CRITICAL STUDIES
OF GENDER EQUALITIES

Nordic dislocations, dilemmas and contradictions

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“Yes, well, of course, a few camels have to be swallowed now and then. And there really wouldn’t be much point in constantly quarrelling about the other’s behaviour: none of us would be able to stand it.” These were the words of Vivi, a Danish woman with two children around ten years of age, as she and her husband Valdemar were telling an interviewer about their thoughts on equality and fairness in their marriage. Her husband had just explained that his personal goals sometimes took precedence over the needs of the family, but that of course his goals also sometimes bowed to the needs of the family. It was then Vivi commented that there are occasions when she has to swallow camels; i.e. has to accept that her husband does not always take her needs into consideration.

This chapter explores how a number of Danish, Finnish and Swedish women and men in couples with children talk about equality and fairness when they are interviewed together. In focus here is what such concepts seem to mean when they are used explicitly in conversation. The chapter thus studies “gender equality” as a discursive phenomenon that may be put to different uses. Exploring these uses shows that a variety of meanings of gender equality, fairness and justice are active in the couples’ talk and that these meanings are sometimes contradictory. In many couples the meanings seem to be twisted and turned within the matrix of normative heterosexual life patterns, such that words like “equality” and “fairness” lose much of
their potential rhetorical force. The analyses in this chapter focus specifically on such couples, i.e. those who de-legitimate gender equality and its importance in their daily lives, and their strategies of de-legitimation.

Let us return to Vivi and Valdemar. They told the interviewer that they very seldom had thoroughgoing discussions about each partner’s freedom of movement and access to resources. Instead, they reacted to events and situations one at a time, as they occurred. One example of this strategy occurred when the interviewer asked if they had a fair distribution of all the different housework tasks. They both answered ‘yes’ to this question, and Vivi then continued: “…but it’s not as if we have sat down and said ‘Is it fair if I pick up the kids from daycare, or is it if you do?’ In that sense it is what is most practical there and then, and not what’s most equitable, that carries the most weight.” For them the ongoing, daily practical, “there and then” was more important than equality goals, in the short and the long run; in the same way that peace at home seemed superior to justice and fairness.

Talking about gender equality in the manner of Vivi and her husband was a very common occurrence in the study of thirty Danish, Finnish and Swedish heterosexual couples with children that forms the empirical basis for this chapter. Jenny, one of the Finnish women, said: “Well, there haven’t really been many things to discuss. This has been sort of the most adequate distribution [of work tasks] anyway, I think.” Gunilla, one of the Swedish women, said: “Often, one can’t choose, anyway, because a thing sort of has to get done, and the children need to get driven places, and things have to get finished. Well, then you don’t stand there fussing about ‘who does what?’, but you just do it so that it gets done.”

“The practical attitude” and the desire for “peace at home” did not prevail in all couples, however. For instance, Jaana, one of the Finnish women, explained: “But I am so strong that I always tell Jarmo that ‘If you didn’t do that, I couldn’t stand living with you!’ If I had a man who didn’t participate, I wouldn’t put up with him. I really wouldn’t want to live with him, with such a man. It is that important that these things are fair.” Sofie, a Danish woman, gave her views on men who do not participate equally at home: “I think men who can’t toast a piece of bread, or can’t find out that white clothes shouldn’t be washed with red clothes are strange – I think that’s basically rather pathetic. And then I think ‘there must be something wrong with his brain.’” She finished by saying that she would never be able to respect her husband if he did not participate in the housework on the same basis that she does. These justice-oriented couples will not appear in this chapter (for more about them, see Magnusson, 2006).

In this chapter the main focus is on how the legitimacy of concepts such as gender equality and fairness is often undermined by the presence of other discourses and daily
practices. I investigate what the concepts are taken to mean when couples use them explicitly, and when these uses serve to de-legitimate them as agents for change. The narratives that my analyses build upon are part of a Nordic research project in which women and men in heterosexual couples with children have given accounts of how they organise their daily lives. The next section briefly describes this study.

**The study “Politics and gender in Nordic families: Danish, Finnish and Swedish heterosexual couples’ negotiations about gender constructions and gender equality”**

Although there is strong political agreement in the Nordic countries that equality between women and men should be favoured as a goal for politics and reforms, there is less agreement about the details of what this should mean in daily practice – for instance in the family. The political agreement seems vague enough to open up spaces where many meanings of gender and gender equality may proliferate. Sometimes these meanings are contradictory, and sometimes they are even counter-productive, i.e. inhibiting rather than promoting change (Bergqvist et al, 1999). That such is the case is indicated by surveys showing that housework and family responsibilities are unevenly distributed between cohabiting women and men with children. Women do most of the work connected to home and children (Deding and Lausten, 2004; Lausten and Sjørup, 2003; Statistics Finland, 2001; Statistics Sweden, 2004).

In the study “Politics and gender in Nordic families: Danish, Finnish and Swedish heterosexual couples’ negotiations about gender constructions and gender equality”, we wanted to investigate connections between political equality discourses on the national level and the ways in which cohabiting heterosexual couples make their own sense of gender and gender equality. To that end, we interviewed cohabiting men and women together, to enable them to give their joint accounts of their everyday lives as parents, workers, and partners. We interviewed thirty couples with children; ten from each of Denmark, Finland and Sweden. We selected couples that conformed to the “prototypical” picture of families in these countries, in that they consisted of a man and a woman who were the biological parents of the children in the family. They were selected to achieve similar distributions across educational levels and children’s ages, as well as across types of geographical location (cities, towns, small communities) in all three countries. All participants were of ethnically Danish, Finnish or Swedish descent.

We wanted to target the “ideals”, those families that most of the gender equality propaganda until recently has been aimed at (Törnqvist, in this volume).

We asked all couples to tell us who usually did each of ten of the most common
household chores (cooking, shopping, vacuuming, laundry, watering the plants, etc.). We added up the answers for each couple, and obtained a “scale” where the extremes consisted of couples where the woman did all but one or two of the chores, versus couples where the chores were evenly divided between the partners. About one-third of the couples gave answers that summed into roughly equal distributions, and one-third into the most unequal distributions. The remaining couples were situated in between these extremes. In the analyses presented in this chapter I sometimes relate these groupings to patterns in the accounts of the couples interviewed. In this respect, the couples we interviewed did not deviate from the general patterns of sharing found in their respective countries.

The couples produced their narratives in a situation where not only both were present but where they were also giving their accounts together to an outsider. We expected such a situation to bring out what we might call their “official versions” of their family: the picture that they wanted to present to a friendly and interested outsider. Within this conversational situation, the study investigated how the women and men in these couples recruited, and put to use, culturally available gendered discourses when they talked about their daily practices and about themselves and each other. This chapter focuses on one part of this overall purpose: how couples shape their accounts when they are explicitly reflecting on their own – and others’ – gender equality situation. The focus is on the majority of couples who seemed to regard achieving equality in their relationship as secondary to many other considerations.

The social production of gender equality accounts

This study has its basis in constructionist and narrative frames of reference (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001a, b). This means seeing people’s identity projects and their takes on daily life as shaped, to a great extent and through language practices, by culturally determined ways of understanding events and activities. People are always ‘who they are’ in relation to the self-understandings culturally available to them. People use those ways of understanding the world that are made available to them in their particular milieu by adopting, transforming or resisting them. When a person selects her identity from available discourses she is also re-constituted as a subject at the same time as she enters or “consumes” her chosen discourse (Edley, 2001). In these processes people are active co-creators, but since the co-creation seldom takes place under altogether equal conditions, some restrictions always remain. Certain restrictions stem more or less directly from the “larger” society, in the form of legislation or labour market and workplace practices. Other restrictions, seen from the individual person’s horizon,
stem from his or her immediate surroundings, often the people he or she lives with (Kaschak, 1992; Rosenwald, 1992).

In interviews, as in other speech situations, people to some extent form themselves by “doing identity”, that is to say through the telling of stories about themselves and others. They do this within available story frames or discourses that are limiting and enabling in culturally specific ways (Bruner, 1991; Magnusson, 1998). When two people who live together as a heterosexual couple give such accounts of themselves power issues can be expected to be present, but perhaps not often in an easily discernible form. For instance, when it comes to the day-to-day practice of a couple who live together, it is often unclear who “decides” in respect of a specific matter, especially since interaction in a couple often is not only about “decisions” but also about building a relation and acquiring a common, or at least commensurate, attitude to life. It is largely through common activities, and in narratives about such activities, that the partners in a couple negotiate their way to their functioning versions of couple, man and woman. In couples who live together, such jointly produced narratives probably contribute powerfully to each partner’s identity project, since their investments in these mutually reaffirming identities are likely to be great.

Such processes draw on the discursive power of normative conceptions such as “the modern man”, “the modern woman”, or “the modern couple” (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). This kind of power is harboured in a culture’s systems of gendered meanings, meanings that help people to produce valid expressions of what it means to belong to one particular sex. “Local” versions of rules and gendered meanings in a particular context function as pre-knowledge, prerequisites for being able to navigate social life in that context. A person usually knows what is expected of her/him on the basis of their sex, and also usually knows what to expect from others on the basis of their sex. Such gendered knowledge is usually “silent”, thus seldom explicitly expressed or even (consciously) reflected upon by those who possess it. Its ways of working, though, map out conversational or discursive rules that influence how people talk about themselves and others (Haavind, 2000).

Analyzing accounts of gender equality and fairness issues
Basic to this study is a view of talk in interviews as both ‘data’ and ‘discourse’. It is ‘data’, since couples are talking about things that have to do with daily life and their identities as women and men. But their talk must also be seen as ‘discourse’, since they are also doing identity in the interview. As they talk they act out what it means to them to be a man, a woman or a couple in that particular setting (Cameron, 2001).
This dual view of peoples’ talk brings three aspects of the interview accounts into focus for analysis. Firstly, content: what are the couples saying about the topic in question; secondly, form and interaction: how are they saying what they are saying? The third aspect focuses on the range of culturally intelligible possibilities from which they draw their way of talking about the topic (Cameron, 2001).

While talking about how they organise daily life and their history as a couple, women and men are often also managing accountabilities, that is, telling the best and most credible stories they can (Horton-Salway, 2001). When they do this, and in order to make each narrative as persuasive as possible, people tend to vary the meanings of certain central concepts across narratives, depending on the local discursive context. Such variation is especially prevalent when the talk concerns issues that are in some ways controversial (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). It is therefore not surprising that talk about gender, femininity and masculinity often draws on seemingly incompatible cultural notions. The researcher’s task in analysing such accounts can be, for instance, to investigate in which situations different kinds of notions appear, and what their consequences are. It is also important to look at how notions work together to make certain ways of understanding oneself and each other more likely and more intelligible, and to study how such processes are gendered. In a study such as ours, where the couples have agreed to participate voluntarily and without any monetary inducement, and where they generally seem to participate as “good” examples, accountability management is likely to be fairly prevalent. Though analyses of accountability management do not feature strongly in this chapter, the existence of such strategies should be kept in mind as a background to the accounts scrutinized here.

Since the interview analyses for this chapter were geared towards exploring the explicit talk about fairness and equality in the interviews with couples, I began by searching through all interviews for passages where such questions were the expressed topic of discussion, and collecting them in one document, sorted according to couple. Then I read through these extracts several times, searching for patterns in the talk, and hints about the kinds of cultural resources or discourses that the couples recruited in their talk about these topics. I then used these sorted extracts to describe illustrative examples of the patterns. These examples and patterns formed the basis for the analyses of all the extracts that make up this chapter.

The first, and very pervasive pattern, was the lack of centrality or spontaneity of “gender equality” as a conversational topic.
Gender equality talk – the ingredients and the cake

Gender equality and fairness were not topics that often triggered animated accounts from the couples we interviewed. They spoke eagerly and often quite extensively about many topics – but not about gender equality, fairness and power distribution at home. In most couples, such themes did not appear spontaneously in the interview conversations. With a few exceptions, where the woman brought it into the conversation, the interviewer had to extract the informants’ views on gender equality from them.

The couples seemed happy to talk about who did what chores. And they seemed prepared to account for why tasks were arranged the way they were between them. They talked freely about who worked the most hours outside the home and who spent the most time at home with the children and so on. But they seldom related these arrangements to gender equality or fairness. And they did not bring in issues of power when talking about who did what in their family. Thus, the couples talked at length about those things that researchers might call the ingredients of gender equality, without as it were whipping them together into the shape of the whole cake. Rather, they seemed to look at one ingredient at a time. While doing this they often brought in other kinds of ingredients, so that the cake they mixed was not related to equality and fairness. Instead, the narrators often employed traditionally gendered discourses, while producing and presenting themselves as “the good family”, “the good mother”, “the good provider”, “the conscientious professional”, or talking about “our different house-cleaning thresholds”, or “other couples who quarrel unnecessarily”.

De-legitimating gender equality

The Swedish couple Bengt and Britta have an unequal distribution of household chores; Britta does most of the work. When asked how she feels about their distribution of housework, Britta tells the interviewer that she is content with it, and that they never quarrel about such things. She then goes on to say:

Britta: It’s something I think many other people perhaps squabble a lot – too much – about, you know: “Now it’s your turn to do the cleaning!” We have friends who do…

Interviewer: Things have to be similar?

Britta: They have to be as similar as possible.

Bengt: Because, “If you do this, then I get to do that. If you go there, then…”
Britta: We have never ever talked like that.
Bengt: No!

In this short dialogue, Bengt and Britta co-operated in painting a derogatory picture of “schedules” for housework, as well as of ambitions to share equally. They did this by distancing themselves rhetorically from couples who have such ambitions. Their strategy involved firstly labelling equality discussions “squabbling”, a word that is clearly of negative value for this couple. Then they declared, in unison, that *they* never quarrel about such things; they don’t “talk like that”. Thereby they placed their domestic peace – an achievement that tends to have positive social value – as a rhetorical “stopper” to gender equality ambitions. They did this in their accounts by connecting “equality” intimately, though indirectly, with disagreement and trouble. Somewhat later, Bengt explained that their daily life simply would not function if they had to aim for equal sharing of housework: “Then I would… things wouldn’t work well for us. We would get angry with each other”. Thus, in order to uphold peace at home, equality had to give way.

Similar derogatory images of “schedules” and equality discussions connecting “equality” to adversity were quite common occurrences in the interviews. Another example, with a slightly different twist, appeared in the accounts of Cecilia, a Swedish woman in a couple with an uneven distribution of housework. For her, being able to do “one’s own thing” seemed to be the important thing, not equality, as she said: “I have never felt the need for us to – well some people have sort of schedules of ‘I do this and you do that, and I have done that this week’ … I don’t think so. It must be better if one does what feels like ‘This is my thing’.” Ideals of individuality and self-realisation thus could be used to de-legitimate strivings for equality.

In several couples, individual differences featured as the rationale for not entering into equality discussions. For instance, when Malin, a Finnish woman in a couple where housework was unevenly distributed, was asked if she was satisfied with her husband’s contributions to the housework, she replied: “…my threshold is lower than his when it comes to what needs to be done, and such things – so I suppose I only have myself to blame if I think I get too little help.”

The ‘difference’ theme occurred with a less individual slant in the accounts of Jenny and John, one of the Finnish couples with an uneven distribution of housework and responsibilities. John explained why they distributed responsibility for housework, as well as actual housework, unevenly. For him, this was a matter of instinct, not justice: “Of course both of us go in for it, but perhaps despite all that, this mummy – mummy thing is more of a, it’s more an instinct that’s stronger, I think, sort of more powerful.”
In a similar vein Mette, a woman in one of the Danish couples that had an uneven distribution of housework, highlighted differences between women and men that she felt needed to be considered: “I think that as a mother you also want to be there for your children; but I think it is easier sometimes for fathers to distance themselves a bit from that.” Difference in these last two examples seems more directly related to each partner’s sex, and thus hardly “individual” at all.

A few couples explicitly portrayed gender equality as harmful in one or more ways. For instance, Mette (see above) commented on what she described as many other women’s misdirected demands for gender equality: “Who is to say that the ideal is for women to go out and be as stressed as men? Who can say that that is the optimal thing? I don’t think so. I can’t be bothered to waste my time on that. Who has made that model? I mean, who made the unwritten rule that this is how it should be?” Equality in her version thus becomes something that may harm women rather than help them.

Some couples explained that circumstances made equality impossible as a goal for them at present. For instance Pernille, a Danish woman in a couple with a medium distribution of housework tasks, who wished her husband to contribute more, said: “Well, looking at our lives right now, I can’t quite see how things could be arranged differently… So, there isn’t anything for me to be very discontented with.” Thus, she had decided to stop complaining.

These were some of the many accounts in the interviews that showed gender equality and fairness to be secondary in these couples’ everyday organizing, as well as in their images of themselves and each other. As can be seen in the extracts, the arguments vary. The final result, however, is uniform in de-legitimating gender equality arguments in the daily lives of the couples. I will now discuss how the accounts and arguments that these women and men used may connect to their identity projects as women and men.

**Identity stories that leave equality outside**

For the couples speaking in the previous section, gender equality was not a goal. One would not expect them to say that they needed to change this or that in order to become more equal. For them, “classical” political arguments for gender equality and fairness seemed to lack rhetorical force: it would appear to be difficult to use “gender equality” as a lever to change things in these couples’ day-to-day ways of organizing. Judging from what they tell us, their main goal was instead to make everyday life run reasonably smoothly without conflict.
Neither did they seem to think that others ought to give priority to equality. One may deduce this from the fairly large number of couples who talked in derogatory terms about “others” who fight and negotiate about equality or make schedules for their division of housework. They sometimes pointed to those “other” couples as possible failures. The failure motif was particularly present in some cautionary tales. These tales tell us that equality-oriented couples risk separation precisely because they negotiate and quarrel too much about gender equality. Thus, “other couples” seemed to have important functions in the ways these couples talked and thought about themselves: by distancing themselves from the kind of couples who “go on squabbling”, they reassured each other that they were not like them, and that they were committed to staying together.

If gender equality and fairness were not important ingredients in these women’s and men’s identity projects, what were those ingredients? Scanning those topics and issues that the couples seemed to talk most spontaneously about may give an approximate idea of what the most highly appreciated identity stories were for these women and men. They talked particularly freely (and, as it seemed, were pleased to do so) about questions related to these themes: professional success (making money, having a career); involvement in working life; being family-oriented or work-oriented; being a mother (emotional commitment, expert knowledge, responsibilities and work tasks involved); being a father (involvement in the children’s sports activities, sometimes feelings of inadequacy); being a happy family and investing in making the relationship last; the importance of having rewarding leisure time pursuits, and the difficulties in achieving this; doing things together as a family; doing things together as a couple; doing things on one’s own; and space for self-realization as a person.

They did not talk as eagerly about their own situation with respect to “gender equality” or fairness. In fact, when they were asked questions about gender equality they usually did not produce stories, but rather brief responses. It was as if the other identity stories reduced the space for personal narratives about equality issues. And could it be that the themes and stories above, by standing in the way of producing stories about gender equality, also prevented “gender equality” from becoming an active ingredient in people’s subjectivities?

Narrative and constructionist approaches to psychology would argue that such obstruction could be expected. These approaches focus on how people perform their identities in their daily lives, and how they, through this performance, recreate and maintain these identities as well as their ideas about what a good identity is. People’s stories about themselves and others play a very central part in such performance (Bamberg, 2004; Bruner, 1991). Performances of identity do not happen in a vacuum.
but always in contexts replete with culturally rooted conduct, decrees and prohibitions that mark out the norms and boundaries for acceptable ways of being a woman or a man. Being feminine or masculine in culturally acceptable ways means to act in accordance with these decrees, and – as important – to experience these acts as expressions of one’s own personality (Haavind, 1998; Magnusson, 1998). Also, acceptable behaviour will be perceived as confirming and legitimating those particular acts as signs of, for instance, “natural” feminine or masculine characteristics, or good motherhood or fatherhood. The act itself then proves, both to the person and to those in his or her environment, that that is what it means to be a modern woman or man, or mother or father.

As seen in the couples above, local social norms and rules for acceptable ways of being a woman or man may often change more slowly than official ideals. Then, the steps in an individual’s identity-producing processes may have little or no room for “gender equality” ingredients. Such ingredients will consequently be experienced as ‘outside’, that is to say not part of one’s identity. The next section discusses possible ways in which this can happen.

**Equality accounts without identity ingredients**

When listening, as in this study, to people’s narratives about their daily practices, equality ideals often seem to be embedded in a recalcitrant cultural mixture of discourses and wishes that de-legitimate equality as anything that could rightfully make demands on ordinary people’s everyday lives. This discursive mix works to make “gender equality” appear, almost by definition, external in relation to one’s love affair, and to one’s views of oneself and one’s partner. For some, “gender equality” may even seem so “external” that it appears as something that others try to force upon them; something they certainly did not ask to have imposed on them, and perhaps even something that might ruin important things for them. Mette’s extract above, about “forcing” women to be equal against their will, was one of several examples of this view among the couples we interviewed.

To put it schematically: in such externalizing narratives, official gender equality discourses seemed to be constituted as a thin surface layer of (usually) professed general ideals. These ideals appeared, as it were, perched on top of multiple layers of robustly sedimented ideas and experiences based in traditionally gendered practices closely related to identity experiences. The gender equality discourses seem seldom to succeed in percolating through to these sedimented layers to encounter them and perhaps modify them (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). As a result, those ingredients which constitute major parts of one’s subjectivity, such as “motherhood” or “femininity” or
“masculinity”, etc., do not become amenable to the influence of “gender equality” as it is perceived. This may especially be the case with aspects of identity related to heterosexual love.

**Gender equality ideals encounter the romantic project: from ideals to danger**

Today, heterosexual romantic love is usually seen as the cornerstone and self-evident basis for forming and maintaining a lasting family relationship between a woman and a man. In contemporary western cultures, if no love is present then there is no legitimate relationship to maintain. How do such discourses interact (or interfere?) with gender equality ideals? According to Nordic researchers such as Anna Jonasdóttir (1991), Hanne Haavind (1984) and Carin Holmberg (1993), they interact in complex ways to make “love” contribute to the maintenance of gendered asymmetries and power differentials within couples. How can that be? Can true romantic love between a man and a woman really coexist with inequalities and a power asymmetry in their relationship? Today this may seem like a contradiction. Looking back over the development of modern society, however, we find that in traditional discourses of romantic love, being a woman in a successful heterosexual romantic couple inevitably required subordinating one’s wishes and needs to one’s male partner. Such subordination was part of the very definitions of a heterosexual relationship, as expressed for instance in earlier marriage ceremonies. These definitions were based on strong cultural images of women and men as essentially different, and men as more highly valued than women (Giddens, 1992; Jonasdóttir, 1991). Thus, “love” has no history of guaranteeing against inequality between women and men.

Contemporary ideals of heterosexual love, however, have left the subordination part behind, and are usually expressed as the “pure” encounter of two equal and free individuals in a mutually affirming relationship (cf. Giddens, 1992). Have they thereby moved beyond gendered asymmetries? Opinions differ, and I will not pursue this issue further here. Romance and love are for most people still played out within the daily grind of work, childcare and household chores. Today’s discourses of romantic love are situated in a complex juxtaposition to other discourses and practices of women and men as parents and workers. In the Nordic countries this juxtaposition is further complicated by publicly propagated political ideals of gender equality.

Judging by the interview conversations in our study, at least some couples perceive the demands of the contemporary romantic project to be in conflict with the political ideals of gender equality. Thus, we earlier heard Bengt declare that he and Britta
“would get angry with each other” if they had to strive for equality. He did not think their relationship could sustain such discussions. In a similar vein Rikke, a Danish woman in a couple with an unequal distribution of housework, recounted a previous relationship where equality was often on the agenda, and commented: “… I think it is extremely trying for a relationship if one has to keep discussing who is to do what, and if one partner keeps telling the other partner ‘Now it’s your turn to…!’ “

In Bengt’s and Rikke’s accounts, bringing together romantic relationship issues and gender equality resulted in predictions of some kind of unease, or even danger. Such predictions were sufficiently prevalent in the interviews to merit analysis. It may seem paradoxical that gender equality and fairness – words of concord and agreement that denote balance and harmony – often seemed to invite associations with their opposites: inequality, imbalance, disagreement and conflict. It was as if simply talking about gender equality would cast a shadow over a couple’s harmonious presentation of themselves.

The several couples in our study who report that they do not keep “squabbling” about fairness show each other that they are not like those “other” couples who do. But they may be doing more than that. In having quarrels over the issue of fairness unacceptable because these would shatter their concord, they also appear to effectively close down such discussion as ‘an argumentative avenue’ for themselves. From then on, if one of them were to feel that housework tasks were really unfairly distributed, it would seem difficult or impossible for them to complain about this without feeling responsible for causing unnecessary conflict over trivial issues.

Let us look at an instance of such argumentative closing-off in one of the couples. Torben, a Danish man in a couple with an uneven distribution of housework, said: “All couple relationships have the same problems. Basically, they discuss the same thing over and over again; namely that the woman always wants to change the man, don’t you see?” According to Torben, women are wrong not to be content with what their husbands do at home, and wrong in wanting to make them do more housework, and especially wrong in quarrelling about this. Many couples among his acquaintances keep quarrelling over the issue of how fairly housework is distributed; quarrels that, according to Torben, usually have to do with such petty little things that one ought not to bother about. He took one example: whether one throws one’s dirty socks on the floor or carries them to the laundry basket. Far too often, relationships go to pieces over such trifles: “But many of those small, totally insignificant things tear lots of couples apart completely.” Torben gave several examples of couples where such quarrels about trivial matters had led to divorce.

In Torben’s account it is the quarrels that result from women seeking to make
their male partners contribute more to housework that lead to divorce, not the unfair distributions of housework as such. For someone who thinks in this way, it may seem to make good sense to avoid negotiations and quarrels about fairness at home. However, in doing so, one also closes off an avenue to change.

Some consequences of such a closing-off can perhaps be guessed at when listening to how Tine, Torben’s wife, subsequently commented on the “insignificant things” referred to above, such as throwing dirty socks on the floor: “But we couldn’t have it that way – there just has to be some orderliness to things and tidiness everywhere, and we wouldn’t have that if one of us was that way and I, for instance, was a different way. That would clog up the system, wouldn’t it? And, as I also say, if one over and over again keeps saying ‘Yes, but why don’t you do that, too?’ – throw your dirty socks in the laundry basket, I mean. If one has said that five times and it still goes on, then that is a source of irritation, and why should one burden the other by becoming irritated over such a little thing?” Thus, rather than demand fairness over dirty socks and risk the dangerous quarrels that Torben had pictured, Tine here told the interviewer that one should refrain from even becoming irritated. Her argument was well within the argumentative frames that Torben had just drawn up.

Would it have been possible for Tine to have moved outside the frame and say that she thought it more important to have a fair distribution of housework than to maintain peace at home? We cannot know this, but we do know she did not do so in the interview. Perhaps she had attempted to earlier, though. An interaction between them soon after Tine gave her account above may hint in that direction. Torben mentioned that earlier they had also disagreed about those “little” things. He continued by saying that after a few years one’s edges get rubbed smooth, and that he and Tine had become more alike. Tine then laughed and said: “I have had to rub a lot of my edges smooth because I have been, and still am, much of a perfectionist.” This comment implies that it was Tine, rather than Torben, who had had to “rub her edges smooth” and change her demands on him, because he would not accept them until she did so. In that sense quarrel and conflict about equality had not been profitable for her. In such a context it may feel safer not to bring up equality issues at all.

Might this ‘play-it-safe’ strategy be reinforced by Torben’s earlier cautionary tales about male friends who divorce their wives because they refuse to put up with the wives’ equality demands? In the interviews we have collected, such outright cautionary tales were not common. One would not perhaps expect them to be, considering the conversational situation: a woman and a man in a heterosexual couple relationship telling an interviewer about their daily life together. It makes sense for them to want to present themselves in a flattering light, especially since they had volunteered to take
part in the study. However, slightly less explicit varieties of cautionary or closing-off interactions were more common, as in the following brief illustrations:

Carl, a Swedish man, compared his wife to other women: “I think many would become completely hysterical because – well I, I may as well admit it – there’s much in our home that rests on Cecilia. And the question is how many would accept that today.” Portraying an angry woman as hysterical, as Carl did, is an old way of discrediting her anger. In using this portrayal, Carl was at once telling the interviewer and Cecilia that Cecilia was not “like other women” – that is, she was better than them, an invitation that women sometimes have had difficulties resisting – and posing an unspoken threat that she would be seen as “hysterical” if she were to quarrel, with possible untoward consequences.

Bengt, a Swedish man who we encountered earlier, told the interviewer about his wife Britta: “I think she knows that she can’t make me do certain things.” Thus, he told both the interviewer and Britta that he had drawn a line over which Britta was not expected to dare cross with respect to her demands on him. Johan, also a Swedish man, compared his situation to that in other couples where the wife demands more involvement in housework by the husband: “With others it sometimes – well they get told off when they come home late, and there’s a bad atmosphere in the family, and one thing and the other.” This was one of several opportunities that he took, to tell the interviewer (and his wife) how compliant his wife was, but also of indirectly telling her about the negative consequences that would ensue if she weren’t, that is, if she were more like the other wives.

Yet another example was provided by Lauri, a Finnish man whose wife, Lotta, had recently started making much greater demands than before regarding his participation in housework as well as with respect to her right to her “own” time. Lauri was not pleased with this development and said: “I see it this way: do I have to put up with this? I mean, do I have to? Or should one find some other kind of solution?” He did not go on to explicitly threaten with a divorce, but judging from his wife’s reaction in the interview, the existence of such a threat seemed likely.

To summarize the analysis presented in this section: for quite a number of the couples in this study “gender equality” and discussions related to equality seemed to be closely associated with uneasiness, discord and conflict. Some couples indicated incompatibility between the demands for equality and the demands of their romantic relationship. The stories some of these couples told about other couples’ failed relationships seemed to indicate a concern that equality issues could disrupt their own relationships.
Conclusions?

Judging by the narratives and analyses that form the basis of this chapter, “gender equality” does not have an easy and well-paved road into the inner sanctums of the homes of many heterosexual citizens in the Nordic countries. Is this rather pessimistic picture the whole truth about gender equality talk in Nordic couples? No, of course not: among the couples we interviewed, approximately one-third gave accounts that were clearly in favour of gender equality as a central value, and some of those couples also argued strongly on the side of equality. But for that majority in this study who did not bring equality in as an explicit goal, the accounts I have analyzed in this chapter give a representative coverage of typical arguments and rhetorical strategies.

The analyses show how the conversations in these couples often pit equality discourses unevenly against what seem to be more identity-relevant ideas and discourses for the participants. This juxtaposition was often done in ways that strip “equality” of its rhetorical force – a force that gender equality workers and feminists often take for granted. Consequently, “more of the same” gender equality propaganda that we have seen so far may be insufficient to influence couples like the ones in this chapter to move in a more equality-friendly direction. If these couples do not buy into the basic ideas that most gender equality propaganda is based on, then simply producing more of that kind of propaganda may be a waste of effort.

How should one proceed given this situation? Keeping within the necessarily limited scope of the kind of study that I have reported on here (leaving aside the fact that talk is not everything in the life of a couple, among other things), the following are a few suggestions: Comparisons of the arguments of “recalcitrant” couples with conversations in couples who have adopted gender equality values as their own may give interesting insights (cf. Magnusson, 2006). Another avenue would be to continue the close study of – and argumentative struggle with – those discourses and identities in the lives of heterosexual couples that serve to trip up and de-legitimate traditional equality arguments. This would mean that arguments in this political sector have to move away from primarily dealing with equality, and into closer combat with contemporary notions of, for instance, identity, individuality, motherhood, fatherhood, as well as with discourses on difference and “biology”, as they are playing themselves out in the lives of heterosexual couples today.
Notes

1. The actual words used in the conversations were, for gender equality: “jämställdhet” (Swedish), “ligestilling” (Danish) and “tasa-arvo” (Finnish). For fairness the corresponding words are: “rättvisa” (Swedish), “retfærdighed” (Danish) and “oikeudenmukaisuus” (Finnish). Official definitions of gender equality vary between countries, but in most political circumstances an acceptable definition would be: equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men to pursue work which provides economic independence, to care for children and home, and to participate in politics, unions, and any other social activities (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2005; Statistics Sweden, 2004).

2. “We” here consists of the three interviewers, one from each country, and I as the project coordinator and researcher. The interviewers were Elisabeth Hellemose (Denmark), Kristin Mattsson (Finland) and Lena Wännman (Sweden). They have carried out and transcribed the interviews and participated in parts of the analyses. The research was financed by NOS-S, Nordiska Samarbetsnämnden för Samhällsforskning (Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Social Sciences).

3. I use “sex” here since this term seems to me to fit best with common sense conceptualizations of what the bases are for expectations of oneself and others. “Sex” in this sense is not used as an analytical category in this study.
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