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Men's Family Breadwinning in Today's Norway: A Blind Spot in the Strive for Gender Equality

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ABSTRACT

The Nordics are known as countries of gender equality. Still, the heterosexual gender and labour division arrangement in the nuclear family to a large degree persists. This particularly seems to be the case in Norway. In a Norwegian context, this is also particularly so in the southernmost region of Agder. In this article, I argue that work that is part of the heterosexual gender and labour division arrangement in the nuclear family in today's Norway is left largely unexplored and that the invisibility and silence of this work contributes to the inertia of this arrangement. I use insights and tools from institutional ethnography to explore what I call "breadwinning work" in the everyday lives of men living in nuclear families in Agder. I also explore how certain understandings of breadwinning and paid work have contributed to concealing this work. These understandings underpin social science research, contemporary public debate and gender equality policies in today's Norway. In order to move towards greater gender equality, I argue that these perceptions need to be challenged.

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Introduction

It was my mother who ... 'You seem so worn out', she said. And since I learnt in the last round that I had to go to the doctor when I was ill, I called. And then it became clear to me that I had not been there since I finished my cancer treatment all those years ago. Then it hit me. Had I really been that stupid again? Had I fell into the same trap again, just working and working to keep the wheels going and the whole business going and then I don't have time to take care of myself? (...) It is something that has struck me the last six months, actually. I do all this ... of course, for my own sake, but most of all to keep everyone else's head above water, and I did the same with my first wife. I cannot continue like this forever.

This quote is from an interview I did with an informant I call John in 2012, whilst I was doing research on Norwegian fathers' breadwinning (Magnussen, 2015). When I interviewed him for the first time in 2008, John was very much in love with his second wife and told me how she "made him feel like a man" and how good he felt providing her with "security", both economically and emotionally. The quote above is from my third talk with John. He then told me that since he travelled so much in his job, he had given his wife access to his bank accounts. His wage went into these accounts, and they also contained money he had inherited and made from selling real estate. After some time, John discovered that his wife, who had no income of her own at the time, in his absence had spent his money "as if they were hers". This is the backdrop for his reflections in the quote above.

In the quote, John makes visible some of the work that his love for his family entails. To him, paid work is first and foremost work for the family; work that "keeps everyone else's head above water". In other words, it is most of all care or love work. This experience of paid work, however,

which is shared by most of the informants in the research I write about in this article, is the complete opposite of the understanding of paid work which underpins much social science research, the public debate on gender equality in the nuclear family and gender equality policies in today's Norway. Here, breadwinning is almost solely understood as self-interest, something I show later in the article. Furthermore, the extensive and diverse expense-handling work that John told about in other parts of my interviews with him, and that also most of my other informants do a lot of, is almost invisible in the mentioned research, debate and policies. This *disjuncture* (Smith, 2005) between the diverse and complex breadwinning that John and other informants in the mentioned research told of and the simplistic and one-sided understandings of this practice that dominate the mentioned research, debate and policies in contemporary Norway, is this article's point of departure. In the article, I use insights and tools from institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005) to explore the *breadwinning work* that was made visible doing the mentioned research but also to explore understandings that seem to have contributed to producing the mentioned gap or disjuncture. I end the article by arguing for the importance of reducing such gaps, which is something that can be done by striving to set aside concepts and starting research by exploring peoples' everyday practices.

The research the article builds on

This article is based on qualitative interviews with 12 white, Norwegian fathers who were or had been in long-term relationships with women, who had all had cancer and were living in the Agder region in Norway.¹ Even if they are known internationally as countries of gender equality, Nordic societies are still highly gendered. One aspect of this is that men still have considerably more paid work than women, and this is particularly the case in Norway (Lanninger & Sundström, 2014).² Further, considerable research substantiates that the gendering of work and responsibilities which was strengthened during the modernization process still shapes the practices of men and women in the Nordics, but in more subtle ways. In this historical process, family/household and work-life became increasingly separated from each other, and the work being done in these different relations became increasingly gendered (Solheim, 2007). Whilst women in the Nordics have increased their paid work since the mid-1950s, they still often have the overview of and the main responsibility for doing unpaid house and care work (Aarseth, 2008; Smeby, 2017). Moreover, whilst men have increased their unpaid house and care work in the last decades, they still do much paid work.

Statistics Norway ranks Agder as the least gender equal region in Norway. Both the difference between men's and women's working hours and their respective incomes are greatest in this region. Around 13% of men between the age of 22–66 years in Agder worked part time in 2017, whilst around 46% of women of this age did the same.³ Even after controlling for the effects of education and working hours, heterosexual couples' allocation of unpaid work in the home is less gender equal in Agder than in other parts of Norway (Lima & Steen Jensen, 2012). In almost all the families I have come in contact with as I was conducting the mentioned interviews, the men did more paid work than their female partners or ex-partners, whilst the women had the shortest working hours and took far more paid or unpaid leave from paid work. They also did most of, and had most responsibility for, house and care work in family relations.

Based on the description of Agder, we have good reason to assume that the men I have interviewed do particularly much breadwinning and that this work has particularly strong connections to masculinity, and is particularly deeply embodied, here. In this article, however, I argue that men's breadwinning in today's Norway is being reduced and silenced in public debate and sociology. Therefore, we have good reason to believe that also men who, seemingly or actually, live more gender equal lives than those of the men I have interviewed, actually do more silent, embodied, masculinity-building breadwinning than we might think. This is substantiated also by other researchers (Aarseth, 2008; Lilleaas, 2003; Oftung, 2009).

In the research I write about in this article, I studied my informants' breadwinning as *work* in Dorothy Smith's (2005) understanding of the word. Social scientists are trained to start research in theoretical concepts. However, according to Smith, we thereby run a high risk of subjugating and displacing the experience of our informants, thus making our research useless or even harmful to them. We also run the same risk by adopting concepts from public discourse. To enable us to see something more or something new, something that can challenge existing power relations, Smith advises us to strive to *set aside* concepts. Instead, we should try to make visible a certain kind of "work" done by people "standing a certain place" within the social relations that society is made up of. Doing institutional ethnographic research, work is understood in a broad sense, meaning "anything done by people that takes time and effort, that they mean to do, that is done under definite conditions and with whatever means and tools, and that they may have to think about" (Smith, 2005, pp. 151–152). Talking, as well as physical, mental and emotional activities are understood as work, and in this article, I unfold "breadwinning work" that cuts across such a categorization. To open up a certain kind of work, the dialogue between researcher and informant should produce what Smith calls *work knowledge*. This knowledge includes "a person's experience of and in their own work, what they do, how they do it, including what they think and feel" (Smith, 2005, p. 151).⁴

Producing work knowledge is also about trying to make visible how a certain kind of work is *socially coordinated*. In institutional ethnography, our actions are understood as fundamentally shaped by the actions of others, even if we are not fully aware of how this happens (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). In what Smith labels *local relations*, relations towards people and things in our social proximity (Campbell & Gregor, 2004), speaking is the primary coordinating tool.⁵ When people's actions are coordinated across time and space, with people's actions elsewhere and elsewhen, both discourses and material texts are crucial. Smith labels relations in which such coordination happens *trans-local* or *ruling relations*, and the ultimate goal of doing institutional ethnography is to explore and challenge ways of organizing and understanding people's actions that shape the experience of people in different places at different points in time.

In the research I write about here, I went from exploring my informants' breadwinning work to exploring why this work is almost invisible in both social science, contemporary public debate and gender equality policies in today's Norway. In other words, I moved from explicating my informants' work in local relations to explicating ruling understandings that contributed to concealing this work. In doing so, I explored Norwegian research on gender in family relations and Nordic research on men and masculinities. Hence, this research became what is called *second-level data* in institutional ethnographic research (Campbell & Gregor, 2004).

In the following sections of the article, I unfold the breadwinning work that was made visible in the mentioned research. On this basis, I move on to explore and problematize understandings of breadwinning and paid work which seem to have contributed to concealing this work. I end the article by arguing for the need to conduct research that reduces the risk of unconsciously adopting such understandings and, instead, attempts to explore and understand them.

Generating, securing and maximizing income

I started my interviews by asking about my informants' employment, and the conversations these questions prompted unearthed a great deal of activities being done to generate, secure and maximize income. All except one of my informants worked full time or did so before they fell ill with cancer, many worked overtime, several worked odd hours on a regular basis and some also travelled a lot to maximize diet money. Working long hours was almost always taken completely for granted. Some had several jobs or their own businesses parallel to "having an ordinary job", and the men talked about all of these activities in a positive manner, seemingly considering them as opportunities for maximizing income. Several had arranged so that they both secured a steady income and could earn more risk-free in the ways mentioned above. They planned their families' future income and had secured it with insurance schemes.⁶ Some of my informants even had

“hobbies” they made money from, such as fixing and selling cars, and they talked about this in the same breath and in the same words as other ways of making money.

If we define both paid work and profitable “hobbies” as breadwinning, this work cuts across the division between home and workplace often used in sociology—and also across the division between work and leisure. That such dichotomies may hinder our understandings of men’s breadwinning became particularly visible in the mental and emotional breadwinning of my informants. This work was, of course, not confined to certain times and places. The mental breadwinning work that first became visible to me was the substantial and diverse knowledge about maximizing their income over the life course that most of my informants had built. They justified their choices using this knowledge, and interestingly, some of the men were so preoccupied with economic issues that they often ended up talking about it almost all the time, regardless of my questions.

Concerning the emotional sides of generating income, we saw that for John, earning money was “love work”. The same was true for most of my other informants. Many also talked about money in a dreaming and longing language. They dreamt of making more money, even if they said that they did not really *need* it. Many also longed to become age pensioners and for their income-generating work to be over. In the quote below, an informant I call Peter talks about this longing and his “profitable hobby” of buying, fixing and selling cars. He also reveals some of his diverse and detailed economic knowledge by stating that,

I sold all the cars and I actually got more than a good enough price, considering today’s market. So ... So I know that it is 8 years and 8 days until I’m an age pensioner (Laughs). Yes, but I know it! I am counting down. And then me and my wife both know that if we sell the house, we can quit our jobs so and so many years earlier, both of us. And by selling the cars, I was also able to pay some of the debt. (...) I am really looking forward to becoming debt-free and an age pensioner. I am.

Masculinity’s connections to independence and self-reliance has a long history in the West, and with modernization, paid work became a central way of increasing independency. Thus, such work became a central way of doing masculinity (Tjeder, 2003; Tosh, 1999; Warren, 2007).⁷ In my data, this connection became particularly visible in the experience of a man living on disability pension. He found this situation uncomfortable and handled economic issues in ways that reduced this unease. This connection also became visible in the ways by which many of the men I have interviewed talked about paid work. Most of them spoke of themselves as either someone who had to work to thrive or as having the strength to discipline themselves to do so.

Disciplining body, thoughts and feelings

As I will demonstrate in the next sections of this article, we understand more of men’s breadwinning if we include more than paid work in the concept. Still, paid work is undoubtedly a core activity, and actions aiming at securing and maximizing income in a long-term perspective can also be understood as breadwinning. Some of the work my informants did to handle their health can be understood this way. Many were preoccupied with “doing a good job” and were proud of doing so. Many were also available for colleagues and superiors almost non-stop. Doing this, they concealed health problems and sickness, in line with the findings of Norwegian sociologist Ulla-Britt Lilleaas (2003). If they were sick, but “could get out of bed”, almost all of my informants still went to work, but slowed down or worked less if possible, “without making a fuss about it”. Most also handled information about their health problems cautiously. Clearly, as they dealt with these problems, something beyond their health was at stake.

Exploring my informants’ disciplining of their bodies also made visible parallel disciplining of thoughts and feelings. Several told that they suppressed so-called “negative thoughts”, and some even went as far as trying to stay away from things that might provoke these. An informant I call Eric said that

I mean that I mostly have a positive view on life. And ... mean ... I have a positive view on most things. And ... I try to stay away from things that are not positive. (...) I don't like things that are not ok. I cannot watch ... sad stuff and intrigues and things like that on TV.

I understand this mental and emotional disciplining as a response to health problems representing multiple threats to the men. Signalling weakness, sickness may in itself jeopardize men's masculinity (Courtenay, 2000). In addition, such problems threaten their income, which threatened my informants' self-reliance *and* their ability to care for their family. Swedish historian Clas Ekenstam (2007) connects many men's fear of losing control over their feelings with their historic status, power and careers. I argue that my informants' fear of losing control over their emotions is also a fear of not being able to keep the family economy's "big wheel" rolling.

Financing most—and certain parts of—family expenses

In the previous sections, I tried to show that exploring income-generating work in a generous and open manner enables us to understand more than a narrow focus on formal, paid work allows for. In the following sections, I make visible the expense-handling work of my informants. This makes us understand even more of the diverse and intense income-generating work of my informants. The first thing I noticed when I shifted my interview focus from income-generating to expense-handling, was that my informants did not make sharp distinctions between such work. They talked about both income-generating and expense-handling as ways of optimizing their family economies, and they also seemed to tap into the same knowledge reservoir doing it and explaining it to me.

Talking to my informants about their handling of expenses, I also found that most of them did not finance a certain *share* of the total family expenses. Instead, they "owned" certain expenses. The men paid for what they called "regular expenses",⁸ whilst their female partners paid for food, clothes for the family and for "smaller things for the house". The men almost always paid for house and car loans, for electricity, insurance and all expenses connected to telephones, Wi-Fi and TV. Further, they paid for petrol, other car expenses and mostly also for property maintenance. The same was almost always true for more luxurious things, like holidays, enlarging and refurbishing houses, furniture, boats and cabins.⁹ American sociologist Viviana Zelizer (1989) calls this practice "ear-marking of money". However, in almost all the families I came in contact with whilst doing my research, this earmarking was done in the same way. Therefore, I find it more useful to describe their economies as consisting of gendered sub-economies. Even if the bulkhead between these was not waterproof, money often seemed to both enter and leave *his big* or *her small* economy, without being mixed or redistributed to any substantial degree.

The distribution of expenses in my data can be understood as a reflection of the gendered division of work in the families I came into contact with. For example, the women can be understood as paying for food and clothing because these are connected to the family work they did most of (Nyman, 2002). However, this distribution may also be understood as a division of work in its own right. Most of my informants not only financed "their" expenses but also *did* the buying and the paying connected to them as well as other kinds of work in the relations they involved. For example, they not only financed the house loan but also *did* the paying. Furthermore, they were generally the ones who checked out and chose banks and loan terms and kept in contact with bank representatives to ensure that they got a good deal.

The distribution of expenses I have explicated makes almost all of my informants into the one financing most of their families' expenses, and other research substantiates that this is often so in Norwegian heterosexual couples (Brusdal, Borgeraas, & Stamsø, 2013). Except for the expenses "owned" by their partners, most of my informants actually paid for as much as they could. Whilst doing my research, I gradually became aware that my informants' breadwinning often had a kind of elasticity to it, both size- and time-wise. It undoubtedly exceeded securing the family economy and financing necessities for dependants, and as the men were able to finance more, they often

did so. The interviews with John and several others show that this can be understood as love work. However, it should also be understood as “masculinity work”. This became particularly obvious in the experience of the few of my informants whose status as the “main financier of family expenses” was challenged. For example, a man I call Richard had a wife who earned considerably more than him. He was one of only two informants who kept track of who paid which family expenses, and he did this to ensure that he paid as much as his wife. He and his wife also cooperated to make this visible to her family, as he did not want them “to think of him as a freeloader”.

Not only the *size* of my informants’ financing of expenses but also the *kind* of expenses they financed, can have a breadwinning aspect to it. The so-called “regular expenses” bear resemblance to the “necessary expenses” that Norwegian male breadwinners during the breadwinner/housewife era were expected to pay for, whether or not their wives had an income (Slottemo, 2003).¹⁰ Paying these expenses could make my informants feel and pass as a “good breadwinner” in their social relations. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that a considerable part of the expenses “owned” by most of my informants can be seen as an investment that, in the case of a break-up, may benefit the men the most (Brusdal et al., 2013).

Paying bills and being the family’s “finance manager”

According to most of my informants, they did more “expense work” than their life partners, and “their” economies were bigger. Moreover, whilst the women often bought and paid for things at the same time, the men much more often paid invoices using online banking. Some also paid their partner’s personal invoices or remind them to pay these. Most of the men also kept track of possible future expenses. This means that both their income-generating and their expense-handling work was oriented towards the future and ahead of what happened. There is a logic in those financing and paying the major share of the family expenses having the greatest need for control by having an overview of the here and now and by planning for the future. That the expenses in question are connected to the families’ “infrastructure”—levied by outside actors at a regular basis and is deemed important for the family’s credit rating, probably also adds to the men’s need for control. At the same time, the men I have interviewed *built* their economic overview by doing the mentioned expense-handling work, and this overview also seems to *facilitate* planning.

Moreover, the mentioned expense-handling work involves emotional work, and I have mentioned a need for control. Almost all the men I have interviewed also said that they had the main responsibility of handling the family economy. Fulfilling this responsibility felt good, but it also entailed stress, constant worrying and sleepless nights. Some told that they worried about family economy even if they, in reality, had nothing to worry about. If we see family breadwinning as a way of doing and displaying masculinity, these feelings can be understood as a fear of not being “man enough” (Seidler, 1997). However, when my informants worried about family economy, they also worried about others, and this was yet another way that the care and love in breadwinning became visible in my material. For instance, an informant I call Henry had never talked to his wife about his fear of not recovering from cancer. He had, however, made her a book with economic information she would need if he should die:

It (the book) concerns the whole situation in the house and home and economy and . . . things that she must go into and . . . must do more of, things that I have always done. Just something like the insurance. How often does the bill come? What is insured? How does she enter my online banking, for example, open the mail I am using . . . She uses hers at work and she knows how to do it, so that’s ok, but . . . Then I made templates for all of this.

This means that Henry’s everyday experience, like the experience of John that this article started out in, perforates the sharp distinction between breadwinning work and care work which permeates much Norwegian sociology about gender in family relations (see, for instance, Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006a).

Concerning the emotional side of expense-handling, I have already mentioned that most of the men I have interviewed felt that they had the main responsibility of economically supporting their families. They did not, however, elaborate on this unless I asked them to do so, and there was almost no reflection on the gendered nature of their breadwinning work.

Influencing the family's use of money

There seemed to be many discussions about the use of money in the families of the men I have interviewed, and more “luxurious” expenses seemed to be discussed a lot in particular. This finding further substantiates the usefulness of understanding money administration and control connected to gendered sub-economies, because this way of organizing family economy probably reduces the need for discussing the expenses that have a designated “owner”. When my informants told of what *was* discussed with their life partners, they often told of partners wanting refurbishing and expansion of houses and cabins or even new houses and cabins, furniture and travels. The men often wanted to spend money on things they considered “more necessary”, such a building and vehicle maintenance. Several spoke as if there was a never-ending line of “necessary things” waiting to be financed, and as if their female partners neither saw nor felt these the way they did.

Many men told that their partners claimed that it was possible to realize the wishes of both parties, for example by increasing their bank loan. The men, however, often argued for a constant need to prioritise—to choose. Their economic knowledge and overview probably gave them both arguments and authority in these discussions, and my material gives few possibilities for demarcating neutral “planning” from “having power over family expenses”. Most informants portrayed themselves as economically sensible and their female partners or ex-partners as more economically unsensible. Interestingly, this alleged lack of “economic sense” in their partners, which simultaneously displayed the men as being more economically capable and responsible, was the only way my informants explicitly complained about their partners. However, we have good reason to believe that the men, overall, knew more about family economy than their partners and also had a different feel for it. Most of them had worked a lot, experienced a great deal of stress, worries and economic responsibility, and thus dreamt of winding down. Some feared that an improved family economy would lead to increasing expectations and expenses, and this can definitely be understood as a fear of never-ending work and worries.

Some of my informants refused to increase their bank loans to pay for things they did not condone, and some also let such things stand in the mentioned line over time, repeatedly prioritizing other things. However, several said that their partners usually “get what they want in the end”, and also other research substantiates that women have a big say in how families spend money in today's Norway (Brusdal et al., 2013). Many of my informants influenced family expenditure by labelling some expenses as “most necessary”. Many also argued for maximizing the outcome of money spent and did several things to ensure this. Building, enlarging and refurbishing houses and cabins themselves were ways of doing this, and many spent much time and energy on this kind of work. For example, the informant I call Peter said that

Do you know what, with my ex-wife, there always had to be some kind of house project going on. She was almost turned on by the smell of paint (Laughs). Yes, but it is true. Because then she knew that something was happening, that there was a project going on at home, that something was being refurbished. There always had to be something going on. During the years with her, I never sat in the sofa for an hour at a stretch, I mean it. I always had to do something. So . . . That is something that I appreciate enormously with my wife now. She does not always chase new things and new projects. We buy things, we fix things, but it's not that kind of chase and all those demands.

I understand the mentioned work to limit and direct family expenditure as an extension of my informants' income-generating work and other expense-handling work. The logic in the work is the same, and many of the activities facilitate others. However, some of the men who both worked, earned and financed a lot and also did most money administration, were *not* preoccupied with using

money as sensibly as possible. On the contrary, some told of “giving” children and spouses as much of what they wanted as possible and of liking this. These men understood being very generous with money as love. John is one of those who used to think and feel like this, but who now feels exploited. Some also understood being very generous with money as a way of “giving back” to their female life partners for their crucial unpaid family work. The men who were most generous with money, however, had had solid economies over time. The informant who was living on disability benefit, meanwhile, told that he felt a sense of shame for not being able to finance family expenses. Having an income that was considerably smaller than that of his wife, he seldom tried to influence the family’s use of money, and he talked as if he was in no position to do so.

Ruling understandings of breadwinning in contemporary Norway

In the previous sections, I have tried to show that the men I have interviewed did a broad range of knowledgeable, embodied, masculinity-building, physical, mental and emotional breadwinning, shaped by the thoughts and actions of their female life partners and kids as well as by people they worked with. Overall, such work included having responsibility for and an overview of the family economy, and I argue that it has parallels to the responsibility and overview that women often have more of in the nuclear family, which are connected to house and care work (Aarseth, 2013; Faircloth, 2014; Haavind, 2006; Hays, 1996; Smeby, 2017).

All in all, my findings substantiate that breadwinning can be understood as *family work*—as an integral part of doing both fatherhood, relationship, family and home in today’s Agder and also in Norway more generally. In the remaining part of the article, I explore how my informants’ breadwinning is shaped by trans-local or ruling social forces (Smith, 2005). My material shows that their experience is shaped by connections between breadwinning and masculinity that were strengthened during modernization. Even if these are to a large degree silent, they have a visible impact on almost all of my informants’ everyday lives. In the rest of the article, I explore ruling understandings that have contributed to keeping much of my informants’ breadwinning in the shadows. As mentioned, I continued my exploring of men’s breadwinning into gender research—into Norwegian sociology on gender in family relations and Nordic research on men and masculinities.¹¹ Based in this part of my research, I argue that the *silence* surrounding men’s breadwinning in today’s Norway is not only a sign of more gender equal breadwinning, of breadwinning losing importance in family relations and of weakening connections between breadwinning and masculinity. I argue that this work is also *silenced*. This has and is being done, in gender research, in public debate and in policy documents about gender equality in the nuclear family, by *reducing* breadwinning in two rounds. First, breadwinning is reduced to paid work. Often, Nordic gender researchers state that men in nuclear families often have more paid work and earn more than their female partners, and therefore often are the families’ main breadwinners (see, for instance, Skrede & Wiik, 2012). Second, paid work is reduced to self-interest—to a right, a privilege, an asset and a way of gaining independence and influence (Magnussen, 2015), something pointed out Norwegian historian Hilde Gunn Slottemo (2009). For instance, in the introductory chapter in the book entitled *Politicizing Parenthood in Scandinavia. Gender Relations in Welfare States*, Norwegian sociologists Anne Lise Ellingsæter and Arnlaug Leira state that

Gender equality is integral to Scandinavian citizenship and represents a central element of the Nordic welfare state model. Further, equality between women and men is not only about labour market participation and economic independence, but also about work/family arrangements (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006b, p. 7).

The early women’s studies and the women’s movement, closely connected in Norway in the 1970s (Halsaa, 2006), defined paid work as “self-realization”, “the right to money of one’s own” and “economic liberation” (Koren, 2012). This understanding also underpins Norwegian gender equality policies from the 1970s and up until today (see, for instance, The ministry of children and gender equality, 2012, p. 15). More remarkably, this notion even seems to have been adopted in Nordic

research on men and masculinities. This may be caused by this research being “empirically weak” and “theoretically overloaded” (Holter, 2012, p. 274). Moreover, this research *grew out of* women’s studies and also had tight connections to gender equality policies (Hearn et al., 2012; Lorentzen, 2006). In 1998, Norwegian sociologist Øystein Gullvåg Holter wrote that “men, as women saw them, became part of the basis for the Nordic research on men and masculinities” (Holter, 1998, p. 228). However, the Nordic research on men and masculinities that concerns family and work-life shows few signs of having taken this insight thoroughly into account.

The understanding of paid work as self-interest is understandable from the standpoint of women, and in particular from the standpoint of the middle-class women who were active in women’s studies and in shaping Norwegian gender equality policies (Magnussen, 2015). However, it conceals much of the love and care for others that John and my other informants do when they do breadwinning. It also conceals other aspects of this work, its masculinity-building potential and its part in the gendered, emotional work complex of the nuclear family. This has undoubtedly impeded the understanding of family practices more generally. Likewise, understanding paid work as self-interest has also concealed the fact that even if men as a group can be said to be more privileged than women, they are not only and always privileged in all their social relations. Such an understanding has obscured the costs that may follow with what is defined as privilege and has also concealed women’s contributions to reproducing gender inequality in the nuclear family. I argue that it has also exaggerated the difference between the everyday lives of men living in the Nordics today and men living elsewhere and elsewhere. Several Anglo-American researchers, for instance, understand breadwinning as fathering being done alongside “newer” ways of fathering (Doucet, 2006; Miller, 2010; Palkovitz, 2002), like I do. It is probably easier to discover such “traditional fathering” and the connectedness of people’s actions more generally, outside of the discourses of individualism and gender equality that are so dominant in the Nordics (Gullestad, 2003). The capturing power of such discourses suggests that using institutional ethnography to study gender may be particularly useful in this specific context.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how understandings of breadwinning and paid work which have been used in Norwegian and Nordic gender research have contributed to concealing much of the everyday and everynight breadwinning that John and my other informants do as well as the social coordination of this work. Hopefully, I have managed to show how *adopting* concepts instead of *exploring* them puts researchers in danger of becoming tools for ruling, as argued by Dorothy Smith (2005). This danger is not eradicated by researchers’ wish to “do good”, for instance, by contributing to gender equality. On the contrary, researchers who have such ambitions *and* start out in well-established concepts and social categories probably run a particularly high risk of systematically not seeing and not writing about experience that does not fit these (Magnussen, 2019).

Even if simplification of men’s experience at one point in history may have facilitated gender equality measures and thereby gender equality in Norway, this reduction is still problematic. Furthermore, I argue that in today’s Norway, the simplistic understandings of men’s everyday lives that I have identified are counterproductive to the goal of gender equality. Men are largely uninvolved in contemporary Norwegian public debate on gender equality in the nuclear family, and I believe that this is not only because men as a group can be said to be more privileged than women and do not need gender equality to the same extent. Rather, I believe that it also has to do with this debate directing much attention towards what men *do not do*, rather than what they actually *do* and *why* they do it (Magnussen, 2015)—a why that includes women’s role in shaping this work. We also have good reason to believe that men with a working-class background often experience a particularly large gap or disjuncture between their everyday experience and the generalized understandings being activated in such debates, and may be particularly discouraged from participating in them.

I believe that challenging ruling, simplistic understandings of men's family work and its connections and giving room for more of the work I have made visible in this article, this debate can become more inclusive and more productive towards the goal of gender equality. Smith urges us to develop new—and even unwanted—knowledge if we want to challenge existing societal power relations (Smith, 2005; Widerberg, 2015). Her insistence that we start research in people's everyday and everynight experience and on exploring concepts instead of adopting them enables the social scientist to take on such a role.

Notes

1. The interviews were conducted between 2008 and 2012. Only one informant had never had paid work. All had had cancer because my project initially was part of a larger project about men with cancer. Most of my informants were in their 40s and 50s. Only one informant had more than four years of higher education. One had finished primary school, three had finished high school, whilst seven had shorter university degrees. I interviewed almost all of my informants several times, as I wanted more details about breadwinning work that gradually became visible to me.
2. However, 45% of heterosexual couples had quite similar incomes in 2013 (Bergsvik, Kitterød, & Wiik, 2016).
3. This is shown in tables you can make yourself at <https://www.ssb.no/statbank/table/09293>.
4. Making work that is being silenced by scientific and/or lay discourses can be challenging. I tried to assist my informants in articulating their breadwinning work by asking open questions about their everyday/everynight activities—which physical actions they did, what kind of knowledge they based their actions in, what they worried about, what they longed for etc. I also tried to help them “unpack” concepts they used to describe their own breadwinning activities, trying to bring forth the physical, mental and emotional work hidden in/by concepts such as for instance “paying the bills”. This kind of interviewing entails a great deal of probing.
5. However, digitization may challenge this assumption.
6. They did this prior to falling ill with cancer, and in fact, several told that this meant that they had few economic worries when they fell ill.
7. For a research review on men's breadwinning through Western history, see Magnussen (2015).
8. These are called “faste utgifter” in Norwegian.
9. In a Norwegian survey about household economy, the majority of the married or cohabitating respondents reported that both partners contributed to paying different expenses. However, a considerable share of respondents also reported the allocation of expenses I write about here (Brusdal et al., 2013).
10. Food and clothing are necessary expenses. However, these are less often levied from actors external to the family, are less predictable time- and size-wise and the price also varies more. They are probably also more easily reduced at short notice.
11. For an overview of the sociology and the research on men and masculinities I have explored, see Magnussen (2015, p. 24): <https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/48893/PhD-Magnussen.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>. Lilleaas (2003) is the only one who has explored men's breadwinning in today's Norway. She finds that men still do much breadwinning, which includes worries and feelings of responsibility and stress and is a way of doing masculinity.

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