‘Quality Time’ in Nanny Families: Local Care Loops and New Inequalities in Sweden

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INTRODUCTION

Political initiatives such as tax deductions for domestic services, including nannies, together with a growing au pair market, have paved the way for new possibilities of organizing child care and parenting in Sweden. This has implications for the everyday ‘local care loops’ (Isaksen & Näre, 2019) in upper-middle-class families purchasing these services. With the possibility of hiring cheap, female—and often migrant—care workers, the logistics of solving the work-family dilemma have changed. In this chapter, we analyse how this affects the doing of family in ‘nanny families’, with a special focus on the ideal of ‘quality time’: a discourse on

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L. Näre and L. W. Isaksen (eds.), *Care Loops and Mobilities in Nordic, Central, and Eastern European Welfare States*, Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92889-6_5

parenting that has strengthened in recent decades, based on assumptions that parents are responsible for creating time and situations filled with an ‘harmonious experience of togetherness’ with their children, and for giving them their undivided attention (Christensen, 2002, p. 79)¹ (Fig. 5.1).

Buying the services of someone else to care for one’s children might, at first glance, appear to contradict the quality-time ideal, as the time parents and children spend together is reduced. However, our interviews attest otherwise: quality time is instead, according to the parents, *made possible* by the hiring of nannies and au pairs. Their argument builds on ideas of the possibility of dividing up and ‘marking’ different ‘care times’. These are, in turn, connected to more general changes in our view of ‘time’ in late-modern societies, in the tensions between linear clock time (Daly, 1996, p. 5) and efforts to create special moments outside of time pressures (Urry, 1994, p. 139). By comparing the parents’ perspective with the perspective of the actors who find themselves in the actual care situation—the nannies, au pairs, and children—this article analyses the complex work involved in creating family and quality time, arguing that care is an activity that entails emotional doings (Mason, 1996) characterized by ‘circular family time’ (Daly, 1996, p. 14; Morgan, 2011, p. 77), which fits badly with ideals of dividing and separating out ‘mundane’ from ‘quality’ time.

PAID DOMESTIC CARE AND THE DOING OF FAMILY IN SWEDEN

Outsourcing care for children to parties hired by the family, such as nannies and other domestic workers, has a long history (Sarti, 2014; Souralová, 2017), marked by the dimensions of class and ethnicity. In the Nordic context, this was visible at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the practice of assigning care work in upper- and middle-class families as an appropriate form of employment for young girls from rural areas and for migrant women (Strollo, 2013). With the development of the social democratic welfare states and increased demand—and possibilities—for women to work in paid labour, child care was increasingly seen as a public

¹ This chapter expands on the analysis and arguments in the book *Nanny Families: Practices of care by nannies, au pairs, parents, and children in Sweden* (Eldén and Anving 2019: Bristol University Press).

Fig. 5.1 Visual summary of Sara Eldén's and Terese Anving's chapter by illustrator Aino Sutinen

concern. As one of the Scandinavian ‘women-friendly’ welfare states (Hernes, 1987), Sweden presents a good example of this development. Since the Second World War, Swedish family politics has been driven by two overarching ideas: social equality and, at a later stage, gender equality (Esping-Andersen, 2016; Lundqvist, 2011). The first aimed at creating equal opportunities and good care situations for all children, through reforms such as universal child care allowances and an extensive and affordable-for-all public day-care system, and the second questioned the male breadwinner model and promoted dual-earner/dual-carer families, e.g., through ‘daddy quotas’ on parental leave (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006).

Despite progressive politics and policies, there are still discrepancies between the strong political rhetoric of gender equality and family practices (Statistics Sweden, 2020). The failure to fully realize the dual-earner/dual-carer model has spurred various political initiatives over the years, one of which is to subsidize domestic care services for households. Initially, the idea was met with scepticism, as privately employed domestic workers were considered un-Swedish, and as belonging to ‘a clear and visible class society with masters and maids in people’s homes’—a society that was seen as having been abolished in Sweden by the social democratic welfare system (Kvist, 2013, p. 215). However, in 2007, the Conservative/Liberal government introduced the RUT tax deduction, which allows purchasers of domestic services to deduct a proportion of the labour costs. This led to considerable growth in the formal market for paid domestic services, especially in the cleaning sector (Gavanas & Calleman, 2013; The Swedish Tax Agency, 2017), but also in nanny services. In parallel, a less formal market of au pairs emerged and, today, Swedish families increasingly employ au pairs from all over the world (Anving & Eldén, 2016; Calleman, 2010).² Although their working conditions differ in some ways—nannies are employed through agencies by the hour, au pairs are privately employed and live with the family³—they both represent groups that perform paid care work, primarily of

² Norway, Denmark, and Finland experienced similar developments (Bikova, 2017; Näre & Wide, 2019; Stenum, 2010) but, in recent years, have exhibited different tendencies. For instance, in Norway, the willingness of families to hire au pairs has declined (Isaksen & Bikova, 2022).

³ In Sweden, *nanny* (*barnflicka*) refers to a live-out child care worker, employed by the hour through an agency, without formal education, and who usually works for a family a

children, in the private setting of the family home. Given the relatively high cost, domestic services are a realistic choice only for a well-off group of middle- or upper-class families (Halldén & Stenberg, 2014; The Swedish Tax Agency, 2017).

While delegation of care and divisions of time have long been common practices in Swedish families and are visible in parents' extensive use of, and trust in, public day-care services (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2017), our study shows that the new possibilities of outsourcing family care that emerge with the growing private market for domestic care work change the parameters. This calls for a re-thinking of the ways in which care for children is organized, in time and space, in the local care loops that have been made possible.

THEORIZING FAMILIES AND TIME

Focusing on the 'local' levels of everyday arrangements of care in a particular place makes it possible to capture the complex and contradictory ways in which politics, policies, and discourses are played out and re-formulated. Everyday practices of care are 'simultaneously routinized activities but also changing from day to day depending on the available resources and constraints', such as time, money, and caregivers; collectively, this forms what Isaksen and Näre (2019, pp. 594–595) call a 'patchwork of care'. Care loops are the 'daily choreography' organizing actors' movements in time and space. The 'local care loops' orchestrated by parents in our study entail and enable certain movements (Isaksen & Näre, 2019; Isaksen & Bikova, 2022), both for themselves and for the other actors involved, here specifically nannies, au pairs, and children. To capture these, theoretical points of departure are needed that enable an understanding of both family and time as *processes* rather than as factual entities.

By conceptualizing family as something constituted in and through 'doings', a *family practices* perspective enables a focus on 'what appears

couple of afternoons per week or sometimes more. The main work task is to care for children. *Au pair* refers to migrant live-in 'workers' who are officially on cultural exchange, under conditions similar to the European Agreement on Au Pair Placement (1969). Both categories of workers are predominantly occupied by young and often migrant women, and are poorly paid and weakly regulated (Anving & Eldén, 2016; Eldén & Anving, 2019).

to be trivial or even meaningless activities' which are 'given meaning through being grouped together under one single label, that of family' (Morgan, 2011, p. 5–7). Issues of time and space are necessarily implicated in family practices (Morgan, 2011, pp. 75–76), and the concern with time has become increasingly critical in society at large, and especially in families. Time has become 'the dominant currency in families', as Daly argues (1996, p. 9), and the metaphors for how we understand time are *linear* and economic, built on the notion of clock time: time is thought of and organized in a past-present-future manner, where day-to-day routines are set up around productive activity (Daly, 1996, pp. 7–9; Urry, 1994, p. 133). The 'acceleration' of time renders family worlds 'increasingly dominated by an angst about the availability of time' (Daly, 1996, p. 14). However, while linear metaphors dominate how families *conceptualize* time, *circular* time is still very much present in the *experience* of everyday life, as daily routines are by essence repetitive (Daly, 1996, p. 5). 'Practical time', that is, 'everyday routines' with 'the same or similar tasks being repeated with clearly detectable regularities' are the most central features of family life, but are increasingly experienced as problematic, and ideally to be replaced by 'special time', that is, time that is associated with 'the exceptional or the memorable' (Morgan, 2011, pp. 77–78).

The search for 'special time' is a more generally emerging characteristic of 'disorganized capitalist societies', in what Urry (1994, p. 136) identifies as instantaneous and glacial time: on the one hand, a sense of the dissolution of everything that is stable, but on the other a celebration of stability. A need for 'quality time' emerges: 'efforts are made to ensure short but sweet moments of uninterrupted "presence-availability"' (Urry, 1994, p. 139).

Ideals of 'quality time' draw our attention to a particular and quite recent development in the life of families: the increased stress on *parenting*. 'Quality time' is, according to Christensen (2002, p. 79), built on the assumption that 'parents are responsible for making time and situations when, by giving children their undivided attention', they 'create "family time" as an harmonious experience of togetherness', 'achieved through parents and children engaging in activities that communicate and support their mutual affection and enjoyment'. The emphasis on 'undivided attention' is closely connected to new ideas of *intensive parenting*, a form of parenting that is '*child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive*' (Hays, 1996, p. 8;

emphasis in the original). The underlying assumption is that children are vulnerable and at risk, and that parents need to make the right choices for them and to provide them with the right environment to ensure positive outcomes (Faircloth, 2014, pp. 44–46). While this ideal is hard for most parents to realize in practice, as it requires time, money, and a certain cultural competence (Faircloth, 2014, p. 31), it affects everyone, as it is understood on a discursive level as the 'appropriate approach' to raising a child (Hays, 1996). In this sense, the doing of 'good' intensive parenting reproduces social class (Lareau, 2003). The parents in our study have both the finances and the cultural competence to live up to these ideals, but, as we will see, their version of intensive parenting relies heavily on notions of delegating and dividing care and time, trying to ensure that 'family time' is qualitative and special.

STUDY AND METHODS

The point of departure for this chapter is the research project *Care for children in an era of private market service* (RJ P13-0603:1), which has as its overarching aim to analyse the practice of doing care and family in families that hire nannies and au pairs. To grasp the complexity of this practice, we have interviewed actors from all categories involved: parents ($n = 29$, 19 mothers and 9 fathers), nannies and au pairs ($n = 26$, 11 nannies, 15 au pairs, 18–29 years old), and children ($n = 19$, 5–14 years old). Together, the parents had experience of hiring 83 nannies and au pairs over the years, the children had been taken care of by around 80 nannies and au pairs, and the interviewed nannies and au pairs talked about experiences from working in 59 families. For ethical reasons, to protect the most vulnerable parties in the study, we interviewed nannies and au pairs first and gave them the choice of allowing or refusing us access to their parent employers. In addition, in the cases where several adult members engaged in family practices in the same family were interviewed, the nanny or the au pair was interviewed by one of the researchers, and the parents by the other. This was done to ensure that no information from the nanny or au pair would be passed on to the parents. The children were interviewed in the last stage, ensuring that no information from their interviews was accidentally passed on to adult participants. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants (for children, also from legal guardians), and when reporting the study, we have changed names, locations, and other circumstances

and have only included personal information about informants if it is important to the analysis.⁴

All participating parents were working full-time in demanding careers and told of partners doing the same. Their incomes placed them in Sweden's upper-middle-class strata. The parents had children aged between 6 months and 14 years, and all had made use of public day-care, with nannies and au pairs as a complement, enabling fewer hours of day-care and more working time for the parents. The number of children in each family varied between one and four. The majority of nannies and au pairs had middle-class backgrounds, but belonged to lower strata than the employing parents. Most were engaged in, or had already completed, a university degree. Eight nannies were born and raised in Sweden and three came from other EU countries. Seven au pairs were from within Europe and eight from outside of Europe. All were women and none had children of their own.

The principal focus in the interviews was everyday care practices. In the repeated interviews with nannies and au pairs, we used care diaries (Gabb, 2008); the children were engaged in drawing activities (Eldén, 2013); and data from parents came from semi-structured interviews. In analysing the data, we used different tools: extensive field notes in connection to each interview; repeated readings of transcripts, looking especially for accounts that indicate tensions, discrepancies, or hesitation, as care doings are often invisible and lack an adequate language (DeVault, 1991); and coding and then reducing the data into themes.

PARENTS' VIEWS ON QUALITY TIME: DELEGATING TO ENABLE 'GOOD PARENTING'

Key to understanding how spending *less* time with one's child can enable one to realize intensive parenting ideals is to deconstruct the ways in which the delegation and division of care are conceptualized in relation to different kinds of 'time'. Of importance here is the surplus time that parents experience through the practice of hiring nannies and au pairs, a surplus that they argue makes them into better parents. This becomes

⁴ Ethics Review Authority approval: Dnr 2014/94. For a discussion of ethics relating to studying individuals engaged in the same family practices, see Gabb (2010), and for the particular challenges of family practices and nanny/au pair relations, see Eldén & Anving (2019).

visible in *what the parents think they get* when they buy the services of a nanny or au pair (Näre & Wide, 2019; Näre and Wide, 2022). Firstly, they buy themselves *available-for-work time*. The parents in our study all pursue demanding careers, and their workplaces expect them to be available and flexible, in sectors that are, by and large, marked by instantaneous time (Urry, 1994). To combine this with dropping off and picking up children from day-care, for example, is difficult. As one mother, Felicia, says, you do not work part time as a lawyer; if you do, you send a clear message to the boss that you are not 'into' your career. When you have a nanny or an au pair, you cannot only work more hours, you can be a more flexible employee.

To be able to spend more time at work is especially important to the mothers we interviewed. Gender equality—in the sense that women should have the same opportunities as men to pursue a demanding career—is a primary concern for the parents. The problems of realizing gender equality in practice are apparent in their narratives. Buying care and household services is often framed very consciously by both mothers and fathers as a way of buying the part of care work that men should otherwise have taken upon themselves (Eldén & Anving, 2016).

Secondly, the parents see themselves as buying *qualitative children time* and *family time*. The mothers, especially, argue that to have the opportunity to spend time doing things you like, like your job, makes you develop as an individual and not just a mother, which makes you a role model for your children—showing them that a mother, too, can have a career. It also makes you a better parent and not one who is, as Vera says, 'forced into a role' where one is unhappy. This indicates a key reason why the parents in our study hire domestic care workers: when delegating care, they withdraw from some parts of the children's care situation. But it is not necessarily the specific care activities *as such* that are the problem, but rather when and under what circumstances they occur. Vera again:

We really cannot have set times, we can't cope with having that on a regular basis. [...] like, 'you have to be home at three every single day', we cannot make it. [...] She [the au pair] has unburdened us so, so much. That she, she takes on, like, the whole buffer time, she takes upon herself this time, like we have never really had to go to the supermarket with our children screaming on the floor, pulling our legs. You never have to experience that, really, like, being really exhausted, since she [the au pair] also makes dinner for all of us, so neither I nor my husband have ever had to stand there

by the stove preparing meatballs and pasta with all the children screaming around you. [...] Because it is the everyday stuff, the things that recur, we cannot handle that.

The regularity, the recurring demands of mundane everyday chores, these are the problems according to Vera, and it is such experiences of care practice that the parents in our study wish to be rid of. In Vera's quote, avoiding recurring demands is key, as they in themselves seem to entail unpredictability and potential conflict. When the uncontrollable time—the 'buffer time' as she calls it—is taken over by someone, stress is reduced, not only in relation to work demands but also, and more importantly, in relation to the time spent with the children.

Previous research on employers who hire domestic care workers has argued that the marking of delegated chores is crucial for understanding the ways in which care workers can be exploited—as those doing the 'dirty' work, constructing feminine otherness (Andersson, 2000)—but also, and especially in the case of care work with children, how marking chores is crucial in creating oneself as a 'good parent'. Roberts (1997) argues that there is a distinction made by parents between 'menial' and 'spiritual' care activities, where the former refers to 'easy', labour-intensive care which can easily be outsourced, while the latter is more emotional and should be 'kept' by the parent. As a consequence, 'spiritual' housework is 'valued highly because it is thought to be essential to the proper functioning of the household and the moral upbringing of children', while 'menial' housework is 'devalued because it is strenuous and unpleasant and is thought to require little moral or intellectual skill' (Roberts, 1997, p. 51).

While this way of thinking is also present in our data, we argue that delegation needs to be understood in relation to time. To hire a nanny or au pair enables a different time allocation for care doings: parents remove the repetitive, circular time that characterizes much of what we think of as family time (Morgan, 2011, p. 77; Daly, 1996, p. 5), and replace it with 'quality time'. The same care chore can be menial when carried out by a nanny or au pair, and spiritual when performed by a parent, depending on time and circumstances, as is obvious in Ingrid's reflection on why she delegates bathing to the au pair on weekdays:

You ask the au pair, 'Could you please give the children a bath?' – otherwise, it turns into an obligation for us. Then we can do it in a relaxed and

enjoyable way at the weekend instead. Not that we miss out on it; rather, you share it a little more. It becomes a better experience for the children and they get, like, time to play in the tub for half an hour if they want, instead of us saying that they should have a bath in five minutes.

By placing the care activity at a time and in circumstances when neither the work stress of the parents, nor the mundane, circular 'musts' of everyday family life are present, it can turn into something 'spiritual': the nanny or au pair takes care of 'obligation care' during the week, and the parent/child relationship is guarded from the tediousness of the mundane. Narratives describing instances of quality time are plentiful in interviews with the parents and are characterized almost unanimously as *times without stress and conflict*. The parents talk about 'taking the stress out of the everyday', of not letting your own stressful life at work affect your children, of an everyday life without 'shouting and screaming', where you come home and everything has been taken care of and you can 'get on the sofa together right away', and how less nagging and fighting makes room for calmness and presence so you 'actually have time to listen' to the children.

The practice of hiring nannies and au pairs enables a realization of 'intensive parenting' by making the parents 'better' in relation to their children, conceptualized through the *quality* of the time that they can offer to their children. In this way, the instantaneous time demands of working life can be met by parents while still being shielded from the children. In addition, as the parents do not need to deal with the demands created by the circular, routine, repetitive time of mundane family and care activities, glacial—or quality—time is maximized, and parenting takes place in 'sweet moments of uninterrupted "presence-availability"' (Urry, 1994, p. 139).

However, there is a paradox in the parents' narratives describing, on the one hand, the hardship of the care doings they avoid by hiring nannies and au pairs, and on the other, their imagined view of the care situations that nannies and au pairs engage in together with the children. While objectively the same practices, the negative descriptions of these activities in retelling their own experience are missing when the parents talk about the nannies' or au pairs' doings, which are instead described as 'easy', 'limited', 'without stress'. This is in line with the Migration Agency's definition of au pair work as 'light housework', as well as nanny agencies' description of the work as a 'fun' extra job for which no formal education

is needed. This understanding of care work as ‘unqualified’ and as something everyone (every woman) can do without training has long been the dominant understanding of such work and has contributed to its low status (Cox & Busch, 2018; Lutz, 2011). This understanding comes into question as we turn to the nannies’ and au pairs’ descriptions of the care situations they find themselves in.

MAKING QUALITY TIME POSSIBLE: NARRATIVES OF NANNIES AND AU PAIRS

While, in the view of the parents, care and time seem possible to divide up and are described as ‘easy’ or ‘limited’, in the narratives of nannies and au pairs, delegation for ‘family’ and ‘quality time’ emerges as much more complex.

One part of the day widely described as particularly hectic is the time between picking up children from school or day-care and dinner time; for parents, the time when nannies and au pairs are most appreciated. The nanny Andrea initially describes her job as ‘rather easy’ and presents her duties as clearly defined: picking up the children from school and day-care, driving them to and from different activities, playing with them, and making them dinner. When we meet with Andrea for a second interview, her understanding of her work is different. In her care diary, she has written:

Today I worked between 15.30 and 19.30, which means an hour overtime. I picked up the kids and we had a quick snack at home before we went to the older son’s football practice. I was pretty nervous, because I did not know if I would find the way there, but it went ok. The children were happy in the beginning, but then the youngest girl got really tired [and fell asleep in the car], and when we went to pick up the oldest one again, and I woke her up, she got really upset. I do not think that I have ever felt as awful as when I was carrying the screaming child out of the car. [...] The day was really hard. I was totally knocked out when I got back home, and I was so relieved when their mother came home and I could bike back to my place.

In the interview, Andrea tells us more about how inadequate, alone, and unprepared she felt at the time, trying to handle the child’s outburst. This, she concludes, was definitely not easy work. It was not something

that the parents or the agency had prepared her for, but she was reluctant to bring it up with anyone as that would reveal her insecurity and she might appear a bad nanny in the eyes of the parents.

The parents' descriptions of reductions of stress consequently turn out to be one-sided: the difficulties and stress are not gone, but are instead experienced by the nannies and au pairs. Being able to handle everyday situations in a way that works for all—and is approved of by the parents—is crucial, and what makes them 'good' nannies and au pairs. To do this, they have to 'be in the moment': to be able to interpret the child's needs, likes, and modes, which requires knowledge about the particular child (Mason, 1996). This knowledge occurs in specific situations (Wærness, 1984), during everyday routines characterized by *circular repetitive time* (Daly, 1996)—the very time experience that parents want to avoid. When delegated to nannies or au pairs, the circularity of family time does not disappear or become 'easy'; their narratives turn our attention to the inevitable complex emotional doings that are still part of everyday care situations.

For the parents to realize both the instantaneous time demands of work and 'quality time' at home, nannies and au pairs have to be flexible—and to be so on two levels simultaneously. Firstly, in terms of hours and of partly letting go of control of their own time in favour of the parents'. The nannies in our study rarely have a set schedule and are often expected to be available to work whenever the parents call. If they say no to work hours, they risk losing their jobs. Au pairs often find themselves in situations where they are never off duty, attesting to the unclear position they occupy, between a worker and a 'family member' (Anderson, 2000; Anving & Eldén, 2016; Cox & Busch, 2018; Lutz, 2011).

Secondly, nannies and au pairs are expected to be flexible in relation to the family's more subtle wishes and wants: to be able to 'sense' the family's needs and to be available to 'step in' when required, but also to know when to 'step out' in order to create 'family time'. Consequently, the making of quality time entails active doing on the part of nannies and au pairs in consciously or intuitively ensuring that this 'time' actually takes place, and that it is as qualitative as the parents expect. This involves a kind of 'deep' knowing and seeing of the family's needs (DeVault, 1991). For Ellie, an au pair, knowing *where* to be in the host family's house, and *at what times*, is key:

They have their bedrooms there [upstairs] [...]. I am absolutely allowed there, but I try to leave them a bit alone there. But if they're in the kitchen we'll do something together, but I do get the feeling sometimes, okay, now it might be good for me to go out and go for a run [laughing].

Ellie says her host mother is very happy with her ability to 'read different situations'. To be able to do this requires that the nanny or au pair has comprehensive knowledge about the family, that she can interpret the situation correctly and come up with a solution of which the parents approve. Not being able to do this can be cause for conflict and unease. Olivia, for example, tells about having learned this the hard way. In a former host family, she became very close to the children. As this was not appreciated by the mother, it led to the family giving her notice. This experience taught Olivia to in later placements actively create 'family time':

If both parents are home, I try to keep my distance more, so I don't ... play with the kids unless they ask me to. [...] Sometimes on the weekends, if the children ask me, 'Oh, can you play a round of Uno with me?', I'm not gonna say 'no' because that would hurt their feelings, but on the weekend, I try to not interact with the children as much because then they know, now it's parents' time. [...] I'm still there, and I'm still helping because I'm still at my workplace, but I try to just give them some family time.

By 'stepping out'—in the sense of subtly making herself less available to the children—Olivia makes sure that the parents' quality time with the children can take place. To do so requires that she is there, both in the very direct sense—she takes care of the circular, everyday, menial tasks—but also that she reads the particular situation in a way that is approved of by the parents, and is flexible towards their needs, while keeping in mind and attending to the sentiments of the children. This requires *sentient activity* (Mason, 1996) on her part: to see what needs to be done without being told is an implicit expectation from the parents, and is what, according to them, makes a 'good' nanny or au pair. But this is not easy work; it is often gruelling, yet lacks a suitable language, and therefore remains invisible and unacknowledged (DeVault, 1991). This is the kind of doing that has been (and still is) carried out by wives and mothers in producing family life (DeVault, 1991, pp. 4, 13), and, as Souralová's chapter in this book shows, by grandmothers (Souralová,

2022). These sentient activities, taking place in everyday, circular, and repetitive time, are necessary in doing care and in enabling parents to spend highly valued 'quality time' with their children, and are also seen as necessary by nannies and au pairs to create a good care situation. And, as we shall now see, they are something that children also expect.

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF 'QUALITY TIME'

The narratives of cared-for children, the least-researched party in this situation (Souralová, 2017), bring yet another perspective on 'quality time'. On the one hand, the children's narratives can be seen as affirming the parents' views of 'quality time', but, on the other, their experiences of being in care situations affirm the nannies' and au pairs' narratives and point towards problems in the possibility of delegating and dividing up care times.

Children's understanding of why nannies and au pairs are hired relates to the time demands of their parents' work, which is seen as an unnegotiable fact. Not having a nanny or au pair would mean spending more time alone, or more hours in afterschool care or in day-care, the children explain to us. They find neither of these options particularly tempting, though most have positive experiences of these institutions. While most say that they would have preferred to spend more time with their parents, they also acknowledge that their parents' work brings benefits. It enables the family to have a high living standard, experienced by the children in the form of a nice home, plenty of leisure activities, and exotic vacations. Ten-year-old Camilla, who has had many nannies and au pairs over the years, explains—and also negotiates with herself during the interview—why her parents have arranged her care situation this way.

Camilla: Mum and dad work so much, that is sort of why we have this [the nannies], because if we didn't have it like this, then we would be, if we went to, when I went to afterschool care, I would be picked up at five, or half past five maybe. [...] But it's good too, because we go on vacation much more often.

Researcher: Oh, I see. So, you think that is something you can do because they work so much, or...?

Camilla: Mm. So that's what you kind of think about, that they're doing it for us and not for...

It becomes obvious during the interview that Camilla is not very happy with the situation—she is tired of having new nannies and au pairs introduced to her, tired of what we have elsewhere called ‘turns in the nanny circle’ (Eldén & Anving, 2019, pp. 112–116)—but she sees and appreciates some of the gains that it has brought to her life. One gain, recognized by several children, is the possibility of having someone other than the parents—or themselves—do some of the care chores at home. Like their parents, the children recognize how this enhances the quality of life for themselves and their family.

At the same time, a more ambiguous narrative around ‘quality time’ emerges as children describe the care situations they find themselves in with nannies and au pairs; the times that the parents have delegated. In the children’s narratives, the ‘mundane’ chores carried out by nannies and au pairs are inseparable from emotional doings, and the times in which these doings take place come out as deeply meaningful. Discussing the draw-your-day picture he makes during the interview, eleven-year-old Ludwig says:

Ludwig: When I get home, I usually do my homework, but first when I get home, I have an afternoon snack. I usually have yoghurt and, and then I used to talk to Linda [former au pair]. She learned a lot of Swedish from me. [Ludwig draws himself and the au pair together in the kitchen.]

Researcher: So, what did you talk about?

Ludwig: Like, everything. Nothing special, really. It’s, like, it just comes. For some reason or another, you just start talking about something.

Researcher: Was she good to talk to?

Ludwig: Yes. [...] You felt like you could talk to her, kind of. She was there and she understood. She, like, helped out.

Times *in between* recur most often in the children’s narratives as they relate their experiences of nannies and au pairs: not the planned activities, but the moments that ‘just happened’ in the midst of something else. Like the serving of afternoon snacks in Ludwig’s quote: as simple, straightforward, and mundane a chore as it might seem, it was singled out in his narrative—and in many children’s narratives—as a very important time for forming a relationship with a nanny or au pair. While ‘mundane times’ were not always portrayed as harmoniously as in Ludwig’s quote—they could also be described as entailing fights and conflicts with nannies, au pairs, and siblings—it is in the midst of this ‘everydayness’ that relationships are formed. *The ways* in which nannies and au pairs are

present in everyday care situations matter immensely to children (Eldén & Anving, 2019). Ludwig's former au pair, Linda, was a very good au pair according to him, because she was *present*. Not all nannies or au pairs are 'good' in the eyes of children. What makes a good nanny or au pair is an ability to be attentive to the individual child, to 'be in the moment', and to see how she *herself* is important to the child; in other words, to share a care situation full of emotional doings (Mason, 1996) (Fig. 5.2).

The children in our study see the benefits that nannies and au pairs bring to 'family time' while, unarguably, also wanting to spend more 'circular time' with their parents. It is evident that the circular everyday time that they spend with their nannies and au pairs is significantly more important and emotionally complex for the children than their parents perceive it to be. 'Quality time' is not just something that happens when parents orchestrate it; it cannot be equated to 'fun activities' or to 'time without conflict', but is intertwined with and inseparable from emotional doings—both negative and positive—in the everyday mundane doings of care (Christensen, 2002, pp. 81–7).

Fig. 5.2 Ludwig's 'Draw-your-day' drawing

CONCLUSION

What happens to families and parenting when the patchwork of care (Isaksen & Näre, 2019: 594) is sewn such that the ‘dirty’, ‘menial’, mundane care work—the demands of circular and repetitive family time—is delegated to someone else, and replaced by ‘quality time’? It is a compelling image that the parents in our study paint, of a parent–child relationship relieved of hard work, of the stress of handling the unexpected, and of negative emotions associated with ‘musts’ and ‘nagging’. But the narratives of nannies, au pairs, and children—the party that takes over ‘menial’ care work and the party receiving it—point to the problems with this image. In practice, mundane care situations are full of emotional doings even when they are taken over by nannies or au pairs. Children expect ‘presence’—to be seen and acknowledged in ‘the moment’—from nannies and au pairs too, not just from parents, as it is the *care activity itself* that demands such engagements (Mason, 1996). Nannies and au pairs are left with paradoxical experiences, of, on the one hand, taking on a job that is framed as ‘easy’ and, on the other, facing a situation which, in practice, demands complex emotional doings and engagement. On top of this, they are left with the delicate work of ensuring that the parents get the sought-after ‘quality time’, which not only means doing the ‘dirty work’ but also giving up control of their own time and developing a complex understanding of when to ‘step in and out’ of family practices.

Our study has shown that when welfare states such as Sweden, through tax deductions, encourage families to solve the work/family dilemma and realize both gender equality and ‘good parenting’ by complementing public care with market solutions (which are available only to those who can afford them), certain views of care and time are reproduced. The point of departure for these solutions is the experience of middle-class parents: their anxiety about the ‘acceleration of time’, their worry that the stressful demands of availability imposed by their instantaneous working lives will spill over onto their children, their frustration at the demands of the circular time they experience when engaging in mundane care situations, their desire for more ‘quality time’—all of these are ‘solved’ through outsourcing to nannies, au pairs, and other domestic workers. The ideal of ‘quality time’ is not limited to this group of parents; on the contrary, it seems to be a recurring and increasingly widespread ideal among different groups of parents (Alsarve et al., 2017; Christensen,

2002). Middle-class parents' view of care, time, and parenting dominates as the 'publicly accepted version of contemporary good parenting' (Dermott & Pomati, 2015: 2–3), masking the fact that, in practice, this 'imaginary' ideal (Morgan, 2011, p. 76) requires certain financial means. In this sense, social class increasingly has an 'impact in shaping the daily rhythms of family life' (Lareau, 2003, p. 8), manifesting itself in the dominance of the middle-class understanding of 'quality time'.

In addition, as our data from nannies, au pairs, and children show, the ideal of 'quality time' is not only middle-class centred, it is also adult/parent centred. Arguably, children also see the advantages of having more 'quality time' with parents, to go on vacations and not having to do household chores. But children's views on care times testify to the impossibility of the clear division and delegation that parents subscribe to—which is in line with the narratives of the nannies and au pairs themselves. Care times are, the narratives of the latter tell us, inherently circular, impossible to nail down and control once and for all, and require constant re-thinking and re-learning, on-the-spot attention and improvisation, and a deep knowledge of the specific individuals in the care situation (Wærness, 1984). All of this is very far from the ideal of care as something that is possible to divide into 'manageable blocks of time' (Tronto, 2002, p. 44), which characterizes the parents' delegation practice.

Earlier Swedish policy and politics on gender equality stressed not only a 'dual-earner' but also a 'dual-carer' ideal, which at least had the potential to make visible the specificity of reproductive work, as this was thought to be something that everyone, both men and women, should take part in, regardless of class. Through the hiring of nannies and au pairs, and given the subordinate positions they find themselves in related to gender, age, class, and often migration and ethnicity, the circular time logic of care risks becoming even more invisible—even more so than when it used to be carried out by mothers (DeVault, 1991, p. 4; Eldén & Anving, 2019). It is increasingly squeezed into the logic of clock time which is devalued and surpassed by 'special time'—or 'quality time'—which, in turn, is not for nannies and au pairs to be part of, but only to enable. In this sense, the new local care loops emerging in families in the 'women-friendly' welfare state of Sweden are in fact creating new inequalities, even in the midst of 'doing family'.

Acknowledgements The Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Science (*Riksbankens Jubileumsfond*) generously funded this research, including making this chapter Open Access. We thank the editors and authors of this volume, for valuable support and constructive feedback in the writing process.

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