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**Author(s):** Eerola, Petteri; Närvi, Johanna; Terävä, Johanna; Repo, Katja

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SPECIAL ISSUE • Relationality in family and intimate practices

## article

# Negotiating parenting practices: the arguments and justifications of Finnish couples

Petteri Eerola,<sup>1</sup> [petteri.eerola@tuni.fi](mailto:petteri.eerola@tuni.fi)  
Tampere University, Finland

Johanna Närvi, [johanna.narvi@thl.fi](mailto:johanna.narvi@thl.fi)  
Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, Finland

Johanna Terävä, [johanna.terava@jyu.fi](mailto:johanna.terava@jyu.fi)  
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Katja Repo, [katja.repo@tuni.fi](mailto:katja.repo@tuni.fi)  
Tampere University, Finland

This article explores Finnish different-sex couples' ( $n = 12$ ) negotiations on their parental division of labour. Theoretically, the article is based on the literature on gendered parenting practices and relational negotiations. Our discourse analysis reveals how the couples produced 'togetherness' and 'our family' by representing their care practices as agreements, irrespective of whether the care was described as equally shared or distinctly gendered. Disagreements reflecting more individualistic tones, and mainly resulting from the mothers' sense of unfairness, were especially foregrounded when the distribution of household duties was discussed. The analysis also revealed how men cited involved fatherhood as a justification for their lesser responsibility for housework, while women sought to reconcile the contradictory discourses of equal parenting and mother's primacy. Our results show how personal wishes and preferences, work life, family policies and cultural discourses are reflected in couples' negotiations on parenting practices and moral identities pertaining to 'good' motherhood and fatherhood.

**Key words** parenting practices • negotiation • couple interviews • gender equality • Finland

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## Introduction

Throughout the 2000s, parents and parenting practices in families with young children have been widely discussed by academics, practitioners and the general public. The sociologist Frank Furedi (2014) has even described parenting as one of the most hotly debated issues of the 21st century. First, several scholars have highlighted the intensification of parenthood – a process in which childrearing has become a much more labour-intensive and demanding task for parents – as a key trend in parenting (for example, Faircloth, 2014; Macvarish, 2016; Miller, 2017; Gillies, 2020). Second, there has been global growth in parental time devoted to childcare – explained by intensified expectations of ‘good’ parenting and ideologies such as intensive motherhood and involved fatherhood (Rose et al, 2014; Miller, 2017). Third, fathers’ increased involvement in care has been argued to be a major global trend; researchers have demonstrated how practices and ideals, such as intimate fatherhood and caring masculinities, have emerged and changed family lives throughout Western societies (Dermott, 2008; Johansson and Klinth, 2008). We argue that increased global public attention to parenting and parenthood has also directed the ways and cultural climates in which parenting practices are negotiated in contemporary families. These relational negotiations were explored in this study through couple interviews with Finnish parents.

Drawing on Morgan’s (2011) concept of family practices and recent research on the multidimensional nature of contemporary parenting (for example, Doucet, 2006; Miller, 2017), we understand parenting practices as a combination of hands-on care work (for example, putting a child to sleep, playing with and reading to a child), mental labour (for example, making decisions about care arrangements) and household labour (for example, cooking, cleaning the home). Our empirical data comprise qualitative couple interviews with 12 different-sex couples with a child approximately one year of age. The couples were interviewed for the multidisciplinary research project Finnish Childcare Policies: In/equality in Focus (2015–21 for more information on the project, visit the project website: [www.jyu.fi/childcare/en](http://www.jyu.fi/childcare/en)) on the childcare arrangements and decisions of Finnish parents. Our research questions are as follows:

1. How are parenting practices negotiated when couples discuss their daily family lives?
2. What kind of understandings on gender and parenting are produced in these negotiations?

Theoretically, the study is based on the literature on gendered parenting practices (Fox, 2009; Ralph, 2016; Miller, 2017) and relational negotiations (Finch and Mason, 1993; Duncan, 2011; Smart, 2011). Our analytical framework is informed by a social constructionist approach and discourse studies in particular.

## Background

### *Gendered parenting practices in families with young children*

A wide body of research has shown how parenting practices in families with young children have remained gendered, as women continue to do more parental care and household work than men (Fox, 2009; Ralph, 2016; Miller, 2017). Such studies describe

how gender is 'done' or constructed, particularly when couples become parents for the first time. Scholars have argued that becoming a parent and developing care practices is a reflexive process, in which complex notions of masculinity and femininity and gendered cultural understandings of 'good' motherhood and fatherhood are entwined (Magaraggia, 2013; Rose et al, 2014). Thus, in the transition to parenthood, women and men often adopt conventional gender roles, even if before childbirth they had planned on equality in caring for the child (Fox, 2009). Research shows that, in its later phases, parents often continue with the gendered rationalities adopted in early parenthood (Rose et al, 2014; Ralph 2016).

Studies also suggest strong gendered divisions in care even when fathers are actively involved (Rose et al, 2014). That is, mothers do more practical and mundane routine caring tasks than fathers, who spend relatively more time on different kinds of leisure, educational and recreational activities (for example, Craig, 2006; Rose et al, 2014; Ralph, 2016). Rose and colleagues (2014) showed that these gendered divisions are often discretionary and largely taken for granted, and that fathers can opt out of tasks they find too challenging or feel uncomfortable with. Several studies have also argued that mothers 'orchestrate' parenting by taking care of the mental labour and managerial side of family life and childcare (Walzer, 1996; Ralph, 2016; Miller 2017). Recent research has revealed how mismatch in partners' housework reports is associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Ruppanner et al, 2018). The existence of a gap between spouses' gender-equal ideals and unequal practices may also present a higher risk for partnership dissolution (Oláh and Gähler, 2014).

Despite the persistence of gendered parenting practices, a clear shift in cultural expectations has occurred: fathers are expected to be more involved with their children's lives from the very onset of parenthood (Ralph, 2016; Miller, 2017). Studies have suggested that the principles of caring and involved fatherhood have spread across the global north as more sensitive and emotionally involved ways of fathering have gained ground in cultural conceptions of fatherhood (Johansson and Klinth 2008; Rose et al, 2014; Eerola, 2015). However, the expansion of intimate and involved fatherhood has not reduced societal expectations on motherhood: 'good motherhood' remains rooted in the idea that mothers should be active in all aspects of childcare and on call to care 24/7 (Vincent and Ball, 2006).

### *The Finnish context*

Finland is one of the Nordic countries categorised by social policy researchers as dual-earner welfare states (Leira, 2002). It has a long history of supporting shared and equal parenthood, including promoting women's participation in the labour force and encouraging fathers to take greater responsibility for childcare from the onset of parenthood (Eydal et al, 2015; Lammi-Taskula, 2017). The current parental leave scheme consists of maternity leave (18 weeks), paternity leave (9 weeks) and sharable parental leave (26 weeks). After parental leave, all children are entitled to a place in state-subsidised early childhood education and care (henceforth ECEC) before the start of formal schooling at the age of seven. If the parents of a child under age three do not take up state-subsidised ECEC services, they are entitled to a flat-rate child home-care allowance.

Although during recent decades Finland has seen an increase in fathers' take-up of leave and time spent on childcare, the division of caregiving responsibility between

parents remains far from equal (Ylikännö et al, 2015; Attila et al, 2019). Young children are cared for at home, mostly by their mothers, for longer than in any other Nordic country. This has been argued to be a consequence of the dominant cultural ideals in Finland that favour maternal primacy in early care (Repo, 2010). Fathers continue to take only ten per cent of all the parental leave available to parents, and sharable parental leave is mainly taken by mothers (Salmi et al, 2019). Finnish fathers take parental leave considerably less often than their Nordic peers in Sweden, Norway and Iceland (Eydal et al, 2015). Overall responsibility for daily or weekly routine household chores also often drifts to mothers. Moreover, household chores continue to be gendered; for example, women are most often responsible for cooking and laundry, and men for home or vehicle maintenance and repairs. The division of housework is a more common cause of rifts between spouses than childcare (Attila et al, 2019).

### *Relational negotiations of parenting practices*

Since Pierpaolo Donati's (2010) pioneering work in the field of relational sociology, the relational approach has become well established in family studies. A broad body of empirical research has demonstrated how family lives – including parenting practices and negotiations about parenting – are profoundly shaped by relationality (see, for example, Finch and Mason, 1993; Smart, 2011). Parenting practices (on the concept, see Morgan, 2011), for instance, are not only negotiated between the partners but also in relation to the labour market, social policies and cultural values, and are also entangled with power, intimacies and affects.

In this article, we understand *negotiation* as a relational process through which social order – including practices, values and identities – is (re)produced (Strauss, 1978). Negotiations by mothers and fathers on parental responsibilities and the household division of labour can thus result not only in specific parental practices but also in a shared understanding of social reality and its meaning; for example, on the meaning of 'good' motherhood and fatherhood. In other words, mothers and fathers negotiate not only over practices but also over meanings (Finch and Mason, 1993).

One way of (re)producing meanings is using justificatory accounts, deployed in negotiations. According to Finch and Mason (1993), people strive to legitimise their actions as these are associated with moral worth and identity. That is, in constructing their moral identities, people usually seek to gain others' acceptance of their actions. Duncan and Edwards (1999) talk about 'gendered moral rationalities', meaning that a couple's division of labour is shaped by relational ties and socially negotiated moral responsibilities. Mothers and fathers, for example, may present justifications for their (lack of) parental or household responsibilities, thus negotiating over both the actual division of labour and what is expected of them as parents.

In family research, negotiation has been understood as both explicit and implicit communication about the kinds of actions people regard as reasonable for themselves and other people (see, for example, Finch and Mason, 1993). While negotiation can take the form of open discussion, other types of communication may also occur over time, such as gradually developing agreement or shared understandings and practices that may later seem obvious and unquestionable, as if they had needed no negotiation at all (Finch and Mason, 1993).

Although this broad definition of negotiation has been criticised for viewing even the unconscious routines of everyday lives as outcomes of negotiation (Evertsson and Nyman, 2009), we adopt this broad understanding of the concept. We would agree that parents do not necessarily consciously reflect on their choices; rather, they often prefer familiar, taken-for-granted and pragmatic choices which provide stability and routines (Evertsson and Nyman, 2009; Duncan, 2011). However, even when negotiations between parents seem absent, negotiations in relation to structural and cultural contexts will have taken place.

## Research design

### *Qualitative couple interviews as empirical data*

Concepts such as the pair interview and dyadic interview have been utilised in social sciences when two people are jointly interviewed for research. In family studies, researchers have used, for example, family interviews and relationship-based interviews when people connected to each other with a family tie are interviewed (Morgan et al, 2013). Two people in a couple relationship interviewed jointly makes for a special case of such pair/family interviews. In this article, we refer to this type of interview as a *couple interview*. The couple interviews are unique in that they include pervasive intimate and affective tensions, dimensions that cannot be ‘turned off’ or excluded when conducting an interview. Some tensions might be individual and related to the couple relationship and hence unrecognisable to the interviewer. Tensions might also reflect broader cultural norms and ideals – pertaining, for example, to gender and parenting – that are familiar to the researcher. A couple relationship is a socially constructed cultural category, and talking as a couple might affect the course of a discussion when a couple acts as a ‘team’ in the interview (Lahti, 2019). In the case of interviewing couples with children, in addition to ‘doing a couple’, parents might aim at ‘doing a proper family’ and reflecting the dominant cultural expectations of parenthood.

According to the relatively scarce methodological literature on couple interviews, the recruitment stage is critical. According to Mellor and colleagues (2013), couples with a good relationship, positive experiences and mutual understanding of the topics to be discussed in the interview are easier to recruit than others. They also warn that if only a one member of a couple is contacted, s/he could act as a ‘gatekeeper’, making the decision to participate or not for both partners (Mellor et al, 2013). Moreover, even if both partners are willing to participate, practical obstacles may remain, such as arranging childcare or schedules (Bjørnholt and Farstad, 2014).

Couple interviews are useful for studying spousal negotiations and interaction. Bjørnholt and Farstad, (2014) argue that couple interviews can add to the richness of the data, as the interviewees can help each other to remember details and fill in narrative gaps. Furthermore, according to Allan (1980), interview accounts that couples produce jointly might be ‘richer’ than either spouse’s individual account. On the other hand, a risk in the couple interview is that if one partner takes the reins and dominates the conversation, the other’s side of the story could be overlooked (Mellor et al, 2013; Bjørnholt and Farstad, 2014). Ethical considerations in interviewing couples include, among others, the researcher’s ability to deal with sensitive topics and unpredictable,

challenging situations; for example, if the interview becomes a forum for the airing of grievances.

### *Interviews of Finnish couples with young children*

In this study, we analysed interviews ( $n = 12$ ), conducted between 2016 and 2017, with Finnish different-sex couples with young children. Interviewees were recruited through a survey focusing on Finnish parents' childcare practices and decisions (for details, see [Eerola et al, 2019: 6](#)). If both partners had replied to the survey, they were contacted individually, and offered a choice between an individual interview or a couple interview. Of the total of 64 interviews, all those conducted with couples were selected for this study, as our interest was in couples' relational negotiations on their parenting practices.

The couples lived in eight municipalities across Finland, varying in their demographics, geographical location, economic life and local childcare policies. The female interviewees ranged in age between 27 and 42 and the males between 27 and 46. Both partners in seven couples and one partner in two couples had a BA or higher degree. At time of interview, the youngest child of any of the couples was around one year old. Six couples also had older children, either from their current or a previous relationship. The leave arrangements of ten couples followed the gendered patterns of parental leave take-up in Finland ([Salmi et al, 2019](#)); that is, individual leave periods were taken only by mothers. In two couples, both partners had taken an individual leave period. At time of interview, both partners in ten couples were working or studying full or part time, and their child/children were in ECEC; in one family a mother and in another a father were on parental or childcare leave while their partner was working. We assumed the interviewed couples shared a general interest in the issues of equality and parenting, as they had responded to the initial survey focusing on these topics.

The interviews, which were initially gathered for a study on parents' childcare arrangements and decisions, were conducted as semi-structured qualitative interviews with narrative features. The interview guide focused on such topics as everyday family life, childcare arrangements, work–family reconciliation and parents' views on local and national family policies. In this article, we focus on parental practices, including the division of childcare responsibilities and household chores, and on the couples' negotiations and possible conflicts on these issues. The interviews were conducted in venues chosen by the couples, mostly in their family homes.

Interaction between partners in the interviews was varied and complex. They not only agreed with and complemented but also interrupted and contested each other's accounts. Although the interviewers – a team of one male and five female researchers – had been instructed to consider both partners equally, for example, through eye contact or by directing their words equally to both partners, gendered patterns were observed. The transcribed data show that mothers were often the first to reply to the researcher's question and that they replied at much greater length than fathers. Mothers were also keener than fathers to interrupt and contest their partners' accounts while fathers tended to agree their partners' responses.



### *Analysing couple interviews*

Our analysis can be characterised as generic discourse analysis – that is, as a general working procedure aiming to make sense of a specific domain or topic through, for example, interview transcripts (Antaki, 2008; see also Potter and Wetherell, 1987). We began our analysis by reading through the data and using Atlas.ti to select all the fragments in which parenting practices were discussed. Our thematic analysis of these fragments showed that the couples mostly discussed their caregiving practices and household division of labour and rarely referred to mental labour. This preliminary analysis also highlighted how the practices of care and housework were closely intertwined in the couples' accounts. We then examined to what extent these parental practices were produced as negotiated and how they were negotiated. In this phase, we adopted a more discursive approach and searched for the rationalities, justifications and arguments used by the parents to legitimise their division of labour and parenting practices. Finally, via these rationalities, we analysed the understandings of 'good motherhood' and 'good fatherhood' that the parents (re)produced.

### **Results**

Our analysis showed that couples tended to emphasise agreement when talking about their practices as parents. This was especially the case in relation to childcare practices; whether childcare was shared or whether the mother was the primary carer, the interviewed couples described the division of care responsibilities as a result of mutual understanding. The emphasis on agreement might partly follow from interviewing the parents as couples, although, as our results later show, disagreement on the division of labour also arose during some interviews. Thus, methodological considerations alone do not seem to explain parents' mutual agreement on care practices. We found that the couples produced both agreement and disagreement by reflecting cultural ideals of shared parenting and involved fatherhood but also the mother's primacy.

### *Agreeing on childcare practices*

Many of the interviewed couples agreed on equality in childcare as a key aim and ideal of parenthood and, accordingly, described their care practices as shared. Shared parenthood was often an ideal that the parents said they had already agreed on before becoming parents and that their childcare or parenting practices were arrived at by conscious decision making and negotiation. For example, Hanna,<sup>2</sup> a mother of one, told how the couple's parenting practices were "talked through and negotiated" even before the child was born and emphasised that "we made the decisions together". This was confirmed by Heikki, the father, who added that they did not have separate responsibilities but "both do all the tasks". The agreement on sharing care – a seemingly satisfying situation without any open disagreement – was thus not reached without explicit negotiation about who does what and how. Such agreement can be based on prior negotiations, either explicit or implicit, that lead to shared responsibilities (see Finch and Mason, 1993), and hence no need



for further or ongoing negotiations. Some couples emphasised agreement in the present but described negotiations over the division of responsibilities in the past. In contrast, Paula and Petri, the mother and father of one child, talked about their ongoing need for negotiation:

Interviewer: 'You said at first that you don't have clear male and female roles. What do you think – or is this – I assume it works for you as –'

Petri: 'Yeah.'

Interviewer: 'As that's how you do parenting, or how do you see it?'

Petri: 'Yeah, well –'

Paula: 'Well it's not really – I must say that it's not a given. We do have constant discussions about it of course. [...] I don't know how it has taken this form – we have just somehow agreed in this area as well. And we do talk a lot as well.'

Petri: 'We do.'

Paula: 'We don't stay quiet. So if we're annoyed or concerned about something or if we're wondering why we always do things a certain way, we talk about it, fortunately.'

Petri: 'Yeah, and actually the reason for that is that we're both active in terms of wanting to spend time with the baby. Somehow the way I see it is that, since I work and study, it would be easy for me to say that, during the time that [the child] is at home with us and not in kindergarten, I could just be doing everything else and not be there. But I want to be there. And I have wanted to be there since the beginning.'

Paula: 'Right, and then again I was so attached to [the child] at the beginning, or really for the first year, that you can say that it's actually been nice that Petri has also demanded his own time in quite strong terms. I am – I guess I can be quite strong. I'm a really strong person. So if he hadn't challenged me, I would perhaps have taken all control and he would have ended up with a smaller role. It's nice that Petri has deliberately asked for [time with the child].'

This excerpt shows how this father not only had a strong intention to share responsibility for childcare but also had to claim his share of the time spent with the child. In this negotiation, a legitimate argument for sharing care seemed to be the father's own willingness to be involved in the child's life. Paternal involvement and care practices that conform to the strong ideal of shared parenthood thus seem to need no other justification.

Nevertheless, even the discourse of shared parenting bears traces of the gendered character of parenthood. This appears, for example, in some of the mothers' appreciative appraisals of their partner's involvement in care: "Heikki has anyway participated a lot in childcare after work" (Hanna, mother of one) or "I guess he participates in childcare more than the average guy" (Sara, mother of two). The female partners' expressions of gratitude for their partners' active role in care work underline the fact that a father's involvement in care is not something to be taken for granted but rather to be understood as a result of a conscious choice and therefore something for which the mother should feel gratitude.

Mothers' gratitude for shared care is also illustrated in the following sample in which Paula, a mother of one, talks about how sharing parenting responsibilities has been a strength in their parenthood and couple relationship:

Paula: 'I think something that I can be grateful for is that we have been a good team. We haven't had a man's or woman's roles. Despite the fact that Petri works or studies, that is left at the door. We have both been up at night. It was like we felt that I was equally working even though I was at home with the baby. I think dividing the responsibilities has helped.'

This account shows how the gendered dimension of this couple's parenting is downplayed despite the mother's primary role in care when she was on parental leave and the father was working and studying outside the home. Despite the gendered take-up of leave, the mother's use of the pronoun 'we' when describing their care practices seems to imply the couple's cooperation, togetherness and joint responsibility. The gendered character of care is also produced later in the interview, when Paula describes how she is multitasking family life and how "I'm perhaps the one who is endlessly emotionally available and present". According to her, when her partner is with the child, he focuses exclusively on being with the child and is not, for example, doing housework at the same time. This account is verified by Paula's partner Petri who, however, stresses their aim of sharing duties "fifty-fifty" to avoid a sense of unfairness for either parent. Their process of negotiation illustrates how shared parenting can mean different things for mothers and fathers: mothers are expected to do care work simultaneously with their other duties whereas for fathers it is more acceptable to focus solely on care.

Even when the interviewed couples emphasised shared parenting as an ideal, some also argued that sharing childcare "strictly in half just isn't possible" (Anna, mother of two). The mother's primacy in childcare, however, seemed to need legitimate justification (see [Finch and Mason, 1993](#)) aside from merely being the result of the mother's and father's preferences and wishes.

The mother's main responsibility for childcare was sometimes constructed as inevitable owing to external constraints, most commonly work-related or financial. For example, Minttu and Peter, who had one child, explained that it was "obvious" that the mother would wake up for the child at night when she was on leave from work and the father was working outside the home. Later, however, when the child was older and both parents were in paid work, they woke up in turns.

Nina and Martti, a mother and father of one, described how the father's shift work and work schedules determined their division of care responsibilities. For example, they explained that while on some days the father had more time to take their child to and from day care, on other days he might only see the child in the morning and that because of this, the main responsibility had drifted to the mother:

Martti: 'Nina clearly takes care of the daily things more than I do but when, like today, I'm working the night shift, on these days I take her to the kindergarten, and if I have a day off I'll try to both take her and pick her up since for the next three nights for example I won't be at home.'

Nina: 'Right, you have to consider that one of the reasons I have the main responsibility is because Martti works a lot of night shifts. So he only comes home in the morning and the baby is already asleep when he comes home.'

Previous research has illustrated how family finances are a common explanation for mothers taking up the majority of the parental leave among Finnish parents (Närvi and Salmi, 2019). This explanation is, however, entwined with gendered understandings of motherhood and fatherhood, as citing the family's financial situation seems to be an acceptable argument for fathers not taking leave. This is exemplified in the interview with Hanna and Heikki, the mother and father of one, in which financial considerations are advanced as a primary argument for the father not taking individual leave. It is only after mentioning the father's higher income that other reasons are given, such as both parents preferred the father to continue working while the mother stayed at home to take care of the child:

Hanna: 'It's even possible to split parental leave, but first of all, it's not sensible in any way. Heikki makes more than twice as much money as me, so it's not in any way sensible for Heikki to stay home. And then, neither of us wanted that. Heikki didn't want to stay at home and I didn't want to go back to work at that point, so it was obvious.'

It has been argued that the division of labour in care is often formed through familiar, unconscious and taken-for-granted routines and practices (Evertsson and Nyman, 2009; Duncan, 2011). Accordingly, our analysis shows that, in some interviews, gendered parenting practices were not described as a conscious choice and a result of explicit negotiation. For example, Minna and Niilo, who had two children, described how they had not made an explicit agreement on how to share childcare and housework. Minna, the mother, said that "things have gone quite naturally" and "just settled" when she described a gendered division of household chores, explaining that she was responsible for cooking and "practicalities", while Niilo was responsible for home maintenance and paperwork. In the case of childcare, however, she argued that both participate and that they do not have responsibilities that are "just mine or just yours". Nevertheless, when talking about her partner's share, she used verbs such as "participates" and "helps", implying her primacy in care. Niilo, the father, verified her account by stressing that he does all the same things as his partner "when I'm at home". Their conversation thus implies how *shared* does not always mean dividing everything in half; instead, it can mean sharing the parental tasks according to culturally identifiable gendered patterns.

By talking about the parenting practices as mutually agreed, couples associate themselves with the culturally hegemonic ideal of shared parenting. This can be done, however, either by emphasising the adoption of shared childcare practices as a conscious choice based on both parents' willingness to be equally involved or by presenting legitimate justifications (such as financial or work-related reasons) for inequality in the sharing of care. This suggests that the sharing of care is a powerful discourse that couples want to be associated with in order to present themselves as 'good' mothers and fathers. On the other hand, the mother's primacy and the father's assistive role in childcare seem to be equally powerful ideals that may guide parents towards taken-for-granted gendered practices, sometimes with no need for justifications.

*Disagreeing about housework*

The interviewed couples did not, however, present their parental practices solely in a harmonious light. While they mainly agreed and produced unanimous accounts of their care practices, conflicting views emerged especially when discussing the division of household chores. Some couples even openly confronted each other during the interview. Our analysis revealed how tensions appeared particularly when one parent considered the division of responsibilities unfair.

In our interviews, the men mainly narrated household labour as being rather equally distributed while their female partners expressed their frustration about the unequal division of household duties. Imbalance between men's and women's accounts of the division of household labour has also been shown in Finnish survey studies (Attila et al, 2019). This is exemplified in the following excerpt in which Laura and Lasse, the mother and father of three children, negotiate their housework practices, including two common household duties in Finland – snow clearing and cleaning the sauna.

Interviewer: 'In your family, how do you share responsibilities related to housework and childcare in the home?'

Laura: 'Lasse can answer.'

Lasse: 'I don't ... I don't think we have a specific division of labour. Both of us do both; we do all kinds of things. Of course there are some subtle differences, but we don't really have ... If we are at home at the same time, I do the cooking, and if you want to consider those subtle differences, then I'm not that strict with ... If there's a mess, I clean it up but then Laura is stricter. I don't think there's anything – we don't have any tasks that neither of us do, we haven't divided any tasks.'

Laura: 'Well primarily it's me who cleans more. And some things – I always clean the bathrooms or suchlike, for example. But Lasse spends a lot of time with the kids outside as well, and as he just said, on his days off nowadays, he cooks more.'

Lasse: 'But we haven't decided on or discussed any specific division of labour. So things just go as they go naturally. Laura likes to clean the bathroom, but I like to perhaps clean the sauna. But those have just formed like ... And I cook and I've always done it so I don't see it as a big deal.'

Laura: 'Of course we have to discuss this sometimes.'

Lasse: 'Sure, regularly. But then I do more yard work, whatever there is to do. Luckily there hasn't been much snow this winter and ...'

Laura: 'Or last winter.'

Lasse: 'Or last winter. So those types of things ...'

Laura: 'There's been a lot less need for snow clearing for many years.'

This couple disagreed on how equally or unequally they divided the housework. Although Laura urges her partner to answer the interviewer's question first, she immediately corrected his account about a rather equal sharing of responsibilities by claiming that actually they had quite specialised responsibilities. The excerpt illustrates how this couple negotiated their respective shares – that is, who does more in terms of time spent (weekly cleaning the home versus snow clearing during the winter). Lasse justified their practices by arguing that they had both chosen the chores they "liked" (cleaning the bathrooms, usually done on a weekly basis versus

cleaning the sauna, usually done once or twice a year) and that their personalities led them to specialise in certain chores (Laura being strict about messiness and he being tolerant of it).

Justificatory accounts are often of especial importance where family members disagree about sharing responsibilities (Finch and Mason, 1993). As the previous excerpt illustrates, the arguments that our interviewees used to legitimise taking or not taking responsibility for household chores were linked, among other things, to time, personal preferences and personalities. In some interviews, the father's incompetence in performing household duties was used as an argument for explaining their unequal division (see, for example, Evertsson and Nyman, 2009). For example, Lauri, a father of two, justified his opting out of the main responsibility for housework (such as cooking meals, doing the laundry and cleaning) by stating "it's because I can't". His partner Liisa, too, expressed her doubts about Lauri's ability to master household chores, especially his ability to do this and look after the children at the same time. She then continued, however, by stating that it would be useful for the father "to see what it's like to run the family's daily life" and that his incompetence was due to the fact that he did not usually have to do these tasks. This mother thus challenged the father's argument based on incompetence by arguing that competence can be learned through practice. If one can acquire competence in household chores through practice, the competence argument loses its force as it makes the man appear unwilling, rather than unable, to participate in these tasks.

Furthermore, some of the interviewed men and women justified their share of parental responsibilities by defining their priorities as mothers and fathers in relation to childcare and household chores. This argument was used by both men and women and we argue that in using it couples were also negotiating about what it means to be a 'good father' or a 'good mother'. In the following excerpt, the argument was deployed by Mika, a father of three children, who sought to legitimise his actions when his spouse Emilia accused him of leaving some household chores undone:

Interviewer: 'Are there any household or childcare tasks that you keep arguing about?'

Mika: 'Well, I guess it's everything. We both do everything equally. Where the conflict lies is perhaps in that I take these things less seriously and I'm not bothered by them. I like to prioritise things, so I feel it's important to have enough time to rest and to marvel, and we prefer to be outside on a nice day, like today, and if there are chores to do, they can wait.'

Emilia: 'Well I guess this is where the conflict lies. I would like the children to clean up after them, and Mika doesn't care about that so much, and when he's at home with the children, it's quite chaotic here sometimes when I come home, and he doesn't take care of that as much as I do.'

Mika: 'Right, sometimes we do –'

Emilia: 'And the dishes are another thing. I prefer dishes to be done promptly and –'

Mika: 'Sometimes we do and sometimes we don't.'

Emilia: 'Right. So that is something that annoys me and aggravates me, when the other person doesn't care what it looks like here.'

Mika: 'And quite often in the evening, it's because, with the children, the evenings often fly by, so often, if I have a chore to finish in the evening, I just

leave it. I think it's more important to leave enough time for the children to calm down and maybe get them to bed a bit earlier.'

Mika justified his occasional opting out of cleaning by defining his priorities: he argued it was more important to have unhurried time with the children than to tidy up, even if this meant that the house looked messy. With this argument, it becomes possible to present oneself as a competent father and, more generally, to define what it means to be a good parent. The child's best interests and the idea of a father who is present in his child's life are such strong ideals that they seem to legitimise setting care as the first priority, even if it is at the expense of taking equal responsibility for housework.

Somewhat similar negotiations and divisions of responsibilities were also described by Jaana and Oskari, who had two children. According to Jaana, the mother, her partner spends more time reading books to or playing with the children or just "lying down on the floor and bustling around with the children", something she rarely found herself doing owing to other time-consuming tasks such as "cleaning the kitchen, cooking and taking laundry over there and dishes over here". In their case, as in the previous example, it is the contrast between spending time with children and doing housework that seems to create frustration and disagreement. Jaana was, however, able to justify the lack of time she spent together with the children by emphasising the importance of preparing home-cooked meals instead of ready-made meals for her family. She explained, "You aren't present for your child in the same way, but then again, who would do the cooking if one were just with the children?" It is possible that gendered expectations about the mother's primary responsibility for housework and for running daily family life render mothers willing – or obliged – to prioritise these life domains in order to comply with the ideal of 'good motherhood'.

To sum up, we found that couples' disagreements over their practices as parents mostly concerned the sharing of housework. However, the parents seemed to find different justifications for taking or not taking responsibility for household chores compared with sharing or not sharing childcare. Structural constraints, such as financial or work-related reasons, were not deployed as arguments for not being able to participate in housework. Sharing household chores did not appear to be as strong an ideal among the interviewed parents as sharing childcare. Some fathers used personal preferences or personality differences, lack of time or even incompetence as arguments in answer to their spouse's complaints about unfairness in the division of unpaid work. These arguments could, however, be quite easily challenged. More powerful arguments were found when parents justified their (lack of) responsibilities for housework by setting their priority as being a 'good father' or 'good mother'. We thus argue that negotiations between spouses are not only about concrete practices, such as who does the housework and when, but also about their moral identities as mothers and fathers.

## Conclusions and discussion

In this article, we scrutinised couples' negotiations on their parenting practices and revealed how gender and parenthood were entwined in these negotiations. Our analysis highlights that negotiations on parenting practices can result in agreement and in unresolved disagreement. The present couples emphasised agreement, especially when



they discussed their care practices, regardless of whether the practices were presented as equally shared or distinctly gendered. Our analysis indicates that agreements were preceded by both implicit and explicit negotiations. Tensions and disagreements – mainly resulting from mothers' sense of unfairness – emerged especially when household duties were discussed. It also seems that unanimity on care practices and disagreement on the division of household duties reflect the wider cultural ideologies of familism and individualism. That is, couples produced 'togetherness' and 'our family' by highlighting their agreement over care whereas their accounts of disagreements over household duties reflects individualistic tones. Overall, our results, showing that household duties continue to be perceived as part of the 'women's sphere' and that male parenting has a strong discretionary element, support the literature on the gendered nature of parenting practices (see [Rose et al, 2014](#)).

The key question prompted by our results is why care practices were primarily agreed on while household duties more often raised disagreement. First, it is possible that the interviewed couples were factually more content with the division of their care responsibilities. During recent decades, involved and caring fatherhood has become a culturally dominant ideal in Finnish society, encouraging men to extend their roles as parents and especially in daily caring practices ([Eerola, 2015](#)). Recent statistics also indicate that Finnish couples share care more equally than household duties ([Attila et al, 2019](#)).

Another explanation could reside in the culturally sensitive and intimate nature of parenting ([Dermott, 2008](#); [Miller, 2017](#)). That is, it would not be morally right – or even possible – to publicly criticise one's partner's parenting and ability or will to care. An interviewee doing this would also be casting doubt on his or her loyalty as a partner and contradicting the display of their family as a 'proper family'.

Third, according to [Finch and Mason \(1993\)](#), being 'unable' is a more legitimate reason for not taking responsibility than being 'unwilling' to do so. When the interviewed couples discussed the mother's primacy in care, this was often justified by both parents by reference to the father's work responsibilities which rendered him 'unable' – although willing – to take equal responsibility for childcare. On the issue of housework, legitimate reasons for not taking equal responsibility are more difficult to find in a country with a dual-earner model, such as Finland where, after family leave, both parents usually work full time. Hence, fathers' explanations for the (unequal) sharing of household duties revealed that they often distanced themselves from tasks they felt uncomfortable doing, did not like or did not consider necessary (that is, positioned themselves as 'unwilling' to do their share). It might therefore be easier for mothers to consider these kinds of justifications unacceptable and to challenge them. In contrast, prioritising their role as an involved and caring father was offered by men as more legitimate argument for their lesser responsibility for housework. Highlighting the importance of the time spent being with the child conforms with the ideal of involved fatherhood, which is why it could be a culturally strong argument. To summarise, we argue that relational negotiations between spouses concern not only concrete practices, such as who does the housework and when, but also moral understandings about 'good fatherhood' and 'good motherhood'.

Our results suggest that childcare is often considered more satisfying and pleasant than household chores. Caring for one's children can be seen as an investment in the child's wellbeing and the creation of a lifelong parent-child relationship. Parenting practices directly related to the child may thus be perceived as more meaningful than



those related to housework. This might explain fathers' increased involvement in care. Our results show that fathers, more than mothers, seem able to prioritise being with the child, although mothers remain expected to take overall responsibility for both practical care and household labour.

Utilising couple interviews as empirical data may also have shaped the results of our analysis. First, couples who have managed to organise their parenting practices in a way that satisfies both partners may be more likely to participate. Second, although some disagreement occurred in the interviews, most couples probably tried to avoid openly challenging each other's views. However, the couple interviews revealed certain gendered expectations of parenting: for example, mothers dominated the interviews and positioned themselves as the 'primary parent', often replying first to the interviewer's questions and regularly interrupting their partners' accounts.

Although open criticism of one's partner's parenting was minor and discreet, a clear, gendered pattern was observed. While mothers were able to criticise their partners' lack of involvement in household duties, fathers' criticism of their partners' practices was conspicuously absent. Inequality in the division of housework thus seems to be experienced as unfair by some mothers even when both parents agree on the (equal or unequal) division of childcare. This is understandable given that in many families the burden of household duties continues to fall on women. However, mothers' criticism of fathers' parenting may also be culturally more legitimate since, despite the changing fatherhood ideals, the expectations of 'good motherhood' still appear to be higher than those of 'good fatherhood'.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author.

<sup>2</sup> Interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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