive labor in the market (performed mostly by the husband). The wife’s income is not regarded as payment for her productive contribution to the family, but conceptualized as gifts from an altruistic husband.

'Clearly, h[usband, EK] not only allocates his own income between his consumption and contributions to w[ife, EK] but also determines the total consumption of his beneficiary.' (174-175, emphasis in the original)

This conceptualization of the behavior of husband and wife in the family implies a denial of the productive contribution by the wife to the production of commodities in the family. It
posits the wife as totally dependent on the income of the husband. Moreover, it implies that
the husband first appropriates all commodities produced in the family after which he
subsequently decides how much to give to the wife. The husband's choice on how to spend
'his' money is here analyzed as a choice between spending the income on himself (which
produces utility) or spending it on his wife (also producing utility). In the elaboration of
Becker's final conceptualization of the relation between husband and wife, Becker
consistently adopts the perspective of the husband, the wife's agency being canceled:

'An altruist is made better off by actions that raise his family income and worse
off by actions that lower it. Since family income is the sum of his own and his
beneficiary's income, he would refrain from actions that raise his own income
if they lower hers even more; [...]'. (177)

Yes, that would not be wise, especially because he distributes all her income. It is not clear,
though, why the income of the husband and that of the wife would be interdependent.
Becker's altruist however, fears for the behavior of his wife, who

'would be willing to increase her own income at the expense of family income if
the increase exceeds the contribution from her benefactor. He would be harmed
because he is pushed to a "corner" where he stops contributing to her, but she
is made better off because the increase in her income exceeds the reduction in
his contribution.' (180)

In this discussion of the economic behavior of the beneficiary Becker indicates that when
the beneficiary's income is independent of that of the altruist, the beneficiary just
maximizes her income (as is assumed of any other economic agent). Therefore, her
behavior needs to be controlled, which is here paradoxically stated as if she is the one in
control of her benefactor's actions. If she raises her income and he lowers her allowance by
a greater amount than her increase in income, then she has to consider his actions, and will
probably refrain from raising her income.

'However, his contribution is not beyond her control. For example, if raising
her own income has the effect of lowering his even more, he would reduce his
contribution to her by more than the increase in her income (if his contribution
had been larger than the increase in her income) because family income goes
down; hence the optimal level of her consumption also goes down[...].' (178)

In this case the altruist lowers his contribution to the beneficiary in the event of a decrease
in family income caused by an increase in her income. Becker elaborates here a rather
unusual case in which the wife starts working and thereby causes the total income of the
family to go down (instead of up, which happens when more money comes in). (Notice that
'the effect of lowering his even more' is stated as an unavoidable effect, and not as a
conscious decision on the part of the altruist to punish and control the beneficiary). Becker
needs this assumption for his explanation of the behavior of the beneficiary.

Here the assessment of the relative value of the decrease in household time spent
vis-à-vis the increase in income obtained in the market becomes urgent again. It appears that it is the husband who decides this issue. According to Becker, the altruist decreases the allowance of the beneficiary when the increase in her income is perceived by the altruist as lowering family income. This is also the case when his valuation of her decreasing time spent on household activities outruns his valuation of her extra income (her utility is expressed through his). In this case

'she as well as he would then be worse off, and she would be discouraged by her own selfish interest from actions that harmed him.' (178)

Note here that it is no longer family income that is at stake here, but 'actions that harmed him'. In a situation where she is totally dependent on her husband, the beneficiary will indeed take his whims into account, when for instance, considering participation on the labor market.

Becker does acknowledge the difference of interests between husband and wife that materialize in this situation.

'Of course, the interests of altruistic benefactors and selfish beneficiaries are not identical.' (179)

Against all odds, it is the husband here - pictured as the altruist - who is constantly under threat of exploitation.

'Selfish beneficiaries like larger contributions than their benefactors are willing to make.' (179)

Becker argues then, in line with Adam Smith's famous proposition on the benevolence of the butcher, that the husband need not rely on 'the benevolence of his wife, that he expect his dinner, but from her regard to her own self-interest'. By conceptualizing the beneficiary as totally dependent on the altruist and by stressing that her behavior (raising her income) invokes his reaction (lowering her allowance), he is able to conclude that the wife will take the interests of her husband to heart and act accordingly. By subsequently denying the dependence of the wife and positing this situation as voluntary, as 'led by the invisible hand', the situation becomes a pleasant one from the husband's perspective.

There is a problematic side effect to this perception of marital relations, however, in that it implies the corruption of the love between husband and wife. In this situation, the husband can never rely on the love of his wife, because he will never know to what extent it is sincere or corrupted by her being dependent on him. This, however, seems to be the price he has to pay in order to be sure that he gets what he wants.

'Since a selfish beneficiary wants to maximize family income, she is led by the invisible hand of self-interest to act as if she is altruistic toward her benefactor. Put still differently, the scarce resource "love" is used economically, [...] because sufficient caring by an altruist induces even a selfish beneficiary to act as if she cares about her benefactor as much as she cares about her self.' (179)
For the wife, things are different, as

'positive income for a beneficiary appears to require that her utility be a superior commodity to her benefactor.' (179, emphasis as in the original)

When we 'read as a woman' and apply the perspective of the wife in this text, we realize that the wife – contrary to Adam Smith's assertion - has to talk to her husband about her necessities all the time. She is not able to trust his self-interest in these matters, but instead is fully dependent on his 'love' for her, and thus on her ability to satisfy his wants. However, this does not seem to create a problem for Becker, who makes a plea for the altruistic family, because

'an altruistic family can be said to have a family utility function that is voluntarily maximized by all members regardless of the distribution of family income (as long as the altruist is not driven to a corner).' (191)

It is Becker's masculine perspective that, in his account of the family, enables him to come to a conclusion that not only denies conflicts, but postulates what can only be considered as a wholly exploitative relationship as one based on voluntary agreement.

Becker then discusses the efficiency of selfishness and altruism in the family and in the market and concludes that altruistic families are more efficient than selfish families. Altruistic families invest more in children, and therefore these children are more successful (197).

After a discussion of the application of his model of family behavior to the animal world and a discussion of the relation between imperfect information, marriage and divorce, Becker discusses in his last chapter traditional versus modern societies and the future of the family. Here he indicates a decrease in the importance of the family and an increase in the extent of the market. For him the resulting decline in fertility contains a threat to the family. However,

'a sufficient slowing of the pace of development could eventually raise fertility and also reverse the trends in other aspects of family behavior.' (255)

From this remark we conclude that Becker values the restoration of traditional family relations (i.e. where the head of the household earns the money, with a dependent wife who takes care of the kids and works hard to look after her husband) more highly than economic development. This is at the very least a peculiar strategy for an economist to suggest.

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26 Becker is not explicit as to which countries and cultures he considers as 'traditional'. 'In modern societies markets facilitate trade and production, and dynamic economic environments rapidly change technologies, incomes, and opportunities.' (1981, 242)
2.7 Conclusions

In this chapter, I investigated the use of sex/gender distinctions, perceptions of gender and use of masculine perspective in *A Treatise of the Family* (1981). In this book Becker applies to the family 'the economic approach' - characterized by assumptions such as maximizing behavior, stable preferences and the coordination of the behavior of different individuals by implicit and explicit markets. Becker's representation of economic science by postulating the neoclassical economic approach (by means of four assumptions) as the economic approach that contains the product of two centuries of economic theorizing, is a clear case of canonization. It leaves out two centuries of academic debate and makes other non-neoclassical economic approaches invisible, or implies that they are non-economic.

In his theorization of the efficient family he starts from the base model for consumer behavior. It is as part of this approach that he introduces elements such as time constraints, 'commodities' and (investments in) human capital. He includes Adam Smith's theorem of gain by specialization, the trade theoretical notion of comparative advantages and various other economic notions such as 'complementarity' and 'productivity' in his analysis. This to establish a universal social analysis of the family.

The analysis conducted so far showed that Becker applies in this text a biological concept of gender differences. The distinction between market and household activities, fundamental to his theorization of the division of labor in the family, is linked to and based on sex difference. Becker refrains from defining the market/household activities distinction in any clear-cut way. Feeding or clothing the children, for instance, is sometimes a market (and men's) activity and in other cases a task for women (and a household activity). These changes may, of course, empirically be the case. However, in order to explain anything, these basic concepts need to be specified at the theoretical level and not to change to adjust for anomalies. Subsequently Becker makes a distinction in the value of women's and men's time, and once women's and men's biological orientation towards either household or market activities has been posited, specialized investment and comparative advantages are also explained by sex difference. As doing things together for a man and a woman means Becker performing complementary activities, biological difference between women and men becomes a fundamental ordering principle that fully determines the lives and activities performed by both women and men.

Throughout his analysis of the family, Becker constructs a specific perception of gender. He starts with equality between women and men and then proceeds, step by step, to articulate and conceptualize masculinity and femininity as different and complementary. In the end, the perception of gender in Becker's 'efficient' family can be characterized as hierarchical and asymmetrical. It is the head of the household who earns the money and disposes of family income, whereas the wife is perceived, at least in the last part of the book, as fully dependent on her husband. While her work and contribution to household productivity disappear from view, the dependence of the husband on the wife is not acknowledged.

In the elaboration of his arguments, Becker's perspective is predominantly a masculine one. In discussions on, for instance, the aims of marriage, cheating, polygyny, altruism, he consistently applies the husband's perspective. This impacts on the content of his conclusions, as was shown in the discussion of the voluntary behavior of members of
the efficient family and of women's contribution to family output. There is space in Becker's analysis neither for ambiguity about gender meanings nor for cultural differences concerning gender notions. Biology, or rather his perception of it, provides Becker with univocal answers.

Becker's reasoning is of a dualist character. Referring only incidentally to empirical data to confirm his arguments, he orders his material by describing people, education, attraction, and race by terms such as 'more or less', 'inferior or superior'. These conceptualizations in terms of oppositions prevent ambiguities being acknowledged and leave no room for differentiations and nuances in considerations on these matters.

The masculine perspective as applied by Becker leads him into two paradoxes. The first concerns Becker's initial definition of the problem, which he describes as current threats to the family. He mentions here the increased labor participation of women as causing all kinds of problems for the family. This articulation of the central issue calls for an analysis of the element in family life that creates problems when it is no longer available, namely the presence and work of the wife in the household. It is not this issue however, that Becker addresses in his analysis. On the contrary, it is precisely the contribution made by women that he excludes, or rather drives out of his analysis. He initially refers to it but then literally does not value it. Subsequently he describes it as self-evident, later on he denies it and then explains that it would (or should) be present in an efficient (that is to say, altruistic) family. At the end of the book, the reader is left with an account of the family that, instead of analyzing the issue of the disappearance of women's work in the household, ignores women's contribution to family output and calls for a restoration of traditional gender relations. It is Becker's invocation of biology on the one hand and the alleged success of the efficient family on the other that enables him to argue the importance of this organization of gender relations. Thus he can do without the acknowledgement of the value and content of women's contribution to the family without referring to any political or institutional consideration.

The other paradox that occurs is linked to the one described above and has to do with Becker's solution to the problem of how to restore the efficient family that threatens to lose out by its own success. He suggests that a slow-down in economic development would force women back into the household, which would provide the solution to many problems. This 'solution' however, is contradictory not only because he is an economist, but also because it is the economic success that justifies the organization of the efficient family. At the end of his book Becker states this success seems to be secondary to the restoration of the 'efficient' family.

At various points Becker gives the impression that he aims to place gender differences in a broader perspective than the purely biological. He stresses the importance of education and of culture, but sticks to the biological concept of gender that regards women as having their comparative advantage within the family, and men theirs on the market.

This leaves us with at least three questions: as economists such as Becker lean heavily on economic concepts redefining gender, in what way are these concepts gendered? Instead of canonizing them as Becker does - postulating them as a-historical and value-neutral - we need to investigate these concepts, texts and quotes he refers to in their historical context, to open up their hidden and implicit meanings.
A second question concerns the contribution of this text to feminist and general economics: what is Becker doing here; what is the contribution of this text to a sophisticated conceptualization of gender? This question also requires a broader perspective than can be produced by a textual analysis alone. We need to know more about the economic body of thought available to Becker, the state of the debate in economics, Becker's position in this debate, the contemporary perceptions of gender and, among other things, the gender structure of society at the time this book was published.

The third and last question is how can gender be conceptualized to break out of Becker's straitjacket in which perceived differences between women and men are time and time again reduced to their biological difference?
The neoclassical perspective on applied economics, particularly in relation to Becker's solution, is analyzed with an emphasis on the role of the family in solving economic problems. Becker's initial definition of the problem, which provides the foundation for his analysis, is critically examined. He introduces here the important notion of "marginal utility," an important concept in economics. The analysis of the elements in family life that economics traditionally has not been available, namely the economic and social roles of the wife in the household, is also investigated. It is noted, however, that Becker's analysis in this area is in need of further development.

The concept of the "efficient" family is central to Becker's solution. He refers to an "efficient" family as one that minimizes the cost of producing children. However, it is argued that this concept is flawed, as it fails to account for the costs of raising children, which are not always reflected in the economic analysis.

Becker's solution, which is based on the idea of the "efficient" family, is criticized for its failure to consider the social and cultural dimensions of family life. The solution is seen as insufficient in addressing the social and cultural aspects of family life, which are crucial in understanding the economic behavior of individuals.

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