

Parents, Power, Poverty

On choice and responsibility in two parental communities

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores discourses about parenthood and subject ideals as they manifest in two Swedish parental web communities. The aim is to examine the perceived division of responsibility between the parents themselves and the institutions of the welfare state and furthermore to map out and deconstruct tensions between demands understood to be assigned to the parent and to society, respectively. The empirical material consists of extracts from web community conversations collected between 2006 and 2015. They are analysed using a deconstructive approach and by applying analytical tools stemming from discourse psychology. This means that the texts inserted in the parental web communities are investigated both for how they are rhetorically composed as well as for how the writer in question positions herself in relation to 'facts'. Theoretically, the material is probed by three large concepts that have guided the analysis – those of discourse, power and distinctions. They are broken down to more delimited concepts such as governmentality, discipline and technologies of the self, derived from the works of Michel Foucault, and distinction and misrecognition, which originate from Pierre Bourdieu. Perspectives of class and gender are intertwined in the analysis.

The analysis reveals a core metaphor about parenthood that seems to organise the content: Parenthood is conceptualized as work. The notion about parenthood as work is a residue from a more comprehensive ideal of the citizen-subject as morally upright, self-interested and hard-working, and from a view point about the world that emphasises the mental capacities of the subject and downplays structural inequalities or maldistribution of resources. In the web community conversations the parent appears to have a particular task assignment: To deliver human raw material (in the shape of the child) to a society full of demands. Hence, there is a bond established between the parent and the state/the society. In community conversations

a notion of a particular societal promise of meritocracy manifests – if the subjects receive equal possibilities of refining themselves they now have the responsibility of transforming the possibilities into a good life.

The ideals for how to achieve the proper moral refinement are visible in the interpretative repertoires of the communities. The repertoires are versions of the world and prescriptions for how the world idealistically ought to function. The core repertoire was labelled *Mind over matter*. It summarises community opinions about the relation between the interior qualities of the subject and the external factors of the world and stipulates that things that take place in the psyche of the human being affect the material world, not the other way around. Three other repertoires regulate conceptions about the ideal subject. The first, *Morality comes first*, regulates the preferred constitution of the subject (who should focus on becoming morally sound and self-interested instead of formulating demands directed at the welfare state). The second, *You should reap what you sow*, revolves around expectations (the subject should expect returns that relate precisely to the amount of time or work invested in a particular venture). The third repertoire, *Don't take the easy way out* governs the discursively preferred work ethic of the subject (when working on one's refinement and when wanting to achieve something one cannot allow oneself any type of shortcuts). In the empiric material no repertoires are found that regulate society's tasks or responsibilities. Municipalities, political parties, boards and committees, law enforcement or taxes are absent as perceived prime movers of a subject. This discursive soil is the foundation of the prevailing community contempt for poor subjects, long-term ill, or unemployed, who are considered manifesting defect subjectivity and having neglected the duty to work with oneself. Economic situation is disentangled from the structural position of class and class is instead read as culture and behaviour which is thought of as possible to modify. The dissertation finds analytical connections between the preferred ideals and the transfer of a societal crisis embodied in neoliberal austerity programmes to a sense of uneasiness amongst the parents in community conversation, who imagine society falling apart, not because of austerity regimes but because of the people depending on them.

Förord. (Preface)

Långt före jag påbörjade forskarutbildningen hörde jag det – att skriva en avhandling är en kollektiv process. Det framstod som helt rimligt för mig redan då – man får ju förstås hjälp och råd av sina handledare och av kollegor vid seminarier. Exakt hur kollektiv denna process skulle bli hade jag dock ingen aning om. Hur långt ett förord kan tänkas bli när alla som doktoranden vill tacka har omnämnts vet vi när den här texten skrivits klart men att det finns många att tacka råder det inget tvivel om.

Mitt varmaste tack vill jag rikta till mina handledare, Kristian Daneback och Ingrid Sahlin. Sex års handledning kan inte summeras på några korta rader men det som står ut för mina ögon när jag ser tillbaka är ert solidariska stöd i alla väder. Ni har outtröttligt intresserat er för mina idéer, mina första darrande utkast, mina mest besynnerliga påståenden, mina frågor och irrvägar (de senare har ni diskret breddat och jämnat ut till mer farbara vägar, vilket inte minst är värt att tacka för). Under vissa uppförsbackar var det som om ni omärkligt ställde er bakom mig och sköt på och när det kanske brakade iväg lite väl fort i vissa utförlöpor utgjorde ni broms. Ska jag nämna några särskilda insatser utöver handledningen skulle det kanske vara hur Kristian introducerade mig på en av de mest sympatiska konferenssammanhang jag varit på – Cyberspace i Brno – utöver att lotsa mig in på de teoretiska fälten kring virtuella kommunikationsarenor, och jag vill också lyfta fram det faktum att utan samtalen med Ingrid och de teoretiska perspektiv hon introducerade på masterkursen Teoretiska perspektiv på exkludering och social kontroll hade jag aldrig fått för mig att jag kunde ha en plats att fylla på en forskarutbildning. Jag vill också särskilt tacka min läsgrupp, Hanna Wikström och Lena Sawyer. På er hade jag höga förväntningar och ni lyckades med konststycket att överträffa dem. Er läsning av mitt manus har varit framåtutad, noggrann och oavlatligt intresserad och ni har gjort er tillgängliga för funderingar och samtal när jag behövt. I mitt lite kraftlösa tillstånd mot slutet av arbetet blev ni den injektion jag behövde.

Men avhandlingstexten har förstås granskats av fler. Idéseminariet blev en bra start tack vare Tobias Davidssons sonderande frågor och hjälp att se de teoretiska möjligheterna i föräldraforumen. Under planseminariet lotsade Therése Wissö mig vidare genom att peka på alla de möjliga vägar som låg framför mig och genom frågor som fick mig att förstå vad jag betraktade som det viktigaste i mitt empiriska material. På mellanseminariet fick jag stor hjälp av Sara Uhno och Tobias Daviddson som hjälpte mig att vässa mitt ärende och under slutseminariet ställde Eva Palmblad de viktiga och breda frågorna om samhällskontext och kopplingar till intilliggande forskning. Jag är skyldiga er alla stort tack!

Stödet i min doktorandgrupp har förstås varit ovärderligt. Tack Julia Bahner, Tobias Davidsson och Rakel Berman för sammanhållning och klappar på axeln när energin tröt. Tobias ingick också i det ”exkluderingsnätverk” som jag startade tillsammans med Susanne Liljeholm Hansson och Frida Petersson och det arbetet vi gjort har varit en extra stimulans, liksom det informella nätverk som min doktorandgrupp skapade med tre doktorander från Socialhögskolan i Lund: Erik Eriksson, Ann-Kristin Lassen och Vanna Nordling. Likaså har samtalen om högt och lågt med Majsa Allelin utgjort det perfekta botemedlet mot det sittsår jag trodde att jag skulle utveckla under det sista året framför datorskärmen.

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Majorna
14:e september 2016

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1. Introduction

1:1 If you cannot deal with yourself you cannot deal with a child either. A tragic insight I'm sure, but I find it even more tragic that children grow up in totally dysfunctional families and environments. The children are innocent but the adults can choose.

Of course things can happen after the children have arrived. You can take ill, become unemployed etcetera. Perhaps you should have the possibility of forcing people into interventions? The mere threat would perhaps make some people deal with things?

Apart from that some parents are just lazy. They are really capable, but they don't give a damn about raising their kids and they don't meet a whole lot of demands. A relative of mine who has been working a lot with teenagers has told me several times about parent's that just couldn't be bothered with their 13-year old being out drunk all night. When my relative and her colleagues drive the teenager home the parents are sitting there drinking and think it's great to get rid of the kids, so that they won't bother them. There are many explanations, many problems and many solutions but I feel that in general, we should try harder to make people see the responsibilities that come with parenthood.

(Posting inserted in The Parent Place parental web community 2012)

1:2 Yes there are definitely parents who are 'lazy' as you say, but that is not a sufficient reason for a decision of compulsory care decision to be granted by the Social Welfare Board. How can one make lazy parents assume responsibility?

(Answers posting above)

1:3 A kick in the arse? Two, if they don't get it after the first one? 😊

(Answers posting above)

This conversation about problematic parents is taken from a Swedish parental web community. The topic is familiar to the participants and reappears in a multitude of virtual conversations on a regular basis. Perhaps this conversation is also familiar to the reader who has never entered a parental community – because it has been represented in television shows, in discussions in workplace lunchrooms, in the blo-

gosphere and in mass media debate – conversations about the decline of school results, child obesity, parents who spend too much time on Facebook, the dangers of computer-games, or the need for parents in disadvantaged residential areas to assume more parental responsibilities in order to solve the problem of juvenile delinquency. The conversation is particular at the same time as generic.

The content of the thread¹ that opened up this chapter manifests several recurrent themes in the conversation about problematic parenting in this parental web community: The firm belief that parents can make a choice whilst their children cannot, the image of lazy parents who could perform better if they really wanted to, and the suggestion of using force to make ‘bad’ parents become good ones.² Another feature of this conversation is how society is brought into the perceived practices of the parent. The nick³ who starts the conversation highlights a recurrent tension in the community conversations, a tension between the amount of responsibility assumed to be taken by the parent and the amount assigned to the social agencies of the welfare state. We may understand the tension as a matter of a labour division between the family and the state – a question concerning tasks in the social reproduction: *Who should do what?* This labour division and its representations constitute the basis of the research questions of this dissertation. The particular nick cited above represents a fairly typical position in the parental web communities in not stating how illness or unemployment should be considered. She merely affirms that there are such phenomena but the conceived resolution appears, nevertheless, to be increased constraints on the individual parent.

However, one may still wonder why the need to ventilate family and parenting issues has arisen in the first place. Why is it not a private concern that is discussed with intimate friends or family, or handled in the separate institutional spheres of the Social Services, the school system or in health services such as maternity welfare institutions? The simple answer to this question is: Because these issues do not solely belong to the dimensions of privacy or the concrete domains of institutional care. They transcend into issues of politics, subjectivity, personal worth and societal morality. In short, concepts of ‘the family’ are ideological constructions of different societal organisations (Chambers, 2001). Matters of the family are formatted in an intersection between the personal and the political/the institutional. My interest lies in the

1 See Glossary in Appendix.

2 Another vital feature of conversation is that the term ‘parent’ often tends to mean ‘mother’. This is a recurrent phenomenon, which will be commented on and discussed later in this chapter, when the aim and research questions have been presented.

3 See Glossary in the Appendix.

way that the latter is found in the former, or the way politics operates in discourses about the personal. My 'hunting ground' is two Swedish parental web communities. However, I do not consider the processes pointed out to be isolated to this concrete area but to be generic in relation to a wide array of areas, situations, and processes.

The chapter will continue with a presentation of the ways in which families and parents have been viewed by the political and institutional domains, where they make up a part of a discussion about the relation between the state and the subject. It will be followed by a layout of how we can understand the representations of family, i.e. ways of talking about and understanding family, and a brief introduction to the empirical arena from which the postings included in this study have been collected. At the end of the chapter I shall present the research problem addressed by the dissertation, as well as the overall aim and questions that guided analysis.

Politics of parenting: Reforms and responsabilisation

The importance of sound parenthood for enabling children to become functioning citizens has been emphasised for many decades. It has been part of political aims as well as of a private sense of decency (Bergman et al., 2011: 7). Nevertheless, although the very importance of parenthood remains unchallenged the notion of what sound parenthood is and how a functioning parent should be constructed changes over time. If in the past, as noted by Val Gillies (2008 a), families were considered a more intimate and less regulated space, the contemporary political notion instead leans towards 'regulating individual subjectivity and citizenship at the level of the family' (ibid.: 1080). Society is comprehended as if achieved in, and by, families, where the child is described as vulnerable and dependent on adequate parenting (ibid.: 1079; Wall, 2010). Hence, being a parent is not just a part of existence, nor simply a category of people or a particular experience, as the frames and conditions for parenthood are dependent on time, place and structures of power. Parenthood has its own forces of government, which we may want to conceptualise as a *politics of parenting* (Gillies, 2008 b). Moreover, society's interest in the family does not only have consequences for parents and children. The concept of family enables wider cultural ideals to be recomposed, i.e., notions of societal fellowship (Bergman et al., 2011). The time and space in this particular study has as its starting point two Swedish parental web communities, but consists of such forces as Swedish welfare politics, neoliberal discourse, and other globalized and material schema relevant for what becomes personal accounts of parenthood.

When studying the past century in Western societies it becomes obvious how the very construct of parenthood has changed, at least in some senses. In the preindus-

trial epoch the relation between the family and the state was primarily a contract between the latter and *the father* of the family, although both the father and the mother were considered responsible for fostering the child. Their respective functions were, however, conceptualised as different – the function of the father was to provide for the family and to discipline the child, whereas the mother was considered the provider of love and intimacy. It was only as late as the eighteenth century that the child was described as an individual in its own right for the first time (Ariès, 1962). One of the major influential factors for the way family life was organised in the Western world during the twentieth century was undoubtedly the growth of the welfare state and today it is in the welfare state that political public governing and the intimate spheres meet. The institutions of the welfare state share the responsibility for the prosperity of the nation's children with the parents (Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten, 1997/2001: 17). Today, the welfare state acts as a complement to the father in his function of provider whilst the demand on the mother has basically remained the same – her major function, at least during the first half of the twentieth century, was that of caregiver. This role has gradually become 'professionalised' and her perceived influence on the child has increasingly been viewed as crucial (ibid.: 57). In fact, one of the characteristic features of contemporary state- and institutional perceptions of parenthood is how it is envisioned as decisive for the child. Parents and home environments are thought of as the foundations for the fostering of new citizens and become crucial for the maintenance of both the nation and the welfare state (Bergman et al, 2011). This shift can be noted at institutional levels in the many efforts to create prenatal education and 'parenting classes', and also stands out at a commercial level, such as in the promotion of educational toys and leisure time activities. This cultural understanding encompasses a view that parents – and especially mothers – have a duty to both control and mould the lives of their children. The discourse of the family has become child-centred and, as a consequence, parenthood (motherhood) has intensified (Wall, 2010: 255).

This shift of focus is most certainly aided by political incentives. In Sweden, political debates about the wellbeing of the nation's parents and children have been ongoing since the industrialization of the country. Political initiatives have been responsible for the launch of a vast number of welfare reforms in response to perceived societal ills of that particular era. The majority of the reforms targeted working class families and the putative solution was often to transfer bourgeois values onto the poor. Throughout the twentieth century intellectuals from the temperance movement, the women's movement and other philanthropic movements launched initiatives to both aid and foster working class parents and several family reform

programmes had a biological and eugenic profile (Ohrlander, 1992). The problems were believed to emanate from both a lack of fostering and a bad germ plasm, with mothers held especially responsible, either because they allegedly had passed on genetically substandard characteristics, or because they had neglected the upbringing of the child (ibid.: 300).

Nevertheless, the focus of the Swedish welfare programme initiatives varied depending on the politics of the time. In the 1930s the demand for labour made women start working outside of the home, leading to anxious debates about the role of the woman – should she or should she not be encouraged to enter employment (Platzer, 2006)? This debate focused on middle class women and did not concern working class women, as the work they performed outside of the home was considered ‘normal’ (ibid: 211 f.). A subsequent decrease in the birth-rate induced political action, whilst a parallel debate about what type of families should be officially sanctioned led to the infamous laws that promoted sterilisation of groups (especially women) considered unfit to be parents – poor families, families with many children, individuals diagnosed with neurological or psychiatric diseases, and individuals regarded as feeble-minded (Lundqvist, 2015: 80). After the Second World War the demand for population growth ceased and more comprehensive sociopolitical demands were raised, leading amongst other things to the implementation of a child benefit that included all families with children, and the universal health insurance. During the 1950s themes about the conflicting roles of the mother as both a carer and an employee came to the fore, which can be considered as the first move in the direction of a social policy focusing upon the individual rather than on the family as a unit. Politics now directed its attention towards the issue of making women financially independent of men, and gender equality gradually emerged as a benchmark for family policy. The family was no longer considered to be composed of one bread winner and one carer but instead politics emphasised every individual’s right to paid work and a joint responsibility for the wellbeing of the family (ibid.: 81).

Generally, the focus upon impinging factors outside of the family was never as strong in Sweden as in the discourse of the family in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Parents’ position in the labour market was considered one of the major influential factors for the way family life turned out, and for the life chances of the child. Today, the formulations in Swedish Government Official Reports (in Sweden abbreviated SOU) at the time may come across as striking: ‘The hierarchic structure of the labour market and the organisation of production are thus an obstacle for all children to receive an equal start in life’ (SOU 1980:27: 52 f). The hopes to design parental education that was to be combined with renewed political demands to ensure par-

ents' possibilities to take part in their children's life with retained earnings (ibid.: 53) sound, in comparison, outdated. Today the institutional aspirations of parental education are rather formulated as a hope to instill particular skills in the parent that may reduce potential damaging factors outside of the family (Littmarck, 2012).

The twentieth century is sometimes labelled 'the century of the child', and in many respects it was, in view of the child's improved legal status and social rights (Lundqvist, 2015: 87). The last twenty years have accentuated this trend. Children are positioned as bearers of civil rights and thought of as competent and at risk simultaneously. But when deciphering this outlook we may find that it divides into images of two types of children (and thus two types of parents): Children raised by an attentive, empathetic and knowing parent, and children who lack such a parent (ibid.: 91). Hence, the major institutional aid that welfare agencies such as child health centres or family support programmes direct at the parents of today is designed to mediate research findings and parenting techniques to enhance a desired parental *skill* (ibid.: 92). The parent is to be made knowledgeable, and by that also accountable. The growth of the welfare state becomes, in retrospect, also the growth of institutional control – by offering social welfare for families with children, these families are assumed to demonstrate cooperativeness and openness (Gleichmann, 2004: 59).

The shift is something more than trends in institutions and commerce – in broad strokes it is a sign of a changed viewpoint on the relation between the subject and the state. Nikolas Rose (2000 b) calls this shift *responsibilisation*: The idea that if people behave like responsible citizens a sound type of society will emerge, or the assumption that if society provides the resources necessary the citizen who administers these resources in a prolific manner will access a good life. The trend towards responsibilisation encompasses a 'bottom-up' view; a standpoint that citizen security can be achieved from the basis of local communities and the families living there (ibid.: 329). Insofar as conceptions of the family have changed, so have ideas about the welfare state. The social interventionist state⁴ that interferes with the conduct of

4 The social interventionist state is not a uniform societal organisation that is identical all over Europe. The 'Swedish model' of the welfare state launched after the Second World War was at the time considered as unique in many ways. It distinguished itself by far-reaching attempts of decommodification, which appears as the most important feature of the Swedish welfare state. Decommodification aimed at making the individual less economically dependent on family and relatives by establishing a bond of financial security between the subject and the state. The main goal of this social democratic initiative was to enable exit from the labor market with little loss of income (Esping Andersen, 1990). The model – based on universalism, centralism, social intervention and consensus – was criticised towards the end of the 80s. It was said to be ineffective and standing in the way of the individual's own capacities and initiatives (Boréus, 1994) and the 'new model' emphasised exercise of power from below (Premfors, 2000: 163).

the individual has been replaced by a post-welfare steering that obliges the subject to act responsibly out of self-interest. The social is, so to speak, to be governed from the inside of a functional subject (Oelkers, 2012: 101 f.). Emanating from this shift an ideal of the active citizen, or of an active citizenship, has evolved (Dahlstedt, 2009). This would be true of many Western European countries today, including Sweden.

When focusing on the last two decades, and in particular what happened after the global recession of 2008, this shift towards individual responsibility is accentuated further, as discussed by Tracey Jensen (2012). As a way to respond to the recession similar governmental economic initiatives were launched in several European countries. The trend that characterises these initiatives can be summarised in the neoliberal notion of *austerity*; the governmental attempt to reduce deficit and public spending, resulting in a diminishing welfare state. Austerity is in various ways in focus of governmental economic steering all over Europe and although introduced in diverse forms it seems to result in the same political actions – a reconfiguration of the relations of responsibility between the state and its subjects, and in stricter conditions for subjects who are dependent on financial support. The demands are especially strong when the role of parents is debated (ibid.: 1).⁵

Politicisation of parenthood in the public context

Although ‘responsible parenting’ as a remedy for a perceived malfunctioning society is not yet at the very centre of official social policy discourse in Sweden, as is the case in the UK (Gillies, 2005 b), we are perhaps not far behind. Issues of where to place responsibility and how actively a parent is to participate in the moulding of the child are questions that resonate in contemporary Swedish political debate, as well as in domains of entertainment and mass media. In terms of disciplining ‘disruptive’ families, in 2010 former Swedish Minister of Education, Jan Björklund, suggested that parents of ‘unruly’ children should be forced to be present in the school, a kind of mandatory parental attendance (Aftonbladet 8 August 2010), a proposal that was met with a mixture of approval and derision. The way families and parents are to assist in the restoration of a national morality can be noted in a statement from the current Prime Minister Stefan Löfven that urges parents to discipline their children into performing better at school and by so doing help to improve the falling results in the triennial PISA survey (see the statement in Dagens Nyheter 25 May 2015).

5 Although the concept of austerity is intimately linked with political discourse as it was designed after 2008, it is also related to political ambitions launched long before the last recession. In Sweden attempts of criticizing the welfare state were articulated as calls for citizen responsibility and thrift already in the 1980s (Persson et al. 2010: 36 ff.).

Although this was nothing more than a suggestion, concrete changes have been carried out in the legislative domains – some to discipline parents, and some to support a beneficial development. In 2010 The Swedish Ministry of Justice implemented a sharper liability for legal guardians, which in effect meant that parents became liable even in cases where they could not be reasonably expected to restrict the liberty of action of their child (see Government Office, registration number JU 10.09)⁶. In order to assist a putatively ‘diligent’ family, the former, right-wing Swedish Government approved a tax deduction for private tutoring of school children in the home (Proposition 2012/13:14)⁷. Parallel to these disparate formal transformations, television and the blogosphere are exploiting a sense of people taking the easy way out and promoting an urge to act decisively towards those in society who do not take full responsibility for themselves, such as parents on public welfare who are represented as not administering money with sufficient resourcefulness.⁸ Tracey Jensen (2014: 2.2-2.3) delineates this mass media tendency as ‘poverty porn’ and argues that it helps to promote a neoliberal welfare doxa, i.e., it converts a neoliberal crisis to one that appears to have originated elsewhere; stemming from people described as overly welfare dependent.

This contraposition of force against some parents and help delivered to others constitutes one part of a discourse of austerity where individual morality is linked with state finance. Society is described as if threatened and the envisioned restoration is represented as coming from below – society can be rebuilt from the base of its individuals (Jensen, 2012:7 f.). In other words, economic recession is discussed as an individual problem that can be rectified by particular groups of individuals. One such group is the family and my interest lies in the way the family is characterised as this presumed solution for societal ills. However, my main interest is not primarily the outlook on parents from the side of politics, but the manner in which the objects of the discourse – the parents – speak of themselves. Karl Marx (1939/2010: 230)

6 <http://www.regeringen.se/sokresultat/?query=JU+10.09>

7 For the whole proposition, see: http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/Dokument-Lagar/Forslag/Propositioner-och-skrivelser/prop-20121314-Skattereduktio_H00314/?text=true

8 One example of this is the TV programme *Luxury Trap* at the Swedish commercial channel TV 3 (In Swedish: *Lyxfällan*). In this television programme families living beyond their means receive financial fostering by experts on loans and family budget. Turning to the blogosphere, see for instance the statement by local politician Marianne Ohrlander (the chairman of the Social Welfare Board in Trelleborg) that was strongly debated in Sweden during spring 2012. Ohrlander stated that parents on financial support needed not be poor if they economised properly (for the statement and Ohrlander’s defence of it, see Sveriges Radio: <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=96&artikel=5021521>). For another viewpoint on poverty as something an individual chooses, see well-known Swedish blogger Kissie (<http://kissies.se/rika-maste-vara-odmjuka-det-maste-ni-fattiga-ocksa-vara/>).

has argued that language in itself is a product of society and simultaneously society's verbal expression. This would mean that political rationalities influence how we talk and write, and the way we talk and write is an expression of the rationality. 'Family' and 'parent' thus matter as concepts for how things can be discerned and addressed in a public context. What we believe we know about the family, our own family and other families, forms our approach towards it. Conclusively, if parents are conceived of as self-governing subjects administering resources they will probably be debated in those terms and we will perhaps end up disappointed in those who fail to govern themselves in the desirable fashion. This means that I view the parent as a political subject. She is shaped and restricted by politics and a subject who think and act influenced by politics.

The parental web community

How are the political rationality of austerity and the high hopes placed upon individuals to restore a broken society represented in the particular arena focused on in this dissertation and in what way can we understand the conditions in which the postings⁹ in the parental web communities are inserted? To understand this type of interaction we must know something about the particular environment in which it takes place. This headline will comprise of a condensed presentation of the empirical arenas where the texts that make up the empiric material for this study were collected,¹⁰ what type of users they attract and the way in which Internet interaction may be apprehended.

A web community is a public site on the Internet that provides the means for people to log in and interact by typing messages to each other, or to contact one another via e-mails in the backstage arenas. The venue is usually organised around a common theme of interest, such as parenting, which make such communities different from, for instance, Facebook.¹¹ Communities are usually commercial, meaning that they depend upon advertisement revenues for profit. Visiting a community on a regular basis is quite common for an Internet user – 46 percent of the total population in Sweden visits communities once in a while (Findahl, 2013). The largest Swedish parental communities reach about 50 percent of all Swedish parents with children aged 0-6 years and more than 20 000 postings are made each week in over

9 See Glossary in Appendix.

10 In Chapter Four I will make a more thorough presentation of the parental web communities, their characteristics and the way interaction is designed there.

11 It is worth noting that also Facebook can be constructed in themes or groups that want to debate a particular topic but the basic structure of this web site is not organised around any particular topic.

50 000 ongoing conversations (Alstam, Plantin & Daneback, 2016: 137). The interaction taking place in these venues is not different to that in people's everyday life; it matters to the people involved and provides new relationships where experiences and support can be exchanged (Baym, 2010: 148).

For ethical reasons (see more in Chapter Four) I have renamed the two parental communities – the first one is now called The Parent Place, abbreviation TPP, while I named the second one Virtually Extended Family, abbreviation VEF. The two communities register approximately 1, 100, 000 visitors per week and both are operated commercially.¹² The reason for opting to investigate commercial communities is due to the fact that the degree of interaction is considerably higher than in institutionally founded counterparts that mainly host experts who communicate with the community's visitors.¹³ To become a member of the communities the user registers a nickname¹⁴ (a pseudonym) and agrees to abide by the rules of interaction as formulated by the site owner. The majority of the nicks are registered as women, as for instance in VEF where 87 percent of the regular visitors are women (Lind, 2013: 20). In TPP and VEF nicks who have been members several years communicate with recently registered nicks. The former can be considered a kind of *veterans* who guide and inform newcomers about how to behave, but also reproach those that do not conform to the etiquette of this Internet arena – the netiquette.¹⁵

In a parental web community people give advice on nutrition, birth, the raising of children and how to achieve the ideal relationship with one's spouse or partner, amongst a number of other things. In addition, they make jokes, flirt, support each other, complain, and quarrel. Some write about their becoming friends outside of the community, while others appear to be enemies. Hence, the notion embraced in research performed in the 'childhood of the Internet' that the electronic self is very different from the offline version has been rejected. Today it is not easy to define when one is online and offline, because to a large extent the arenas conflate (Alstam, Plantin, Daneback, 2016: 137).

12 On account of wanting to explore a discourse expressing matters of everyday life I was looking for interaction between peers, rather than institutional discourse. I decided to opt for well-known and established parental communities that are easy to locate through search engines and where I could find texts that were not 'sanctioned' by institutions.

13 TPP and VEF are also visited by experts (in child psychology, pediatrics and so forth) but when reviewing these visits I noted that few nicks appeared interested in posing questions, and seemingly preferred the conversations in the regular interactional sections.

14 See Glossary in Appendix.

15 See Glossary in Appendix.

Research problem

Two perceptions seem to meet in the parental web community: The individual enters conversation with *standpoints on parenthood*, and with *notions about the role of the agencies of the welfare state*. Exploring the parent as a political subject, or more specific a subject that is the result of the politics of self-governance, means studying how parents and families have to be performed publically, in an ongoing dialogue between parents-in-the-flesh and the politically induced ideals of families and parents. The parental community comprises an example of this continuous dialogue and, moreover, it displays a more comprehensive subjectivity. Other arenas in which this dialogue is carried out obviously exist, such as parental classes at child welfare centres or pupil-parent meetings at school, to name but a few. What makes the parental web community special is the freedom of choice when it comes to participation and subject-matters for discussion, and the egalitarian nature of communication. When communicating ‘freely’ but still visible to others, how do parents deal with the norms of political conduct and with ideas about their responsibilities? The parental community is, I think, a case where we may catch a glimpse of how the subject is shaped by its perceptions of itself, but also how it appears in the eyes of others. The parental community can be read as an arena where conversation achieves several types of relations, as described by Colin Gordon (1991):

the relation between self and self, private interpersonal relations involving some form of control or guidance, relations within social institutions and communities and, finally, relations concerned with the exercise of political sovereignty (ibid.: 2 f.).

Comprehended in this fashion the parental web community is a case where the subject receives its contours through institutional demands and ideals: The subject becomes formatted by and in society and society materialises in the subject. Because the web community offers the possibility of writing under a pseudonym and because one logs in on one’s own premises a condition of relative freedom could possibly be established. It would putatively be possible to articulate almost anything that comes to mind, about oneself or about one’s place in society. But is it?

Overall aims and questions

In this dissertation I will explore the ways that parenthood and the division of responsibility between the parent and the welfare state are expressed and negotiated in two parental web communities and furthermore I shall map out and deconstruct

tensions between demands assigned to the parent or the individual and to society, respectively.

In a discourse analysis of postings published in two parental communities I will ask the following questions:

1. How is the parent narrated and what kind of discursive techniques support the narration?
2. How is the division of responsibility between the family and society constructed?
3. What generic subject ideals emerge in the discussions about parenthood? How are these ideals to be achieved? How are failures explained?
4. How is the female subject positioned in discussions about family, parenthood, dependency and intimacy?
5. How do these various ways to construct generic subject ideals, parents and parenthood relate to broader societal contexts?

Representing the postings in general and gender in particular

Some limitations of the study should be stated. During conversation in the web communities the nicks may communicate outside of its frame, through texting and e-mail. This communication is a hidden component that cannot be analysed and could potentially affect the visible textual interchanges that I have collected. The same goes for the technical mediation of conversation: The way that the site itself structures interaction. The technical basis, that allows certain types of communication and precludes others, is not included in the analysis. On the other hand, this can be said about all types of interaction; it is partly structured by events that took place before or after interaction started, or took place outside of the arena in question. Apart from these limitations, the aim of the dissertation is not to produce knowledge about the 'inner' or more fundamental nature of communication but to explore the surface of discourse, the impression that meets the eye when entering.

In matters of representation there is a contemporary tendency to talk about 'parents' but really mean mothers (Sunderland, 2006: 503; Jensen, 2009: 1). Hence, when reading the postings that discuss parenthood, or when imbibing the political suggestions and propositions directed towards parents, we should keep this conflation in mind: Although we use the word parent as a gender neutral noun it hosts other connotations. Nevertheless, the term parent will be employed in the analysis, instead of mother. I have chosen to do so for two reasons. The first is to stay close to

the language used in the parental communities; they use the word parent and therefore I do too. The second reason is related to the ambiguities that reside in representing women. The risk, as I see it, in applying a more gendered terminology is that the analysis is read as if it only concerns women (and because of that it is considered to matter less). Instead, in the analysis female subject positions are viewed as being positions just as universal as those of men. Using the term 'mother' instead of 'parent' would perhaps imply that the dissertation takes a particular interest in female experiences, when it is in fact interested in the *comprehensive demands* placed upon a particular type of parent in a particular type of context characterised by the neoliberal discourse in contemporary Western societies. Moreover, David Morgan (1999/2004: 13) points out that the way that families are put up for display may reflect not only gender practices but class practices, age practices and so forth. To my mind this feature of displaying family makes gender one important aspect of analysis, but it does not precede a factor such as class. On the other hand, women's positions *are not* the same as those of men, because women and men are assigned different places in production and reproduction (Kittay, 1999). I obviously do not want to contribute to a fantasy parent with no gender, because that would cloud the care tasks that are still assigned primarily to women (Jensen, 2009: 1). Therefore there is no reason to obscure the fact that in particular discourses gender is a starting point.¹⁶ Mainly employing a non-gendered terminology instead mirrors how I view parenting. It is still largely gendered, it still offers women a heavier workload than men and it continues to make women the targets of a politically induced and intense sense of responsibility and guilt – but this is not the way it should be; parenthood *should not* be connoted with women (Kittay, 1999: xiii f.). As a consequence of the dual possibilities of understanding gender I have chosen to oscillate between female positions as universally applicable on the one hand and taking into account the singularity of the position in certain cases on the other. The latter consideration is reflected in the choice to devote a particular analytical chapter to positions of femininity (see Chapter Ten), i.e., an analysis of women, when they are *articulated as women*.

16 The onset of this study is perhaps caught between a rock and a hard place and the oscillation between analysing women as 'generic' and as gendered subjects is best summarised by Chantal Mouffe when explaining the 'Wollstonecraft dilemma': 'to demand equality is to accept the patriarchal conception of citizenship that implies that women must become like men, while to insist that women's distinctive attributes, capacities and activities be given expression and valued as contributing to citizenship is to demand the impossible because such difference is precisely what patriarchal citizenship excludes' (Mouffe, 1993/2005: 80).

Outline of the book

In this introductory chapter, besides stating research problem, aims and questions, a broader introduction to societal comprehensions of the family has been outlined, including the concept of responsabilisation in relation to family, and a presentation of the empirical arenas. Chapter Two comprises a broader contextual background and a compilation of previous research. The theoretical understanding guiding the analysis will be outlined in Chapter Three, whilst the dissertation's methodological framing; the collection of material, analytical concepts and ethical considerations, are delineated in Chapter Four. The remaining part of the dissertation comprises a discourse analysis of the empirical material, divided into seven chapters, followed by a concluding chapter that sums up the result.

The aim of Chapters Five and Six is to describe the communities and introduce the way interaction and discourse are formatted. Chapter Five serves as a demonstration of generic patterns of self presentation and probes into what type of subject positions are generally preferred, as well as what happens to a nick who deviates from these preferences. In this chapter both discourse- and interaction preferences will be explored to help the reader understand the comprehensive matrix to which all nicks have to relate. Chapter Six investigates the discursive foundation of the preferences – the propensity to apprehend people, experiences and events through the concept of *choice*. Chapter Seven is devoted to the relation between the subject and society/welfare state institutions and will show the way the subject can relate to other subjects through more or less organised relations. Chapter Eight has a twofold aim. First, I present the way society is understood as created from within the smaller and more intimate unit of the family and show how this tends to mean increased responsibility for the parents. Secondly, I analyse how the family is ideally constructed, and how this construction relates to bringing up children. The rest of the analytical chapters probe into the result of the discursive foundation of choice and the preferred relation between the individual and society. Chapter Nine addresses the ideal subject positions once again, albeit from the position of the subject who does not embody this ideal: *the unfit subject*. I probe into explanations of why particular subjects do not reach the ideals and the parental communities' perceptions of the available remedies for bettering oneself. Chapter Ten focuses on the female subject position and the way the woman is narrated as a member of the intimate sphere of the family. Her perceived role and function are scrutinised, as well as the potential risks or impediments that she faces within this sphere. Chapter Eleven, which is the last of the analytical chapters, pieces together the conceptions about femininity and unfitness with focus on their interaction in narrative examples of disgust towards particular subjects, in

this case that of the poor mother. Chapter Twelve concludes the dissertation in a global analysis that condenses the results from Chapters Five to Eleven. In these chapters I will demonstrate the way that the concept of choice enables viewpoints of subjects as autonomous agents with no or few material needs, and present the way these viewpoints lead to a defence of the middle class position at the expense of subjects positioned elsewhere.

2. Settings: Politics, institutions, research

Laying bare discourse and looking at the techniques applied to make them look true is one thing, but analysing what thoughts might mean and what has shaped them is another. John B. Thompson (1988: 367) argues that any cultural analysis needs three components – a social-historical setting/analysis, a discourse analysis and an interpretation of the former two as they interrelate. The symbolic forms, of which language is one, must be related to the historically specific contexts in which they are carried out, disseminated and received. In the previous chapter, I introduced the idea that notions about society are brought into the perceived expectations on parents and I suggested that there is a possible tension in the location of responsibility – when is the parent assigned responsibility and when is responsibility placed within the institutional domains? In this study, the communities are used as an example of a particular phenomenon that can be labelled *the responsabilisation of the parent*. But if discourses about society operate in these negotiations on responsibility; what do we mean by society? Why is responsibility made to be so important in this particular era? In what ways does it affect the subjects of this study – parents? Bearing in mind the advice from John B. Thompson this chapter provides a contextual backdrop against which the aim of the dissertation should be comprehended.

The chapter is divided in two main sections. The first section comprises a presentation of contemporary political development and the transformation of the welfare state and the second contains an introduction to research relevant for this study. Initially I will present the big picture: Politics and the welfare state and the way they are organised by contract theory; the cornerstone of liberalism. Thereafter, I will provide an account of contemporary political organisation and its institutions in which parenthood is practiced, monitored and measured, as well as pointing out the political and normative preferences of these institutions. The Chapter ends with a brief overview of the concrete parental practices and institutional demands linked to these preferences, as mirrored through previous research.

Politics, liberalisation and the welfare state

I have stated that I wish to explore a discursive intersection between two ideas: Ideas about the role of the parent and ideas about the role of the welfare state. However, employing a concept such as the welfare state requires delimitations. What is the

welfare state, considering it is defined and operated so differently in various countries and contexts? There are an abundance of definitions available to delineate it, as well as differences between welfare states, even in cases when they can all be labelled universal. In the dissertation it matters less whether the welfare state is defined as, for example, corporatist, liberal or social democratic (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and in the analysis I settle for a more simplistic understanding. The welfare state is here defined as a social system for the reproduction of the population of a state and, hence, a meeting between state politics and the way of life of its population (Therborn, 1991: 53). In that capacity it is a type of state organisation of resources from which everybody (to some extent, or implicitly) gains, depends upon and to which everyone is assumed to feel more or less compelled to contribute. It is also thought of as the most effective way to achieve de-commodification (ibid.: 27 ff.).¹⁷ In the dissertation the welfare state is related to class politics because the welfare state agencies ‘redistribute resources and life chances, and regulate risk stemming from market dependency’ (Svallfors, 2004: 119). Thus, the welfare state may regulate the ways that class positions, subsistence and social outcomes are intertwined. When the nicks in the communities refer to institutions of the welfare state, my assumption is thus that this is generally the way they understand it.¹⁸

Having said that, at present the welfare state is changing rapidly and presumably the hopes, demands and ideas about it are changing too. The current discourse of parenting notable in web community conversations as well as in tax debates is not an isolated Swedish phenomenon – I comprehend it as a reflection of a form of politics, referred to by Nikolas Rose (2000 a) as *ethopolitics*, in which political problems are reduced into moral principles: A politics of conduct grounded in particular values, one of which is a reciprocal obligation – a kind of *contract relation* – between the government and its subjects. The contract stipulates a relation between the two – if government provides the conditions necessary for a good life, the subjects have the responsibility to behave so that they benefit from the conditions (ibid: 1395,

17 De-commodification should be understood not only as the manner in which individuals or families ‘can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation’ (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 37) but also access to publicly organised welfare services that enable the individual to take on paid work (Sainsbury, 1994: 162).

18 The definition is thus initiatory and does not encompass dimensions such as gender, or the way that the welfare state regime is both dependent upon and formats gender relations (Bussemaker & van Kersbergen, 1994: 9). I assume, however, that when the nicks talk of the welfare state (or ‘society’) they refer not to the breadwinner model but the individual model where the recipient of benefits is the individual, taxation is separate, employment policies are aimed at both sexes and where the familial ideology presumes a shared role in matters of earnings and care-responsibilities (Sainsbury, 1994: 152 f.). I assume this because the context in which the nicks live and write is Swedish and the Swedish welfare state is organised according to the latter model.

1397f.). The contract is purely ethical and implies a citizen that can regulate and control herself.¹⁹ This is not the contract that once set out to ameliorate the hardship of the worst-off and was given the authority to force leftover groups into reformation and relative safety. Instead, Rose speaks of the emergence of an anti-politic state. Political government is gradually disentangled from its powers to calculate and steer from within its own core and a share of this responsibility is dislocated to individuals, localities, housing estates, schools and parents (ibid: 1400). One of the points of departure of this dissertation is that the specific way of negotiating parenting practises as desirable and productive or undesirable and unproductive, as in the opening posting in Chapter One, is re-vitalised by this political shift.

Liberalism and the free subjects

The shift itself is sometimes called neo-liberal, advanced liberal or simply liberal. The particular ‘type’ of liberalism matters less for the dissertation²⁰ but the view of the subject does. The way the subject is made to be responsible for her actions in the parental web community points to a liberal matrix of understanding: She is supposedly ‘free’ but restrained by ethics. In what follows I will map out this particular formula of freedom and constraint, and show how this perspective on freedom has its roots in social contract theory, which in turn presupposes an abstract citizen-subject.

Liberalism, irrespective of the label, encompasses a thoroughgoing notion of individualism as the perceived core of human beings. It considers the individual as the owner of herself and her capacities (Macpherson, 1962). In the framework of liberalism the individual is not understood primarily as a part of a societal context (nor indebted to any such context) and society is instead comprehended as a number of free individuals who relate to each other as ‘owners’ (ibid.: 3). The owner of a body, a capacity or ability can transfer them to another owner, such as when a labourer sells his/her body to an employer, and so the capacities can be ‘subject to contract’. What the diverse forms of liberalism furthermore share is the idea of the homo economicus – the matrix in which people are made subjects. The premise behind the homo

19 The concept of citizenship is multi-layered. It could mean a subject born in the country or someone who has residence permit but was born outside of the country. As I interpret Nikolas Rose, when using the term ‘citizen’ he speaks of both of these subjects, whilst early contract theorists appear to use the term reserved for the first type of subject.

20 Disentangling the strands of a generic concept such as liberalism is complicated – political liberalism does not invariably imply economic liberalism, and it does not always come with a doctrine about the human subject or the nature of morality (Mouffe, 1993/2005: 41 f.). In this study, liberalism as a broad perspective is applied instead for its dependence on contract theory and the latter’s stipulation about subjects collectively deciding the rules of a society, i.e., I am focusing upon a particular part of the assumptions of liberalism.

economicus is the principle of the market transferred to the subject as self-interested and self-realising (Bowles & Gintis, 1993: 84 f.).²¹ In sum, the liberal visions of the way subjects construct a society are highlighted in the words *contract*, *owner* and *self-interest*. Carol Pateman labels this particular mix *contractarianism* (2002: 21): We enter into cooperation with others through contracts. Liberalism is the foundational ground for a kind of governing that is operationalised not so much by laws and rights but by this particular interest, as well as by investment and competition. In that fashion liberalism governs without governing, i.e., for the government to function its subjects have to be bestowed a great deal of freedom to act (for instance to invest and compete), and to choose, as Foucault contends:

The new governmental reason needs freedom; therefore, the new art of government consumes freedom. It must produce it, it must organise it. The new art of government therefore appears as the management of freedom (2008:63).

Nevertheless, no versions of liberalism would have been able to stipulate the individual's right to invest himself in a market place, to exchange or compete, if not for contract theory. Contract theory can be considered the foundation of liberal democracies. The classic form of contract theory, as presented by Carole Pateman (1988: 1 ff.), suggests that individuals are positioned as naturally free and equal to each other, and therefore there can be no valid arguments for subordination. This, one may say, is the very foundation of the theory, dating back to the seventeenth century. All men, John Locke argues (1690/1823: 106) are in 'a state of perfect freedom to order their actions' and at the same time 'all men may be restrained from invading others' rights, and from doing hurt to one another' (ibid.: 107). All social relations, the theory suggests, should take on a contractual form and, consequently, a free individual must *agree* to be ruled by another. The reason why the social contract functions – in the sense of people actually agreeing upon being governed – is that freedom is such an insecure condition that it becomes rational to subordinate oneself to the civil laws of a state. This subjection is allegedly not forced, as Pateman summarises (1988: 39 ff.); the citizen of a 'state of nature' has *exchanged* insecurity of freedom for civil freedom protected by the state.

As the reader notes, such a theoretical view evokes several questions yet to be answered. What and who is the citizen in a state of nature? On what principles should

²¹ Liberalism is sometimes described as a political project that seeks to create a social reality of exchange (in the case of liberalism) and competition (in the case of neoliberalism) that it proposes already exists (Lemke, 2002: 60): People are like this – therefore society must be created the same.

the social contract be founded? How shall a contract be crafted in order for it not to be partial and favourable only to some? This is not the place to present a full layout of contract theory, but to point out some of its contradictions, which linger on into liberalism, and to indicate the way notions of contractual designs influence the parental communities.

How to achieve a society

The question of who can sign a social contract has been debated since the seventeenth century and answered in many ways. The contemporary comprehension of the contract party (the subject who is to sign the contract) can be summarised in what John Rawls (1993/2005: 217) calls ‘reasonable citizens’.²² The core issue for these reasonable citizens comprises identifying the most suitable principles for achieving liberty and equality, the only restraint being that the formation of principles must prioritise liberty above all other elements (Rawls, 1971: 302). The principles of the contract must be construed in such a way (rational and reasonable) that *all* citizens can embrace them, if they free themselves from self-interested affiliations, and the contract must contain principles for the distribution of societal resources so that they form a *neutral morality*.²³ This is achieved through the ‘veil of ignorance’, meaning that the subjects choose principles for society with no knowledge of the strata in which they themselves will eventually end up. As a result, standpoints are assumed to be dissolved – the subjects will choose principles in a fair way when not aware of their own future position. As reasoning subjects, the contract parties become indistinguishable from one another and one party would be able to represent all the others. Pateman (2002: 41) labels this idea of dissolved standpoints ‘methodological Rawlsianism’ and argues that such an idea obscures the fact that when we debate a certain principle, the debate itself involves some interpretation being brought to the fore, and others being ruled out (ibid.: 45). The presumptions of neutrality should instead be comprehended as a process of inclusion and exclusion, where some interpretations, values and interests *are rendered* neutral.

This relates to a concept such as the welfare state, as well as to the idea of a citizen-subject with rights and responsibilities organizing her life inside that frame:

22 Rawls delineates a fundamentally deep disagreement between the citizens-to-be. We abide by different doctrines and we hold different viewpoints (religious or political), which is what would be expected in a heterogenic and pluralistic society (1993/2005: 4). Hence, what is needed is a ‘mindset’ or a situation that is freed of these tensions.

23 This is one of Pateman’s (2002) main criticisms against contractarianism. She describes the manner in which political philosophy, through the influence of Rawls amongst others, has turned into moral reasoning and that this transformation enables a view of democracy as a kind of political procedure that lacks connection to articulated political values (ibid.: 40).

The notions of rights and responsibilities will have to be interpreted. In the parental communities, society (in which citizens with rights and responsibilities live) is read as an entity separated from the family. This view would come as no surprise if it was found to result from liberal influences. This is precisely what contract theory does – the fairly chosen principles regulate civil society as if it is not related to the intimate spheres of life and political domains are analysed separately from intimate domains such as the family (Pateman, 1988: 21). When investigating accounts on the welfare state and its subjects the issue, I believe, is to understand the way this separation is carried out and what it achieves. Liberalism and contract theory are usually accused of flattening political processes into rational procedures with no obvious signs of antagonisms, relations of power or conflicts (Mouffe, 1993/2005.: 49). But contrary to the prerequisites of the contract, there is exploitation involved in most social contracts that are built upon agreements and that are entered voluntarily (such as the employment contract or the marriage contract) (Pateman 1988: 7 f.). If there is a tension between the standpoint that society is constructed as a result of politics and the standpoint that it is based upon morality, and if notions of appropriate rules and principles in civil society are never linked to the reproductive arenas, is it perhaps notable in web conversations about daycare, preparing meals and homework?

Representations of deficiency

This being said, we may ask why it matters if the domains of production and reproduction are treated as if separate entities in the parental communities. Is there a problem arising from the separation of the intimate and the public domains, or the idea of the reasonable and abstract subject making a deal with other subjects? According to Nancy Fraser (1990), there is. Not only does it suppress power relations or diverging interests, but it de-emphasises some concepts in public debate, especially those related to interpersonal affairs of a more intimate nature, or that relate to domains of life most often dealt with inside the family. Two such suppressed concepts are those of *need* and *dependency*.

Fraser argues (ibid.: 199 ff.) that in late-capitalist welfare state societies, to have a need or express needs is part of a political discourse, because needs-talk is an idiom in which societal conflicts are manifested and elaborated (ibid.: 202). Certain needs can be put in opposition to embraced values, particularly to ‘choice’ (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1996: 89). Choice in turn is a concept that contains notions of consumption, where market forces appear to be conflated with choice and when used in the contexts of the under privileged, it is often understood to mean consuming, or refraining from consuming, the right kind of goods, i.e., being active or passive.

This type of discursive investment into choice particularly moulds contemporary perceptions of poverty. Because a calculated choice (such as a choice to ‘invest’ in education) is understood to alleviate poverty, poor people are divided into groups, one of which is assumed to take action to free the members from poverty, while the other does not. This division of the poor into groups with different characteristics echoes historical notions of the *deserving* and *undeserving* poor. Martha L. Fineman (1991: 282) presents the way in which this classification distinguishes between those who are considered to have caused or worsened their poverty, and those struck by poverty due to reasons beyond their control. In viewpoints such as these, choice has eclipsed need.

Family life, however, is demarcated not only by needs being fulfilled but by another relational feature; that of dependency. The child depends upon its caretaker and the partners in a relationship depend upon each other to make the daily routines function. In terms of reasonable and convertible citizens debating principles for the distribution of resources, Eva Feder Kittay (1999: xiii, 185) stresses how need is unevenly spread out – we need different amounts of resources depending on what type of individual we are. Some subjects become more recipients of care, whilst others provide care, i.e. we are not convertible. When assuming a neutral type of subject there will always be a necessity to make adaptations for that which is *not* neutral or abstract in the eyes of the societal fellowship. Kittay (ibid.: 80) criticises contract theory for the presumption that the party agreeing to the contract holds the same amount of freedom and equality over the course of his/her entire lifetime. According to Kittay (ibid.: 81), Rawls fails to acknowledge that the parties signing the contract will be dependent upon it in different ways due to, for instance, class or race. To this critique we may add the work carried out inside the family, especially in the family with children. In every individual’s life history there are stages in which dependency is unavoidable, such as in early childhood, or in old age and illness. Kittay calls this dependency ‘inescapable’ (ibid.: 29) because the frail individual cannot make frailty go away, and because someone will be assigned the non-negotiable task of care, that which Kittay labels *dependency work*. This is another potential component of conversation to look for in the parental web communities – what types of situation are considered neutral (and thus not up for debate), and what is seen as non-normal (and debatable), and how are issues of need and dependency addressed?

The politics of the Swedish welfare state, triangulation and ethopolitics

When summing up this presentation of contract theory, we see that the stipulation of neutrality is problematic. Irrespective of Rawls' intention to create a situation where the neutral moral of the contract is formulated by an abstract and reasonable individual, it becomes a political fiction (Pateman, 1988: 42). Nevertheless, the re-birth of a liberal vision of a reasonable and self-interested citizen-subject does not only come in one particular shape and it is no longer the property of liberalism, but has also become part of its political counterparts. We will now briefly take a look at how this happened in Sweden. I will sketch the transformation of the Swedish welfare state over the last three decades, as well as the transformation of the political party that originally launched it, the Social Democratic Party. In addition, I will demonstrate how this process has shaped welfare institutions accordingly.

In the 1980s a re-birth of liberal thought took place in the Western world – a blend of aspirations for a regrowth of the economy, support for family values, anticipation of making welfare institutions more effective, support for value pluralism and aspirations for international regulation of trade (Rose, 2000 a). In Sweden, as in many other European countries, this meant a massive, albeit gradual, reformulation of the official discourse on capitalism, private markets and the welfare state. The central tenet of the overall social democratic discourse – the primacy of politics over economy – was in Sweden reformulated and the way in which the Social Democratic Party enabled a compromise between capital and the interest of the working class was challenged (Stilhof Sørensen, 2014: 4).²⁴

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is often considered the turning point for social democracy all over Europe. Suddenly the political pressure from the left was significantly weakened, and instead a presumed consensus of the benefits of a market economy in combination with a democratic form of government was established

24 Historically, the keystone of the socialist compromise can be summarised as an attempt to tame 'the beast' of capitalism to be able to redistribute its profits more evenly by offering the market workers who were properly educated, fed and taken care of when ill, as well as industrial peace. This compromise secured the capitalist's possibility to make profit, whilst still ensuring worker's rights and subsistence. In other words, the main idea within the Social Democrat movement was to create a societal fellowship that embraced both the capitalist and the worker – an idea embodied in the metaphor of the 'People's Home', meant to illustrate the way a society should be politically organised to look after all of its citizens. The modern Swedish welfare state was a compromise between the state and the market – and the relation between these two was formed through a democratic political control. The lifeblood of this control was the public sector built upon formal rules, professionalism, a code of ethics and a public sector offering institutional welfare service available for all citizens (Stilhof Sørensen, 2014: 6 f.).

(Andersson, 2009). During the 1980s the neoliberal trends became more manifest in Sweden, and deeply affected the Social Democratic Party. The latter has a lot in common with the New Labour in the UK: During this period the dreams of putting the means of production into the hands of the workers were relinquished and the flirtation with the middle class voters meant that socialist ideology was disallowed. Both parties instead chose the political method of triangulation; they placed themselves in a 'third position' between their previous political position and that of their opponents to the right, thereby hoping to attract as many voters as possible. This new position is also known as *the third way* and amongst the prominent figures advocating this model were the then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, former Swedish Prime Minister, Göran Persson and sociologist Anthony Giddens (ibid.: 12 ff.).

The third way meant that liberal discourse became close to hegemonic, which radically changed the welfare state and its institutions. In the 1990s Sweden saw drastic privatisations of the public sectors, including health care, infrastructure and education (Stilhof Sörensen, 2014: 10 ff.). The public sector embraced market models, with authorities and institutions divided and made to act as competing functions. Several institutions and departments were obliged to generate a profit and all types of welfare institutions were forced to assess themselves and their performances. The market model also generated changes in the way that the individual was positioned vis-a-vis welfare institutions. The discourse changed – responsibility was gradually moved out of the institutions to each citizen, who was treated as if accountable for her health and wellbeing (Hörnfeldt, 2015: 92 f.). In other words, the Swedish welfare state has changed drastically. It has become liberalised and is built upon a notion of equally free subjects who are no longer adjusted by socialist political organisation constructed on the presumption of exploitation within the free market, but by a market model of New Public Management. If Sweden in the 1940s and 1950s strived to give people a basic social security it is no longer obvious what agent is ultimately accountable for welfare provision (ibid.: 88). The assumptions about the subject embraced by this type of welfare state are the same, I believe, as those presumed in contract theory.

The rebirth of social democracy has interested Nikolas Rose (2000 a). He considers four values as the pillars of the transformation; equal worth, opportunity for everyone, responsibility and community. This community orientation paved the way for another connection between the personal and the political (ibid: 1396 f.), which became ethically imbued: We are free to do what we want, and we should want to do the right thing. Ethopolitics is, perhaps, that which has most effectively superseded socialist ideology. Just like contract theory, ethopolitics needs a general, unspecified

subject as its protagonist and omits assumptions of exploitation and subordination. We now have a moral rather than political contract to sign, which plausibly makes whether governmental power is in the hands of social democrats or a more articulate liberal party less relevant. As I understand it, the third way has had an equalising effect on politics, as it has become equated with morality. Having said that, the question is how this composite of politics and morality hits the subjects in this study? If parents are political subjects responding to politics, in what way are they addressed in Swedish political ambitions and by politically assigned institutions?

Swedish gender equality regimes

To become familiar with the ways in which the parent is articulated in political discourse we will take a look at one of the areas that is a source of national pride in Sweden (Dahl, 2005), the ambitions to promote and facilitate gender equality. To comprehend contemporary parenthood in Sweden one must understand the way it is intertwined with this type of social engineering – the same type that assisted in the design of the Swedish welfare state of the 20th century (ibid.: 49) – and one also needs to understand how it has played a role in the construction of Sweden as a progressive nation. So, are political ambitions also levelled in this particular domain of politics? The answer is perhaps; yes and no. In the following I will present the Swedish discourse of gender equality and look at what kind of subject these political ambitions assume.

The situation in the Scandinavian countries differs from that of many industrialised countries in the Western world, partly because of women's relatively extensive participation in the labour market, and partly because of the associated reconsideration of the responsibility of the welfare state in relation to the family (Leira, 2002: 2). When comparing the incorporation of working women in a liberal welfare state such as the UK with the social democratically based welfare state of Sweden, one will note that the different political traditions impact on policy approaches to social reproduction and to women in employment. For example, in the UK resistance towards institutional interventions into the family has been stronger than in Sweden, while the Swedish responsiveness to demands from the work force, women included, has helped to pave the way for an acceptance of state support for, among other things, childcare services (ibid.: 23). Nevertheless, a presentation of the official gender equality policy in Sweden tells a story of ideology colliding with practice. Since the 1970s equality between men and women has been promoted in all sectors of the Swedish political administration, and increased parental leave for fathers has been an articulate goal in order for women to be able to remain in the labour market,

which in turn explains the comprehensive investments in child care (Elwin-Novak & Thomsson, 2001). Yet parallel to these investments, statistics indicate that equality is far from complete. Women are still the main providers of care for children and the elderly, and carry out unpaid household work for twice the amount of time than men (SCB, 2011). The impression that first meets the eye would thus be that Swedish family policy does *not* surmise a neutral subject but a gendered one. The starting point is two delimited subjects; the woman and the man, and the heterosexual family. (Lundqvist, 2015: 86). This perspective on gender equality has enabled exclusions and demarcations; subjects or families that do not fit the discourse. Instead, a *specific* part of the Swedish feminist movement gained support from the welfare state apparatus – the white, heterosexual, educated, able-bodied and monogamous middleclass (Dahl, 2005: 66). This, I believe, can in fact be understood as the ‘true’ subject of contemporary liberal government – the assumed subject in this type of government – and in much the same way as the ethopolitical regime excludes dependent or subordinated subjects, the Swedish gender equality discourse excludes subjects that do not fit in with the prescribed frame, whilst still describing its aspirations as addressing everyone.

How can the non-white, the non-middleclass or non-educated subject be excluded or considered deviant in times of ethopolitics, especially when the political administration articulates the aims of improving equality and equal rights as in the case of Swedish gender equality aspirations? According to Malin Rönblom (2011), it is because these aims are reduced to administrative techniques and thereby depoliticised. Gender equality, she argues (*ibid.*: 35 f.) is a problem that does not challenge the prevailing order, but confirms it. Rönblom provides us, I believe, with a prolific interconnection between the subject made available in gender equality administrative techniques, and the subject alluded to in ethopolitics. In public discourse gender equality is comprehended as an obvious and common political goal from which everyone gains. When viewing gender equality in that way, power division issues are put aside and by formulating the matter in non-conflicting terms, it is made to look as if we all hold the same type of stake and interests. ‘We’ are characterised as reasonable subjects who all have a great deal to gain from living our lives in an equal fashion. If this ‘we’ is presumed to benefit from equality (rather than for example lose power) it makes Swedish gender equality discourse the bearer of much the same elements as contractarianism (Pateman, 2002: 21) and its outlook on the subject as accountable and free. That which binds these two subjects together is a *presumed neutrality*: Gender equality becomes a sibling of ethopolitics because they both depoliticise the project.

Another similarity between notions of social contracts and of gender equality lies in visions of execution and implementation. In Swedish discourse the overarching model of thought when an absence of gender equality is to be explained is that people lack knowledge, thus knowledge becomes both the problem and the solution. Treating the issue in that fashion obscures issues of struggle (Rönblom, 2011: 43). Whilst gender equality has become a question of enhancing accountability and administrative implementation and knowledge transfer techniques, the larger political scene has gradually become more involved in the same matters. In a political landscape that does not allow for conflict and prefers knowledge, administration and accountability as solutions to societal ills, it is only to be expected that education and training are what is advocated. In gender equality efforts, as well as in contractarianism, the 'problematic' subjects are both ostracised from discourse, while at the same time constituting the very object of it: They must become knowledgeable and made to assume responsibility. Swedish equality regimes are thereby part of a Western feminism that has formatted a racialized and class bound conception of the feminine predicament. In other words, it has privileged *gender* as an analytic starting point, and made equality into a sign of cultural belonging when addressing some subjects, or lack of belonging when addressing other subjects (Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2005: 96, 99). As I understand it the subject asked to sign the social contract in times of ethopolitics and the subject addressed by Swedish gender equality discourse it is based upon a fictitious neutrality and in that sense it is both gendered, and not gendered. Individuals who are considered part of the solution (to be an equal, knowledgeable and accountable subject) are portrayed as if they have no colour or class, whilst the subject singled out as problematic is often coloured and classed. The setting is *made* neutral, due to a lack of political analyses of different (and conflicting) interests.

Consequently, when probing into venues such as the parental communities one needs to take into account the transformations of Swedish welfare agencies, as well as the assumptions of reasonable, convertible and accountable subjects that underpin both contemporary political debate in general, and the Swedish gender equality strivings in particular. In this study, they are assumed to be a backcloth against which articulation takes place.

The politics of parenting: From wealth to warmth

If, as claimed, ethopolitics (and the way it is supported by contract theory) has had a levelling effect on politics, this tendency is putatively manifested in the way people organise their lives, in the way they are discussed in public discourse and in the

design of institutional aid or services. We will continue by taking a look at how the ethically preoccupied politics of today approaches the subject of this dissertation – parents.

In times of ethopolitics the images of parents resemble those of the poor or the excluded in one particular way: Both categories are viewed from the perspective of capability rather than need. In an attempt to understand the contemporary shift in the political understanding of parents' needs and obligations, Tracey Jensen (2010) investigates a contemporary fashion for speaking of *parenting* as a verb and not as an ontological category ('the parent'). The belief in the capacities of parents to mediate other variables of social and economic disadvantage can be associated with a political agenda about social inclusion and poverty that suggests it is what parents *do* that make a difference for the child, rather than their material or social resources, which mostly relate to who they *are* (in terms of class, education, networks etc.) The outlook upon parenting as balancing out factors of detriment and deprivation is thus political (ibid: 1 f.).

In Sweden this tendency is notable in political pleading with parents to act in order to prevent certain societal 'ills'. One example is the appeal from Tomas Tobé, member of Parliament and chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Education, to Swedish parents in 2014 to reduce the amount of time their children spent computer gaming and increase the amount of time they devoted to doing their homework, which was described as a 'handshake' between the Government and the parents.²⁵ The metaphor of handshake is interesting in itself, in that it alludes to contracts, or the way we shake hands to seal a contract. But the demand for good parenting is not confined to the political domains. In the editorial pages of Swedish newspapers the (deficient) capacities of parents are often described as the cause of social problems in general. The first exemplary quote comes from an editorial page discussing parent's obligations in relation to homework and the second puts forward suggestions of how to prevent teenagers from participating in riots.

I cannot help but find it terrifying that the responsibility that comes with children is apparently a shock for many parents. For instance, for how well they do at school. Abdicating from the role of parent as soon as the going gets rough is actually not an alternative. It may sound harsh, but if they cannot find the time or the energy to assist with homework, then mummy and daddy should immediately prioritise their own activities less

25 See Aftonbladet (<http://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/debattamnen/skola/article18443305.ab>).

(Editorial pages of Göteborgs-Posten, 14 October 2013) (author's translation).

26

Why do some pick up stones whilst others do not? It is partly about personal morality but primarily concerns social control. In both respects the fundamental problem is inadequate parenthood. It is really very simple: Some boys are allowed to run around and ravage among burning cars at 2 a.m., while other boys are kept at home by their parents. Most are boys of school-going age who attend a school with a range of resources and committed teachers, have access to youth recreation centres and sports. Boys who live in a country with low difference in income and universities that do not charge fees. Such boys can become policemen men or physicians, or live comfortably as taxi drivers or warehouse workers. But it is easy to skip school. And it is fun to throw stones. Frustration and boredom are replaced by excitement and adventure. The parents of these youngsters need to be helped and made to assume more responsibility. Other institutions and communities must develop strategies to compensate for shortcomings in the home. In the absence of parents, society – through the police and the rest of the legal system – has to clearly state what is right and wrong. More [people] need to be arrested. Law and order must be reinstated. Measures need to be undertaken both from the police and the Social Services. Absent parents as well as laughing stone-throwers have to be held responsible (Editorial pages of Svenska Dagbladet, 26 May 2013) (author's translation).²⁷

In political as well as mass media reflections upon school, homework and crime the comprehension of life chances through the lens of class appears to be outdated. Instead of talking about wealth and its prerequisites or the conditions that lead to economic and social hardship, policy makers, editorials and institutions have seemingly embraced parenting as a sum of acts occurring in zones of private conduct (Jensen, 2010: 3 f.): Parenting comes across as a form of citizenship of a private nature. It becomes a question of choosing a kind of 'best practice' that is already predefined in a system of class values, where the middle class parent serves as a role model (ibid.).

The faith in parenting 'best practice' is firmly rooted in political reasoning in Sweden, as in other countries. In 2010 the same type of formulation was used in a speech

26 See Göteborgs-Posten (<http://www.gp.se/nyheter/ledare/1.2130057-skolan-ska-inte-curla-foraldrar>).

27 See Svenska Dagbladet (http://www.svd.se/opinion/ledarsidan/de-skrattar-nar-stenarna-kastat_8209788.svd).

given by the former British Prime Minister David Cameron at the launch of the project Building Character at Demos²⁸ project to upgrade a sense of parental worth.

Of course there is a link between material poverty and poor life chances, but the full picture is that that link also runs through the style of parenting that children in poor households receive. /.../ What matters most to the child's life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their parenting (Cited from Jensen, 2010: 2).

As Jensen points out, in the speech Cameron acknowledges poverty as a possible explanation for life outcomes but at the same time disqualifies wealth as an explanatory factor for success, and introduces warmth, i.e., a potentially evenly distributed capability. Replacing wealth with warmth is a part of rewriting the terms of social inequalities that harks back to older distinctions between deserving and undeserving poor, and, hence, parents who cannot engraft success in their children become failures in self-governance more than victims of structural injustice (Gilles, 2005 a: 837).

Demos has launched a home page that presents several of its projects. Here, the idea that some parents are failures is spelled out, but also the prescribed remedy for the broken society, *building character*.

There is growing interest in the political and policy importance of a certain set of personal attributes – in particular emotional control, empathy, application to task, personal agency, an ability to defer gratification – that might be summarized as '*character*' [emphasis added]. The *possession of these character traits, or character capabilities* [emphasis added], is an important predictor of a range of individual and collective aspirations, from health and educational outcomes to political engagement and civility. (<http://www.demos.co.uk/projects/the-character-inquiry>).

In the quotation, 'character' is described as a *possession* of the individual and linked with matters such as political engagement, education and the health of a country. We might remember how liberalism views the subject as primarily an owner of properties and capacities rather than part of a societal organisation. In liberalism we inter-

²⁸ Demos is a British cross-party think tank. See: <http://www.demos.co.uk/about> for a presentation of Demo's activities and projects, including more information on the thoughts behind the 'Building Character' project.

relate as ‘owners’ (Macpherson, 1962: 3). Demos seemingly views character as such a possession.

The ideal of tough love

As mentioned in Chapter One, the right type of parenting can be apprehended as a remedy for a broken society. In that sense one can talk of parenting as a joint national fantasy; good parenting is perceived as if achieving capable new citizens (Jensen, 2012). Jensen captures the phenomenon as it crystallises in a kind of desired parental practice of *tough love* (ibid.: 8 f.) – having a correct relational balance between giving the child affection and disciplining it. Tough love is a parental ideal as well as an ideal for how to heal society; in this discourse the remedy for a wasteful society as well as an unstable family is a balance between austerity and thrift. Public spending needs to be austere and rigorously calculated, whilst parents need to calculate the perfect balance between warmth and discipline, in order to help their children to achieve the most out of life. In that sense tough love is perceived as enhancing social mobility.

The aim to cultivate the parental skills necessary for this balancing act is also noteworthy in a Swedish context.²⁹ Public support to make parents more able has existed in Sweden for almost a century, and a range of diverse parental ideals have been promoted. In the reasoning about publicly administered parental support in the government report *Föräldrastöd en vinst för alla. Nationell strategi för samhällets stöd och hjälp till föräldrar i deras föräldraskap* (SOU, 2008: 131)³⁰ ‘support’ is understood in economic terms – apart from generating the positive development of children it is said to have positive effects upon the national economy, as it is depicted as decreasing social exclusion, drug abuse, unemployment and illness (ibid: 123). Perhaps even more telling is the Governmental Institute of Public Health’s report *Nya verktyg för föräldrar: förslag till nya former av föräldrastöd* (Bremberg, 2004: 48).³¹ In this report public support for parents is considered important because it helps them obtain a necessary balance between ‘warmth’ and ‘frames’; an almost exact replica of the ideal of tough love. The report claims that evidence exists that children are not influenced by structural conditions but parental practice: ‘The warmth of the parents is more important than the family’s material circumstances and is often more important than the relationships with friends’ (ibid: 49, author’s translation). The necessary parental

29 For a Swedish version of this discourse, see for instance the book by David Eberhardt’s *Hur barnen tog makten* (2013) (in English: *How the children came in power*), addressing issues of parental neglect and lack of discipline. Calculated warmth towards the child is notable in Martin Forster’s *Fem gånger mer kärlek* (2009) (in English: *Five times more love*).

30 In English: *Parent support everybody gains. A national strategy for societal support and aid to parents.*

31 In English: *New tools for parents – suggestions for new forms of parent support.*

skills are narrowed down to four vital components: warmth, consistency, clearly stated expectations and a level of self-determination on behalf of the child (ibid: 50). In other words, maintaining a good parental practice is envisioned as facilitating social mobility and stability, while notions of enhancing redistribution have disappeared from Swedish institutional aims of improving the nation's parents. Class is no longer on the agenda, but instead techniques aimed at a subject formulated in neutral terms.

Family, expectations and class: A selection of previous research

The outline above has introduced the reader to the specific political context in which parenthood takes place. So far I have not presented how parents actually think and act in this particular context. How do they orient themselves in a setting that emphasises responsible choice, contract relations and consumerism? How do institutions view parents; their role and function, and what demands do they place upon parents? The chapter will now change focus and I will present a condensed picture of previous research of relevance to the study. This review is not intended to be a comprehensive mapping but rather to place the dissertation in a relevant research context. If class is reformulated into inner capacities, as was formulated in the Swedish public health discourse and by the Demos think tank, it is necessary to include research about the relations between the construction of parenthood and class, as well as research on institutional expectations of parental practices. The following presentation includes studies from Sweden and other parts of Scandinavia, the UK, the US and Canada and focuses on the way the parent is perceived by parents themselves and by close institutions (such as schools). Other relevant work not presented in this section will be introduced in the analytical chapters.

As the reader has presumably already noted research performed in a British context plays an important part in the setting of the frames of the study. There are two principal reasons for this. First, much of the research on the intersections between perceptions of class and perceptions of the quality or outcome of parenthood emanates from the UK. Secondly, in the UK class differences in actual living conditions are considerable, but have not affected politics/policies very much (Svallfors, 2004: 132), while in Sweden a political articulation of class has historically been prominent (ibid.: 130). This difference makes the British studies an interesting contrast to the present one. In the light of the rapid transformation of the Swedish welfare state and the growth of market models (i.e., an articulation of a totally different nature), applying British research would potentially provide a pertinent contrast to the Swedish

discourse about ‘sound parenting’ or presumed ‘decent ways’ of using welfare state benefits.

Another feature of this compilation of research is its starting point: Conceptions about class. The concept of class itself has been questioned and criticised for being a stretched conceptual net that captures phenomena stemming from highly diverse social realities, whilst identifying them as the results of ‘class belonging’. That would perhaps make the concept into a ‘theory of everything’ (Pakulski, 1993: 279). In the case of the present study, the research reviewed to frame its results is intended to indicate the manner in which parents *think of class* in terms of suitable ways of behaving. This means that my intention in this particular section is to focus upon the cultural and personal *making* of class and class related expectations, and in particular how this is done by positioning other parents (mothers) as different, deviant or unfortunate. Hence, there will be a focus upon research on the subject that *performs* class and because middle class preference often shapes the norms of parenting in general (Gillies, 2005a: 836), special attention will be devoted to middle class ideals.

Making the middle class

One of the dissertation’s starting points is the contemporary political notion of parental skills as the prime enabler of upwards social mobility, as it is presented by Tracey Jensen (2010, 2012). But how does this notion trickle down to actual parents? In an interview study with middle and working class parents, Val Gillies (2005 b) discovers a diffused notion that children who are ‘parented’ the right way will have an enhanced possibility of upward mobility. The parents in her study isolate parenting practices from their material context and see them as neutral methods that must be conveyed to all parents for the public good (ibid: 840). In a follow up study Gillies (2008 a) compares working- and middle class mothers’ strategies for securing resources from school. She finds that similar intentions on the part of mothers play out differently in the school setting, with the middleclass mother securing resources and the working class mother failing to do so, mainly due to the fact that the latter lacks the necessary financial and social capital.³² Thus, the chances of upwards mobility are in Gillies’ findings not ensured by ‘parenting’.³³

32 In addition, Gillies has suggested (2008 a), the working class mother takes a risk in enforcing middle class child-rearing models, simply because it is risky to cultivate individuality, taste and independence in a child in a social setting where ‘choice and power are limited, hazards are many and consequences severe’ (ibid.: 1093).

33 In fact, Gillies has demonstrated (2008 b: 102) how there is a univocal relationship between the resources of middle class parents and their child-rearing practices, and how these parents use their resources (prestigious contacts, money and legitimate cultural capital) to help their children get ahead, whilst working class parents concentrate on helping their children overcome strains and trouble at school.

Middle class ideals can also be investigated in terms of routine matters of life, such as the place where one lives, or habits of everyday life. Aspirations for the child can, for instance, play a role in the choice of the neighbourhood in which to live. In Maja Lilja's (2015) study of Swedish middle class mothers' choice of residential area, she notes that the women's accounts are ambiguous. While stating that they want their children to grow up in a socially and culturally diverse neighbourhood, in their decision-making they in fact avoid diversity. They explain their decisions by using accounts about the difference in 'parental styles' between home owners and tenants (especially tenants with an immigrant background). These alleged differences are employed to explain both the decision on where to live and why the middle class mothers do not mix with mothers from the housing estates (*ibid.*: 131). Care, moral responsibilities and place thus become linked together; a feature also displayed by Therese Wissö (2012), although examined from another angle. Wissö uncovers (*ibid.*: 183 f.) the manner in which mothers from disadvantaged suburbs are made to feel less welcome in the context of 'open preschools'³⁴ where they describe being ignored by middle class parents, or not fitting in to the normative frame for how a parent should act, leading to them avoiding to visit these venues.

Yet another everyday practice in which class (and gender) can be located is in the planning and the preparation of the family dinner. Terese Anving (2012) explores Swedish mothers of young children and the manner in which they talk about food, revealing that accounts about food allow for a hierarchisation of people. Certain type of food (such as sugar), and certain places (such as McDonalds) become places of identity work, which involves dissociating oneself from particular habits and places and stressing other (*ibid.*: 174 ff.). The mothers host underlying assumptions that middle class parents choose healthy food, whilst parents from the working class eat with less focus upon health (*ibid.*: 172). Thus, distinctions made by middle class parents relate to discourses of choice, which also affect other areas of life, evident in a Swedish interview study conducted by Marie Karlsson, Annica Löfdahl and Héctor Pérez Prieto (2013). They demonstrate how concepts of 'good parenting' are linked to making choices, in this case choices of childcare, and how the parents performing choices position themselves against the perceived more problematic 'non-choosers'. Making a choice is almost equated with making an identity claim, and the parents in the study use a discourse of choice saturated with a more psychologically imbued un-

³⁴ An open preschool is an initiative that can be organised by the local church or by the municipality. It offers a place for parents of young children to meet and socialise on a voluntary basis for a couple of hours every week, before the children are enrolled into the regular municipal preschool.

derstanding of children's needs. Choosing makes these parents feel accountable and responsible: As if children *need* the parent to choose for them (ibid.: 221). Bridget Byrne (2006) also focuses on parental choice and its consequences, revealing the way that British middle-class mothering involves classed, raced and/or gendered practices in matters of how to choose schools and construct social networks for their children. Byrne (ibid.: 1012 ff.) finds that the mothers that are interviewed perform acts of making distinctions between 'types' of middle-class and choose networks in accordance with what they perceive as their own type. The mothers select appropriate children for their child to play with and take an interest in micro-level performances of identity to size each other up, all of which is framed under the heading of catering for the good of the child. Ten years before Byrne's study the same pattern of middle class mothers' dislocation of class was demonstrated by Ellen Brantlinger, Massoumeh Majd-Jabbari and Samuel L. Guskin (1996). While believing in integrated schools these mothers still differentiated poor families from themselves, understanding poor parents as disinterested in culture, reading and language, and these attributions were not followed by any attempts to understand the reasons for this perceived lack of cultural capital (ibid.: 580). The mothers ignored monetary resources as explanations for class inequalities in relation to school performance and focused upon differences in values (ibid.: 586).³⁵

But the construction of a middle class identity also implies work performed on the child, and strategies of transmission. This is notable in a study by Carol Vincent and Stephen J. Ball (2007) on *reproduction strategies*, where they explore what part extracurricular activities play in middle-class parents' class reproduction strategies. They conclude that these activities are a reaction to a sense of anxiety on the part of the parents, and that the intention to give the child the right type of habitus is seen as an investment in a future envisioned as less than safe and where class belonging is a struggle. Market forces playing with mother's anxieties prepare the ground for a frenetic parental activity that maintains social boundaries (ibid.: 1069 ff.). That being said, acting out a sense of class belonging can be an activity that comes with constraints. In an interview study of white middle-class mothers, Simon Duncan (2005) shows that many are unable to exercise their preference. Some had no possibilities to control the amount of time spent in the workplace, while others had opportunities both to work part time and to work from home. Some exhibited a strong career focus, while others showed preferences for staying at home once they had become

³⁵ These identity performances come across as similar to those made in parental communities where class and race determine the outcome of the interplay (Hargittai, 2007) and where the child is used as an impression management prop (Collett, 2005; Alstam, 2013).

mothers. These differences, Duncan argues (*ibid.*: 60, 68), should not be read as merely preferences: The dispersed patterns are the result of being caught between a normative ideal and an economic reality, or in other words; ideology does not always allow for reality. In a Swedish context, Lucas Forsberg (2009) also investigates the collision between ideology and practice when studying how middle class dual-earner couples handle time pressure by applying delegating, alternating or multitasking strategies. He shows that these strategies create unexpected tensions, such as when the child expects the parent to be involved but the parent wants to finish a chore. This, Forsberg argues (*ibid.*: 171 f.), points to the split between ideology and practice and he suggests that the time-related household strategies may be about producing oneself as an involved parent rather than making efficient use of time.

The making of class is, hence, something performed in the everyday routines of a household, but it is also related to realising ideals and norms of a 'generic' good parenthood. This perceived good parenthood seems to rely on two factors in particular: Time and money.³⁶

Identities, ideals and failures

Regardless of the financial recourses or class position, parenting appears to be evaluated and comprehended, partly, through the eyes of others; a feature that is evident in research about parental web communities. While social capital can be gained from participating in conversation (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005), the community users also mention constraining forces: Gender stereotypes appear to be fostered and the mother is made especially responsible for the behaviour of the child (Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Kokkonen, 2009). Research on parental web communities suggests that when parents struggle to achieve the ideal of sound parenthood it is often to gain recognition from others, and the situation seems to be similar outside of the communities. By interviewing and observing parental practices amongst middle class parents in Sweden, Lucas Forsberg (2010) explores parenthood ideals in these families and reveals parental norms of involvement and responsibility. Although the

³⁶ Moreover, the making of class identity sometimes depends on others performing chores in the middle class family home, i.e., on having the financial means to pay for these services. In Sweden the trend of dual career households and the pressure on women with academic degrees to work long hours while also performing unpaid household chores has resulted in the gender equality discourse including somewhat surprising elements, as Ellinor Platzer (2006) demonstrates in her study of political incentives for domestic services from the 1930s to the present day. These services, Platzer argues (*ibid.*: 216, 218 f.) preserve a particular life style, reproduce gender divisions and exploit working class women. Hiring a domestic worker means that marital conflicts about household chores are mitigated, whilst simultaneously transferred to someone else. This means that the realisation of some middle class women's identities takes place at the expense of other women.

ideal is one of commitment, it does not only ensure the wellbeing of the child and good relationships *within* the family, but in addition leads to acknowledgement from other parents (ibid: 94). Hence, it seems as if parents want to have their parenting practices approved by others, as well as evaluate the practices of other parents. Parental ideals may thus generate an *othering*; a distinction in which the parent positions herself as different from other (worse) parents. In the 2014 study by Päivi Berg and Marja Peltola's about self-perception amongst Finnish parents, this tendency cuts across social divisions. Parents from both majority and minority ethnic backgrounds rely on images of their parenthood as *respectable* and the sense of respectability is intertwined with a notion of a decent citizenship. Respectability is, however, manufactured on the basis of constructions of other parents described as lacking the right moral values. The parents in the study considered themselves capable of revealing parental practices by studying the habitus of children around them, believing that the habitus was proof of parental capabilities (ibid: 9 f.). I found the same tendency in an in-depth analysis of a quarrel about proper parenting techniques in one of the parental web communities focused on in this study (Alstam, 2013). Irrespective of the fact that the child could not be physically evaluated in this arena, the mere description of it led to the nick receiving reproaches for failing to discipline the child, reproaches that were not totally rejected. Instead, the nick that was accused tried to prove that she really *had* been a firm enough mother; a feature of conversation I interpret as displaying shared norms of motherhood that cannot be challenged. This finding is supported by other studies on self-perception amongst Swedish mothers. In an interview study Ylva Elvin-Novak and Heléne Thomsson (2001) find that the mothers apply ideals of accessibility, sensitivity and engagement when evaluating themselves. According to the mothers, the more accessible, sensitive and engaged in the life of the child they manage to be, the more they can function as a vaccine against problems. This view was also shared by mothers who, for various reasons, were unable to fulfil the ideal (ibid.: 414 f.).³⁷ The ideals of intense mothering led to self-reproach amongst the mothers who were interviewed, a feature that was more pronounced in single or working class mothers. Mothers on shift work experienced an even greater sense of guilt, as their mothering practice was threatened by the consequences of their work, such as absence and tiredness (ibid.: 420). This finding is also present in the American study on poor mothers' perception of the ideal of

37 Glenda Wall (2010) summarises the ideal of engagement and accessibility as one of intensive parenting and she points out that it arose as an ideal already after World-War II when child-rearing became more and more child-centered, 'with mothers' needs and wants becoming firmly buried beneath the child's' (ibid.: 254).

intense mothering conducted by Sinikka Elliott, Rachel Powell and Joslyn Brenton (2015). The study shows how poor single mothers perform intense mothering in another type of setting, where social support often is missing (ibid.: 365) and how their ambitions ‘illustrate the profound contradictions and inequalities embedded in the ideology of intensive mothering’ (ibid.: 366).

Hence, not everyone can achieve parental ideals. As indicated in studies such as those of Duncan (2005), Elvin-Novak and Thomsson (2001) and Elliott et al. (2015), the feeling of being a good-enough mother appears easier for middle class mothers to achieve, and more difficult to attain when money and time are lacking.

Policy and institutions: Parental support and the school system

The aim of this study is to investigate the perceived relations and division of labour between parents and the welfare state. I have presented research on parents’ ideas about ‘proper’ and ‘less proper’ parenting as interpreted by (mostly middle class) parents and will now focus on research on expectations and rationalities embraced in political initiatives and in institutions of the welfare state. Mapping out political and institutional changes related to the role of parents includes exploring diverse dynamics. This overview of the research has no such overall aim. Instead, I have chosen a few institutional examples to demonstrate a particular feature of the view on parental functions today. We will take a look at research on policy discourse pertaining to two exemplary welfare institutions: Parental education programmes (sometimes referred to as parent support) and the school system.

Two thoroughgoing themes of the contemporary parental education programmes³⁸ are the desired professionalisation of the parent, and the way that parenthood has become public. Today parents have, so to speak, received co-fosterers to their children in the form of pedagogues, nurses, politicians and experts from the scientific arenas. This means that parents’ possibilities to exercise responsibility for the fostering of their children have actually been reduced (Björnberg & Bäck-Wiklund, 1987). However, this does not imply that the phenomenon of parental education has not received criticism. In Sweden in the 1980s, the phenomenon of parental support received vigorous critique for the way it obliterated dimensions of class in its tutoring. In a 1982 meta study Elina Juusola-Halonen and Ingegerd Lundström show that the experience of the educational setting – where parents meet and talk in groups – had an inhibitory effect on working class mothers, while serving

38 Parental education classes in Sweden have been carried out on a large scale since 1980 and often take place in maternity centres and child healthcare centres, although they are also hosted by municipalities, particularly when offering education and support for parents of older children.

as a reinforcement for middle class dittos who talked more and felt confident with the staff leading the meetings. It seems that a middle class habitus was used, the authors propose (ibid.: 19), as a starting point for designing the courses. Lee Gleichman (2004) investigates parental education discourse between the years of 1957 and 1997 and finds that the general transformation in the perspective on parents is the manner in which it has changed from images of parental incompetence to images of parents as *competent consumers* who are perceived as wanting to take responsibility. Gleichman (ibid.: 256) highlights the particular buzz words that may help us understand the contemporary image of the ideal parent – guiding concepts appear to be those of ‘empowerment’ and ‘mobilisation’, i.e., the parents are conceived of as *wanting* to change and learn. Sofia Littmarck (2012) has studied parental education policies of the twenty-first century. In an analysis of a government investigation that argues for financial support of parental education³⁹ she explores the type of relations that are promoted between state/society, parents and children. Littmarck (ibid.: 13) finds that parental responsibility is articulated on three levels: The wellbeing of the children, societal welfare and educating oneself in the area of children’s needs and parental techniques. Parents are now articulated as experts on their own children, but experts who need consolidation and there are few, if any, articulations of structural conditions influencing parental techniques.

A British example of policy research is found in Diane Reay’s (2008) probe into the educational policy rhetoric in the Labour Party Manifesto of 2005. She demonstrates the policy vision of making education compensate for societal inequalities: By operationalising parents as lay teachers they are positioned as a driving force of not only educational improvement, but of a comprehensive economic and social resurgence. New Labour masked this responsabilisation of the parent through concepts of empowerment, although Reay argues (ibid.: 645 f.) that what is really taking place is a delegation of work from schools to parents. Consequently, failures in the educational system are re-constructed into notions of ‘failing parents’. The image of some parents as failures is also behind British government initiatives for an expansion of the legislation to combat youth crime. In the White paper preparing for the legislation⁴⁰ Gillies (2008 b) finds a perceived link between crime and ‘parenting deficit’ (ibid.: 98) that disregards redistributive dimensions and instead promotes a view of particular (working class) parents as deficient.

39 The government investigation SOU 2008: 131 is entitled *Föräldrastöd en vinst för alla* (In English: *Parental support a gain for everyone*).

40 See the White Paper *No More Excuses: a New Approach to Youth Crime in England and Wales* (Home Office, 1997).

Another example of the current rhetoric on parenting comes from in the US where Benjamin Baez and Susan Talburt (2008) uncover how parents, children and schools are represented in parental advice pamphlets from schools. Here the parent is delineated as the child's most effective teacher. A particular focus is placed upon homework, which is presented as if serving political objectives: It is said to have a civic, disciplinary and bureaucratic function. The parent is 'pedagogicalised' and the authors argue (ibid.: 34) that this move implies more than surrogate teaching – it converts the home into a school. Once again, the tendency seems similar in Scandinavia. In a Danish study Hanne Knudsen and Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen (2014) discern a kind of 'hyper-responsibility' (ibid.: 114) assigned to parents from the side of the school, which takes the form of a contractual relation in which parents are obliged to define their responsibilities and promise to become a constructive partner by 'seeking out responsibilities' (ibid.: 115). In addition, Danish schools provide the parents with responsibility games, a kind of social pedagogic game to be played at home, or with school personnel. The games have pre-designed answers to choose from and are geared to present an impression that almost everything that takes place at school is a joint responsibility between the school and the parent. Tentatively, this Danish example may be an amplified version of the requests for responsibility revealed by Reay (2008) and Baez and Talburt (2008).

In summary, the political trend of making the parent accountable and responsible outlined in Chapter One appears to be evident in previous research. The demand for responsibility appears to also have affected the parents themselves and the way they understand the role of 'parenting'. The ideals of responsibility and professionalism seem to suit the white middle class parent, probably due to the fact that this parent has the financial and educational capital, as well as the habitus necessary to comply with the discourse. The abstract parent adduced in pamphlets and support appears to be reflected upon in terms of contract and self-interest, as well as addressed as if she was to invest her child in an insecure market – adverse but still possible to control by acting prudently, preventively and responsibly.

My contribution

In this final section of the chapter, I have concentrated on research exploring the intersections between parenthood, class formation and institutional demands – the way in which parenthood is formed in a politicised sphere. If it is true that the parent of today is reflected upon as a semi-professional with a duty to act preventively and responsibly one may assume that parents in general would relate to these ideals. The research presented in this chapter implies that they do. But what if we looked into an

arena where they can interact more anonymously, or where they at least can decide on the level of exposure? Do the characteristics of such an arena change the discourse of responsibility, or does it not? When the subject of the institutional appeals and demands receives the possibility of speaking relatively unrestricted, what does she say? If Baez and Talburt (2008) probed the fashion in which parents are 'pedagogicalised' in advice pamphlets, if Littmarck (2012) finds that parents are positioned as a kind of experts in governmental investigations and if the parents in a study such as the one conducted by Berg and Peltola (2014) display an ideal of respectability, I want to explore the putative transport between the institutional level and the level of the account, and I want to lay bare the content of this presumed respectability. In the eyes of the nicks, what is it? What is it not? I am interested in how the categorisation of the parental subject is performed in these particular sites, (public yet semi-anonymous, putatively layman orientated, where the subject enters freely). In these arenas politics seems far away, yet subject production is carried out by the targets of political ambitions. The dissertation therefore focuses on the content of conversation, rather than interaction: It focuses on *discourses of parenthood*. My contribution to the research field of contemporary parenting ideals and identities is to explore the way that dominant political demands are received and negotiated when the parent-subject *is not obliged* to comply with them (because she is writing using a pseudonym or because she can choose how much she wants to reveal about herself). The study intends to understand how conversations in venues such as the parental web community relate to the politics of parenting and what kind of more general subject positions are enabled by this particular set of politics. Instead of interviewing parents-in-the-flesh or observing them in institutional settings, I decided to capture the junction between their identities as parents and the institutional or policy demands as it is displayed in mundane Internet conversations. In conversations such as these one may leave whenever one wants to, stage a fictitious character or simply avoid discussing certain topics. The level of personal agency is thus relatively high. Bearing this possibility of agency in mind, this relative freedom; how is the division of labour between the parent and the welfare state articulated?

3. Discourse, power and distinctions

This chapter will comprise of a presentation of the theoretical perspectives that have guided the investigation of the textual interchanges in the two parental web communities focused on in the study. Two perspectives have particularly guided analysis – the work of Michel Foucault and that of Pierre Bourdieu.⁴¹ Foucault is applied for two main reasons – the way in which the arena of the web community can be comprehended as a venue of visibility and the way in which the subject is compelled to be reflexive in terms of her own actions and thoughts. Bourdieu offers another way of understanding the arena as a field of status positions but his work is utilised primarily for two other reasons. First, I will use his concept of distinction; the way taste is applied to create and maintain social distances. Secondly, I will apply the concept of misrecognition; a concept intended to capture a feature of symbolic capital: How it is economic capital that is misrecognised as something else. I understand both of these concepts as analytic tools to understand the maintenance and concealment of privilege. Because the analysis in part will focus upon concealment it will also employ the notion of ideology, albeit used in a reduced fashion.

The chapter will start by delineating ways of using language as ways of shaping thoughts and practices, and how this is related to power and to displays of taste. When taste displays are used to denigrate subjects they can be deemed *affective figures* and when they are part of a discursive formation that makes the subject feel like a particular person with a particular social status they can be conceived of as cases of *interpellation*. The latter two concepts, alongside a layout of the way the notion of ideology will be used to probe the material, will round off this overview of theoretical comprehensions.

Discourse

The term discourse has been defined in different ways, and used for diverse purposes. The concept is applied theoretically in a number of ways, resulting in diverging schools of discourse, such as critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2008) and discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987/2007; Potter, 1996/2012). Various orientations result in different com-

41 I am aware of the fact that Nikolas Rose's concept of responsabilisation can be considered a theoretical one, and as such it can be considered as belonging to this chapter. However, in this study responsabilisation is treated as a contextual backdrop chosen to clarify a societal context and as such it has undergone a theoretical bracketing, meaning it is not investigated for all of its putative meanings, or questioned for all of its possible tensions.

prehensions of what a discourse might consist of. It could quite prosaically be delineated as linguistic conventions applied in a specific group of people, or tailored in a more technical manner; as the unit of language longer than one sentence. It is often deployed as something larger than language – as a system of thought, knowledge and world views that are considered natural, normal or true, and thereby intimately linked to power and knowledge. The latter view would be a summary of discourse according to Michel Foucault (1971:8), who depicted it as something that seeps through all we can conceive of or understand; all that is thinkable. Furthermore, if discourse regulates what is thinkable it means that we cannot think and speak of everything: Discourse disciplines the subject on the inside.

The theoretical outlook upon discourses in the dissertation does not rest so much on this Foucauldian concept of discourses as extensive and structuring beyond the conversational level, as such a view in my understanding is situated closer to the concept of ideology; a concept that will be addressed towards the end of the chapter. In the forthcoming analysis the view of discourse is, first of all, that it is a way to use language applied by large or small but delimited groups of people. Secondly I see it as instructive – it is a way to use language about a particular phenomenon (in the case of the parental web community the phenomenon may be parenthood, intimacy, love, children etc.) to make it come out in a certain way. In the following presentation of discourse I will start with discourse as applied in groups of people and continue with the way that discourse guide us in understanding a phenomenon.

A way to use language: Interpretative repertoires

Discourses can be dominant (used by large groups in society and reflecting ideology) or they can be local (Hare-Mustin, 1994: 19 ff.). Local discourse determines how a group of people (staff employed at an elementary school or people interacting in a parental community) speak and write. Hence, definitions of proper parenthood can be regulated both by dominant discourse and by these local discourses, which in turn at times may coincide.

Discourse enables versions of the social world to be produced and maintained. This activity manifests in *interpretative repertoires* created by the group in question (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). These repertoires are detectable when utterances on a topic or a circumstance contain the same relatively consistent language units, and sometimes even bounded phrases. An interpretative repertoire is ‘constructed out of a restricted range of terms used in a specific stylistic and grammatical fashion. Commonly these terms are derived from one or more key metaphors and the presence of a repertoire will often be signaled by certain tropes or figures of speech’ (ibid.: 172).

This is not to say that every discourse or discursive fragment is coherent. Several different discourses may compete in defining a particular social phenomenon, as for instance child-rearing, and one single individual in a group can obviously be the bearer of several contradictory discourses. Furthermore, the articulation of a particular discourse is never entirely fixed. Often the discursive entity is nothing in itself, but is articulated against its counterpart; each and every entity is defined by what it is not (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2008: 188 f.). I understand interpretative repertoires as smaller commonplace units of discourse – the interpretative repertoire is a semiotic resource for discourse.

Advisory discourse and decorum

In the empiric arenas focused on in the dissertation interaction is performed through publicly using language: The nicks launch statements that are embraced or countered, they recount their days, they tell of joys and sorrows. In other words they make their opinions, experiences and world-views public; they publish themselves. The next part of this chapter is devoted to the relations between language, the way people can be described and how the world for this reason is made to look.

Terry Eagleton (1976/2006) has undertaken to explore the material effects of certain language uses according to Marxist thought. Eagleton (ibid.: 48) views rhetoric as encoding ideology, as well as designating a putative receiver. The same can be said of the form of a text. The metaphors it uses (in other words the interpretative repertoires) is always ideologically significant (ibid: Introduction). Literature, Eagleton asserts (ibid.: 54), is a sphere for struggles, whether fissured by race, class, gender, imperialist or nationalist combat, and discourses manifesting through texts warrant the misperceptions of the 'real' which enable the reproduction of the dominant social relations. Formulated differently, texts steer our attention in particular directions. The way Eagleton views literature corresponds with how I conceive of the discourses in the parental communities. I understand them as advisory (Fischer, 1970/2009): A particular discourse *instructs us* in how to read, but can also create a value-oriented interpretation of some part of the world or of a phenomenon. The way it is organised produces a real-fiction in the sense of proclaiming something that is not exposed to empirical verification and, hence, it is grounded in terms of motive: It wants to subvert, provoke, undermine, highlight or celebrate something. In other words, interpretative repertoires signal discourse which in turn may signal ideology.

Advisory discourse is a feature that is evident in the parental communities. However, not all attempts to launch a statement or a worldview are successful. The fact that some postings are overruled and rejected may be explained by the lack of skill

necessary for a suitable narration. Skill level in turn is related to a sense of what is appropriate, i.e., knowledge of social codes. In rhetoric theory this is called *decorum*: The art of expressing oneself in an adequate manner. Decorum can be defined as ‘the almost intuitive capacity of adjustment to the situation /.../ and thereby achieving just the intended result’ (Lindkvist Grinde, 2008: 297, author’s translation). The capacity to adjust oneself to a particular situation can, in turn, be of two sorts; it can be a social skill or a matter of linguistic resources.⁴² In this study decorum is understood as textual employment; an activity conducted within the frames of discourse. It has an *ontological significance*, as for instance in what kind of metaphors are employed to mirror the world. Robert Hariman (1992/2009) describes decorum as political intelligence and as a blend of ‘significant aspects of rhetorical practice, social awareness, and political structure into an aesthetic sensibility’ that gives the subject: ‘the ability to discriminate and imitate signs of status’ (ibid: 152). Nevertheless, this political intelligence does not come in one uniform shape. There is a dialectic relationship between several decorums; a competition of rival versions of what is to be considered vulgar, decent or simply displaying ‘style’ (ibid: 155 ff.).⁴³ In the analysis I will apply the concept of *ontological decorum* to analyse the way in which the world can be described.

Summing up: In this study discourse is comprehended as a technique for instructing us in how to read – elements are scripted, i.e., pieced together as if belonging to one another, or kept apart as if they did not relate to each other. To analyse discourse means to try to discover the way these arrangements are made and the way that the writer positions ‘facts’ in her statement or positions herself in relation to the facts. When wanting to understand *why* discourse is constructed one way or the other, one also intends to capture the world view it bolsters.

Power

As suggested, discourses are not free-floating entities. The analysis of discourse will be made in relation to concepts of *power* which format it and give it a shape. In the analysis power is understood as interpersonal (in the way the parental community

42 Erving Goffman (1956: 66 ff.) leans towards the social understanding of decorum as he employs the concept to understand region boundaries; the front regions where a person is visible to an audience (as one would be when writing in a web community), and the back regions where one can relax and recuperate. In this study it is not important if a nick writes a particular posting because she pays attention to social rules of conduct. What matters is the content of the posting, not the reason for producing it.

43 One example of rival decorums far away from rhetoric is fashion, where the middle class’ taste would be considered vulgar by the proponents of haute couture and even more so from a street point of view, and where haute couture and street fashion themselves can be rivals.

itself formats its members in accordance with its rules of conduct), institutional (in the way that the political domains inform the subject of acceptable ways of being) and as ideological (in the way it shapes the manner in which we collectively conceive of the world). The analysis applies a Foucauldian perspective on power, paired with the perhaps more determinist standpoint of Bourdieu. However, approaching Foucault's stand on power is a delicate matter, as it is both debated and contested. Questions about whether or not his theory allows for change to be analysed (Heller, 1996) have arisen, as well as questions of how conscious the practice of power should be comprehended.⁴⁴ There is not one uniform way of approaching the way Foucault conceived of power. Nevertheless, the employment of the concept in this dissertation rests solely on the way he delineates the manner in which the subject receives its contours through discourses and institutional arrangements, such as discipline. Whilst accepting the manner in which *subjectivation* works – the way that subjectivity is constituted by the discourses in which it is formatted (Foucault, 1982) – I will leave the possibilities of the subject making a change and the issue of consciousness aside. This means that the study investigates the way the subject is influenced by ideals. The ideals that inform the conversation will be captured through the concept of *governmentality* and the way that the ideals become situated inside the subject will be analysed by means of Foucault's notion of *technologies of the self*. Because it is, presumably, not possible to introduce a concept such as governmentality without presenting the way that *discipline* works, this overview will continue with an introduction to the latter concept.

Discipline and governmentality

Discipline is an art of governing that intensified in the eighteenth century and it is another type of power than the one emanating from the law of a state – disciplinary power concerns labelling the individual and making her conform. Disciplinary power replaced the corporal punishments common before the birth of the institutions and was more effective in producing obedient and docile citizens (Nilsson, 2008: 96 ff.) because what discipline regulates is not the law, but the norms. Foucault

⁴⁴ To Kevin Jon Heller (1996: 83) the Foucauldian notion of power does coincide with social change, because the possibility of an individual to create change *is* power. Heller asserts (*ibid.*) that Foucault did not see power as a particular form or a particular type of change. Power is to be comprehended as the medium of social change and in that sense value-neutral. On the other hand, Foucault does in *The Subject and Power* (1982: 792) acknowledge that power is a *system of differentiations*, such as economic and linguistic differences, or differences in competence, which actually could be read as Foucault accepting differences in power between the social classes. Nancy Hartsock (1990: 169) argues that power for Foucault does not necessarily include the domination of one group or class over other groups or classes, but does not preclude it either.

(1975/2009: 141) described discipline as power's micro physics. While power exercised by the law acts through prohibition and punishment, the characteristic feature of the productive powers of discipline is normalisation. The individual is measured according to how s/he stands in relation to a particular norm and s/he does not even have to agree on being disciplined. Discipline, according to Magnus Hörnqvist (2012: 60 f.), is an intensified and repeated learning process where the individual is *motivated* to behave in a certain way. This would resonate well with web community environments, where the nicks seldom break the law, but on occasion offend a common norm of writing or acting. If a particular style of writing or a particular opinion is popular and if opposing that style generates reproaches, the nick will putatively feel motivated to conform to it.

The mechanism most central to the disciplinary rationality is the one of visibility, explaining why discipline in its most condensed form is represented by the institutional building of Panopticon.⁴⁵ Discipline operates through the individual being seen and categorised by means of differentiation, homogenisation, hierarchisation and exclusion, revolving around a split between the normal and the abnormal. The disciplinary gaze is a normalising gaze – it is a dressage for training the individual. If power is to observe the individual in order to perform the dressage, surveillance needs to be permanent in its effects even if it is discontinuous in its actions. Most important is that the individual knows s/he is potentially being watched (Foucault, 1975/2009: 202 ff.). This means that power operates on the body through a system of norms – it creates individuals (ibid: 171), i.e., it makes us function in a certain way. This is also the case in a web community where certain norms prevail and a nick is more easily accepted if expressing herself according to them. The point of using a building such as Panopticon as a description of a web community is precisely the fact that the nick knows she is potentially being watched by others – but has no idea by how many and when the monitoring takes place.

Governmentality or *the conduct of conduct* on the other hand, is sometimes viewed as distinct from discipline, although it is also aimed at moulding human behaviour. Whereas discipline aims at reforming identified groups of people through observation, the government attention is directed towards the population as a whole: 'the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, et cetera' (Foucault 1991: 100). These objectives are hard to achieve. It is simply too difficult to reach out to each and every subject and monitor and regulate its behaviour. Instead, government fosters more generic desires, beliefs and aspirations, because this

⁴⁵ Typical examples of disciplinary institutions would be schools, prisons or mental hospitals.

will make the population regulate behaviour without government being physically present. Nevertheless, there are links between the fostering of many and the fostering of few, which can be explored through the concept of Panopticon as a form of discipline. To operate effectively, discipline should be executed through surveillance from all directions and where the eye measuring the subject is not visible. This, Foucault argues, is manifested in the Benthamian visions of the Panopticon⁴⁶ with its inspection tower in the middle, allowing the guard to make the inmate uncertain of whether someone is watching or not. This very uncertainty makes the inmate more aware of the potential surveillance and, thus, the point is how an actual subjugation emanates from more or less fictitious relations (1975/2009: 172 ff., 202 ff.). A subject with the impression of being observed assumes the coercion from power, Foucault contends (ibid.: 201 f.) and becomes the supervisor as well as the supervised. The awareness makes power function automatically and surveillance becomes a permanent effect even when it is in fact irregular (the guard may or may not be observing the inmate). Power becomes so complete that it does not have to be exerted. The inmate plays both roles, and thus becomes the principle of his own subjection.

The fact that supervision is unreliable makes the subject do what it ought to do, not because of the risk of physical punishment, but because it is perceived as the best thing to do *in case of supervision*. An analysis of the conduct of conduct therefore combines the government of others with the government of oneself. The concept of panopticism can be used to understand how and why the disciplined subject internalises certain forms of constraints or values through subjectivation. Trent H. Hamann (2009) describes the relation between governmentality and the subject as the former giving a leeway of freedom to the latter:

Governmentality is not a matter of a dominant force having direct control over the conduct of individuals; rather, it is a matter of trying to determine the conditions within or out of which individuals are able to freely conduct themselves (ibid: 55).

⁴⁶ Bentham's *Panopticon* has visibility as the main architectural principle. At the periphery of this particular prison architecture lies an annular building and at the center is placed a tower with wide windows. The windows face the inner side of the ring whilst the annular building is divided into cells. The cells are equipped with two windows, one on the inside facing the windows of the inspection tower and the other on the outside. The light is hence permitted to flow through the cell from one end to the other. In the inspection tower a supervisor is seated, and in each cell a prisoner or a patient and Foucault (1975/2009:201) describes each cell as a small theatre stage, intended for one actor only, completely individualized and constantly visible.

This, I believe, is the governmentality of the parental communities, due to the fact that the nick writes in a public space where she can be evaluated, as well as having the opportunity to evaluate accounts from other nicks. Governmentality in this sense should be understood not only as ‘the conduct of conduct’ but more specifically as a continuum of governing; from governing the self to governing others (Lemke, 2001: 191).

However, when addressing the web community one must ask whether or not it is a case of Panopticon as a situation where the few watch the many, or if it is the other way around, considering that in most situations the number of community readers exceeds the number of writers. In revisiting Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, Thomas Mathiesen (1997: 218 f.) contends that Foucault fails to consider the growth of mass mediated societies where the many observes the few, a phenomenon Mathiesen conceptualises as ‘synopticism’.⁴⁷ Mathiesen argues that if Foucault had allowed for the significance of mass media, it would have changed his conception of surveillance, so that it would have contended that society now displays a situation in which both directions are manifest.⁴⁸ These *multiple gazes* are what really constitute social control. In the web community arena the multiple gazes are indeed significant: External social control is manifested (web community moderators watch over what is written and warn members who have broken the rules, while the nicks regularly correct each other), as well as internal control (that makes the nicks internalise a system of norms that governs textual behaviour). In short, synoptic surveillance enables a monitoring gaze that comes from within, as well as from other nicks: You watch and you are being watched. In the parental community you are allowed to be both the inmate and the prison guard and there are normally more prison guards (readers of a posting) than inmates (nicks who write). Hence, governmentality and discipline fertilise each other. The conduct of conduct is carried out through disciplinary activities, (panoptic or synoptic surveillance) and requires individuals who willingly carry out work to become particular subjects. There is a link between governmentality, a fictional type of freedom and technologies of the self (Hamann, 2009: 38), or put in another way: If the generic ideals are successful they will generate a subject that wants to conform to them. To explore this link, Foucault returns to the hermeneutics of the self, as it was manifested in the Greek-Roman philosophy during the first two hundred years

47 The concept is constructed out of the Greek word *syn*, meaning ‘together’ and *opticon*, which relates to the visual.

48 Mathiesen mainly concentrates on the expansion of television, which in itself is no surprise as the article is published in 1997, a few years before the massive spread of interactive Internet use.

of the Roman Empire A.D., and in early Christian spirituality. The chapter will continue with a short exposition of these inner formations of the self.

Disciplining the self

Lingering through the whole of antique philosophy an ethic and philosophical principle re-occurs in many settings: The principle to speak the truth about oneself, or to 'devote yourself to yourself' (Foucault, 2015: 23 f.). This devotion is the main principle behind the care of the self, understood as a technology with which to handle the inner domains of the subject. This care of the self was manifested in many ways.

The Stoic care of the self was an activity by which the individual executed duties towards the soul. Notes on faults committed were supposed to be made in diaries or letters, and the rules by which to live memorised. The stoic view appears to have embraced an administrative understanding of the subject and was no judgmental process (Foucault, 1976/2002: 61 f.); by memorising codes of conduct one instead had the opportunity of improving and becoming an ethical subject (Kerr, 2001: 232). This *askesis* was not as ascetic as it sounds. It was not a denial of needs but an improvement of self-control and a way of understanding what the world was about in order to be prepared for whatever might come. The aim of the techniques was a *subjectivation of the truth*: Making the truth of how to live wisely one's own (Foucault, 1976/2002: 62). The Christian care of the self had more to do with publicly confessing sins or inappropriate thoughts, with the aim of reinstating purity. The term *publicato sui* can be applied to the Stoic self inspection, as well as to the more extrovert Christian restoration of the self. The *publicatio sui* that was a private endeavour (carried out in diaries or letters) for the Stoics was a public and mandatory affair (to confess of one's sins to the congregation) for the Christians (Foucault, 1994/1997: 178).

The image that Foucault puts forward of the differences between the Stoic and the Christian inspection of the self appears to give primacy to the Stoic view. Nevertheless, the lack of punishment in the Stoic view does not necessarily mean it is an act of freedom either. Self-inspection may be thought of as the subject controlling how independent from temptation or pains it can become, in other words it is about self-discipline. The Stoic ideal is gaining self-mastery independent of endurance (Foucault, 1976/2002: 58) and daily inspection of self-mastery means being under supervision according to moral standards. Seen in this light, the care of the self is simply a case of norms and values weighing on the subject: Government installs values that the subject finds attractive, and she will then want to master them.

Taste is king. Achieving social value in the field

The work performed on the self in the parental communities shares some of the characteristics of the Stoic and Christian traditions. The community can be comprehended as a place of confessions or as a diary or letter that is published. In both cases language is crucial. In these arenas it becomes a resource that is often fought for, because it allows the subject to define and evaluate the world in which she and others are living. This feature of the parental community connects it to the work on distinctions and social value by Pierre Bourdieu. The staging of a suitable self by using language in a public environment makes the activity of writing relate to forms of capital and how they transform to social value (Bourdieu, 1994/1995). The idea that social value should be comprehended as capital seems to be ever-present in the writings of Bourdieu, but it is not monetary value alone that determines how a hierarchical society is construed; there are several forms of capital and having power relates to all of them. Next, I will present the concept of capital – symbolic capital in particular – and the way it is related to a misrecognition of the social world and its assigned social values in particular fields. Following that I will lay out the two ways that the notion of value will be handled in the analysis – as something to attribute to others, and as the way we identify ourselves as belonging to a particular category of people that carries a certain social value.

Capital, misrecognition and the field

Bourdieu (1977/2011) delineates *symbolic capital* as any type of asset that endows the individual with status in the contexts where it is ascribed value. More precisely the concept can be understood as: ‘long-standing dispositions and habits acquired in the socialization process, the accumulation of valued cultural objects such as paintings, and formal educational qualifications and training /.../’ that gives an individual ‘tastes and styles distinct from others’ (Anheier, Gerhards and Romo 1995: 862). In a web community one cannot collect valued cultural objects but still display a disposition for them, manifest qualifications and training and be distinct from others in that sense.

Symbolic capital is precisely that – symbolic. However, Bourdieu (1977/2011) points out that the most essential feature of symbolic capital is that it is really is economic capital that is misrecognised or concealed in some way, i.e., economic capital is transformed into symbolic capital (ibid.: 183). This means that displaying a preference for a particular valued object is an action based upon economic cap-

ital.⁴⁹ Disguise and dissimulation are recurrent conceptions in the way Bourdieu understands economy and in his writings he differentiates between the self-interested and the good-faith economy. The latter is a result of the former disguising itself, not acknowledging what it really is and instead devoting just as much time and effort to ‘concealing the reality of economic acts as it expands in carrying them out’ (ibid.: 172).⁵⁰ The good-faith economy is built upon *misrecognition*. There is, as Bourdieu puts it, an: ‘institutionally organised and guaranteed misrecognition’ (ibid.: 171) in the good-faith economy. We are made to focus upon the symbolic aspects of labour and relations of production, which prevents us from seeing economy for what it is: ‘interested calculation, competition, or exploitation’ (ibid: 172). Taste is one of the symbolic relations of production – instead of saying we have acquired cultural capital we say we hold a particular taste. Thus, Bourdieu’s view leans on a Marxist understanding of capital as not a thing but a social relation that is expressed through money. Exchange involves a level of evaluation or even battle, and there is a correspondence between the evaluation and the receiving of a value.

Social value is established and fought for in different and particular *fields* – rooms that structure positions (Bourdieu, 1984/1991: 131). The concept of fields is a theoretical instrument for the study of the allocation and division of capital and they involve both more formal institutions (fields of production) and people affected by the works of these institutions (fields of consumption). The fields of production are populated by institutions, professionals, politics and so on; the fields of consumption include users (such as users of a parental community), performers or clients.

There are battles staged and prizes to be won in every field. Bourdieu (ibid.: 131 f.) distinguishes the participants in the battles as either newcomers who want to

49 This is not to say that an individual with no economic capital has no access to tastes and styles distinct from others. Instead, it means that developing a refined taste is easier if conveyed within a family that has the financial resources for it, the habitus prepared for it and the social position where one’s taste is viewed as significant by others. To have a particular taste, as well as to master a particular sophisticated level of one’s native tongue, is an efficient distancing technique that preserve certain privileges (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/2008: 155).

50 According to Bourdieu, there is a ‘socially maintained discrepancy between the misrecognised or, one might say, socially repressed, objective truth of economic activity, and the social representation of production and exchange’ (ibid: 171). A social representation of production and exchange is, for example, taste, while the objective truth is the system of production in which money is generated and distributed and which allows an individual to profess a particular taste. Put in other words: Taste (i.e., ‘good’ taste) and money are related, but we do not speak about it. In the eyes of Bourdieu, this particular silence is preserved and insisted upon – there is an objective truth and a social representation with a gap between the two. This latter suggestion resonates with the way Karl Marx (1939/2010: 250) separates the reproduction of capitalists and wage workers that forms the base of a capitalist mode of creating profit, and the ‘ordinary economy’ that only notices the commodities resulting from that production. It is in the ‘ordinary’ economy that taste becomes important.

position themselves, or veterans trying to protect their authority. The characteristics of every position rely on how it is located in relation to other positions, and a position can be analysed disregarding the individual who holds it.⁵¹ When studying a field one always needs to lay bare its specific form and structure, as the prizes to be won differ between the fields. What is considered valuable within one field can be worthless in another. (The nick in a community is one example of this: A preferable prize for a nick would presumably not be money or goods, but status). The structure of the field can be two things. It may be a condition in the relative difference in strength between the individuals engaged in the battle, (for instance in a situation where s newcomer begins to constitute a threat to the veterans), or a certain profile of the distribution of the field specific capital (amongst a group of farmers this capital may be land, whereas amongst researchers it would be prestige). The struggle is about whether or not to redistribute this capital (ibid: 132). In a community the field specific capital probably relates to language and interaction: Who is allowed to define the topic for debate, who receives answers, who is brushed-off and who is finally allowed to have the interpretative prerogative, but it could also relate to who is defined as a good or non-problematic parent. There will always be positions that have monopolised the specific capital and the holders of these positions tend to adopt preservation strategies, defending *orthodoxy*. Positions holding less capital will aim at transformation, or strategies of *heterodoxy*. An example of a threat in a parental community would be a challenge to a locally fortified discourse professed by veterans about what constitutes good parenthood. Heterodoxic activities – such as a critique of the norms of good parenthood – forces the veterans to speak, (and in this case explain or defend the rationale behind the norm), thus constituting a threat to beliefs that are taken for granted. Nevertheless, there is a consensus shared by all holders of positions; the game is worth playing. By participating, the game and the value of its prizes are reproduced (ibid: 133 f).⁵² This means that for the nick who defends a local discourse of parenthood, as well as for the nick who questions it, the prize of affirmation and social value is equally prestigious.

51 This means that my main interest lies in how the postings stand in relation to other postings (establishing or contesting norms, or using discourse) as opposed to the actual person behind the posting, this person's sentiments while writing, or the putative personal reason for responding in one way or another.

52 One reliable indication of a field being constituted is the rise of 'biographers' (philologists, historians, researchers) that preserve the procreation of the arena (Bourdieu 1984/1991: 134). My writing of this dissertation would be a sign of the parental communities really being a field.

Distinctions

To win the game, the player needs to know something about the field specific weapons by which victory can be achieved. A nick who wants to achieve acceptance for a standpoint must be capable of two things – presenting it in a way that guarantees acceptance, and attributing characteristics to other standpoints that make them either gain or lose credibility. But to make an audience believe in the standpoint presented they must be convinced that it comes from some type of expertise, a particular form of knowledge, a valued social position or a certain lived experience. The standpoint must come across as credible (as opposed to gossip, slander or tittle-tattle). The nick who is able to manifest cultural capital is the nick that the audience believes – she stands out from the level of tittle-tattle and has manifested a *distinction*.

Bourdieu delineates distinctions as difference (1984/1991: 221; 1991/2012: 237), and sometimes as taste (1994/1995: 37). Taste, he suggests, is the principle behind choice and taste involves both practices and possessions. For a taste to exist there must be classified goods (classified as refined/vulgar, good/bad etc.) for the taste to act upon. An additional prerequisite is people endowed with the necessary principles for classification (i.e., people who are considered fit for the job of making distinctions). In sum, distinctions need three components: principles, goods and people. In the case of the parental web communities the classification activity obviously does not only involve goods but also the practices of the parent. The parental practices are considered examples of good or bad taste.

Standpoints on taste are made in every type of field and are relational – they are systems of difference and make the subject significant (ibid: 57). If distinctions are comprehended as *human activities to manifest taste in order to establish differences*, it has a theatrical ring to it – it must be visibly staged. Erving Goffman (1959: Introduction) suggested that when we present ourselves to others, it is very much like a stage play, with the individual performing on a stage. We aim at impression management – what we would like the other to see or know about us, and what we would prefer to conceal. In order for us to appear trustworthy or competent (necessary when we perform rhetoric activities) we need to make investments in social value – as for instance when we perform taste displays. This means we can understand how self presentation becomes a technique by which distinctions emerge. Furthermore, distinctions do not always concern preferences, but dislikes. A potent means of distinction is the expression of aversion for certain goods or practices, particularly those that are valued by the ‘populace’. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to believe that we would be given the same amount of social value if everyone conformed to dominant taste displays in a community. A much valued taste, knowledge, or propensity

will lose value if it becomes accessible to everyone in the field (Bourdieu, 1984/1991: 221 f.). A general circulation and appraisal reduces the value that can be achieved by manifesting a particular taste (ibid.: 190).⁵³ This indicates that distinctions are about producing and maintaining a *constant* difference, and sometimes moving the difference to a place where it cannot be reached by everyone, although the difference must still be acknowledged by all participants in the field.

Affective figures and interpellation

Having said that, we still have not addressed the techniques by which social value is *administered* in these particular venues, which will be explored in the following. In the parental communities value can be administered on two levels – a subject not participating in the conversation can be labelled in a particular way and thus be given a value, or value can be attributed to a subject participating in conversation. I intend to analytically capture both phenomena through the concepts of *affective figures* and *interpellation*.

The way distinctions produce and maintain difference may help to explain why certain narrative figures laden with contempt are applied in these communities. One example of such figures is provided by Imogen Tyler (2008), who has investigated British media images of ‘The Chav’⁵⁴, especially those concerned with the young ‘Chav Mum’, the poor white woman living in disadvantaged residential areas of Britain’s large cities. By merging sociological research on class formation and feminist theories on emotions, Tyler has explored how the perceptions of social class are emotionally transmitted by for instance describing poor white women as slobs, tarts or parasites. During the last decade these types of description have increasingly flooded mass media representations and Tyler argues (ibid.: 26 ff.) that the images function as a constitutive limit for white middle-class femininity. The figure should be comprehended as mocking the lower classes, while at the same time protecting the middle-class, which is portrayed as a ‘site of injury’ (ibid.: 23) – a threatened and oppressed position. In other words, the concept of *affective figures* helps us understand how social classifications generate representational struggles and the nature

53 However, it is worth pointing out that the social value achieved through distinctions is possibly an unintentional effect. Distinctions can be distinctive without aiming to be so. Distinctions, Bourdieu propounds (1984/1991: 23), comprise of an almost somnambulistic ability to appreciate what is considered valuable and even to ‘suddenly realise’ that one appreciates the valuable.

54 The figure of the chav is a contemporary descriptive term for British white poor and can be considered a kind of folk etymology. Conceptions of the chav have much in common with the American concepts of ‘White trash’ and ‘Welfare Queen’. The chav figure is a discursive creation of the underclass as it is understood within a space of consumption and taste. Hence, the focus is normally on appearance, and the chav is most often labelled as vulgar (Tyler, 2008: 21).

of these struggles. In particular historical moments certain social types become over determined and represented in distorted ways, expressing societal anxieties. The figures are deployed to attribute impressive characteristics to subject positions that are discursively differentiated from the affective figure, and therefore the affective figure has a material and a semiotic result: It constitutes something that is later circulated in several types of mass media. If a circulation of this type of contempt is achieved a particular affective value is attributed to the figure, and in the case of the *chav* the affect produced is disgust (ibid: 18 ff.).

As mentioned above, ascribing value onto others can be performed in at least two ways. One can ascribe value onto a category not present in the conversation, as in the case of the affective figure, or onto somebody who is present. When the latter occurs, this person is seen or highlighted as somebody in particular. When we are described by someone in the position of defining others or when we recognise ourselves in a description, we become aware that we are a particular type of person, or that we belong to a certain category. To illustrate this situation Louis Althusser (1971) used the verb *hail*, as in being hailed by a policeman in the street. When turning around to respond we acknowledge that we are the one the policeman was addressing; we agree upon being categorised. The concept of *interpellation* concerns a naming that constitutes the subject it names (Davis, 2012: 882) and I apprehend it as a work of subjectivation – it makes us become subjects.

This crude definition could be the starting point for the many difficulties that arise when putting a concept such as interpellation to use. Althusser (1971: 174) described the process of hailing as that which transforms individuals into subjects – the person who responds becomes a subject at the moment of response. But if this is true, who was there before the hailing took place? Is there no subject before the naming of it? The remaining problem in using the concept of interpellation resides in understanding the process of transformation. If it is the hailing itself that *constitutes* the subject there would be no one there to respond to the hail, or there would be a kind of amorphous mass incapable of answering (Davis 2012: 882 f.). The question is what makes the difference between an individual and a subject?⁵⁵ When I apply the concept of interpellation, I will condense subjectivity to mean becoming a *par-*

55 Althusser (1971: 171) states that there is no sequential order between ideology and the interpellation of individuals as subjects. Ideology fashions the subject, but the subject in turn constitutes the ideology of its own society. There is a double constitution; ideology rematerializes in the subject and the subject in ideology. This means that ideology and the subject both are fields of interdependent practice – ideology materialises by and through its user who is simultaneously constituted by ideology. This, as I understand it, also relates to the Foucauldian notion of how subjects are not merely the targets of power, but power circulates through subjects, and is carried out by subjects.

ticular subject. In line with Judith Butler I understand interpellation as being ‘given a *certain* possibility for social existence’ (1997: 2, emphasis added). Consequently, to be interpellated is to have qualities attached to oneself that one *cannot help* but acknowledge. The difference between the affective figure and being interpellated is that the ‘Chav Mum’ is putatively not in agreement with the condescending image of her or she likes her ‘way of life’ or she possibly objects to the label of vulgarity imposed on her, whilst the interpellated person at some level agrees with the label attached to her.⁵⁶ For a parental web community this would mean that a nick registered as a mother cannot help but accept discourses of motherhood that interpellate her as warm and caring, or the exact opposite. This example marks the final and very vital difference between the affective figure and interpellation: The affective figure is mainly applied to trigger disgust, fear or hatred towards a group in society, whilst interpellation can be both benevolent and condescending. Interpellation is, I think, a kind of soaking of the social world – we understand it by ideological applications. Arguably, this makes the subject that performs or accepts the hailing less important, and the ideology enabling the hailing more important. Hence, using a concept such as interpellation means accepting the notion of ideology. The analysis applies this concept in a reduced fashion, and to conclude the chapter I will outline the way it will be employed in the analysis.

Ideology

Even though the difference between them is debatable and even though they sometimes collide and are described as organising thought in the same way, in the analysis ideology and discourse will be treated as different entities. In the forthcoming analytical chapters, ideology is comprehended as performing three things in particular. It gives structure and coherence to discourse, it provides overarching models (organising several discourses) according to which a collective of individuals may think, and it furnishes us with emotions. Ideology may thus be seen as a system of organisation much the same way as described by Brantlinger et al. (1996: 573); a *system* of representations and ideas, i.e., a system of discourses. Hence, the viewpoint of ideology applied in the study differs from that of seeing ideology as a system found in political convictions of party programmes. In the analysis ideology is instead connoted with

⁵⁶ There are, Althusser acknowledges, individuals that resist interpellation but yet, he confidently assures, nine out of ten will respond to the hailing regardless if they feel guilty of charge or not (Levinson, 1999: 89). This would mean that although a ‘Chav’ protests against being labeled as such, she could simultaneously (but without articulating it), become interpellated by the label. There would exist cases in which a person becomes an affective figure whilst simultaneously becoming interpellated.

the fashion of treating thoughts and ideas as if they were not the viewpoints of somebody in particular; the way that certain things, events or conditions are understood as obvious, eternal or natural when in fact they are part of a world *view* (Jaeggi, 2015: 46). Moreover, ideology is comprehended as generally (although not in every instance) in the service of power.

The viewpoint of ideology in this study is materialistic in the sense of viewing it as primarily decided by material conditions (Marx & Engels, 1845/1988). The way the concept is used leans on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and their definition of ideology as serving the interests of ruling groups in society, i.e., class society. As formulated in *The German Ideology* (ibid.: 67): ‘The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas’.⁵⁷ The Marxist stance also means that analysis assumes that material conditions generally *decide* ideology (ibid: 30)⁵⁸ although this proposition would not be a sufficient description of the concept as a whole, but merely a point of departure. A materialist comprehension of ideology starts with ‘the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of their life’ (ibid.: 36 f.).⁵⁹ This intertwines the notion of ideology with that of symbolic capital as economic capital that is misrecognised (Bourdieu, 1977/2011): The material condition (the economy and modes of production) generally precedes the ideological expression (symbolic capital such as taste).

In summary, ideology as such can be viewed as a large and more ‘stable’ entity than discourse. If discourse is considered ways of thinking that are temporarily fixated, ideology is comprehended as the super structure organising these ways of

57 A concrete example that may help us to understand ideology as a relation between the ruling class and ruling ideas is the egalitarian myth in the US (Boudon, 1990/1994). In this hierarchical society the myth enables the middle class to live without guilt, while the poor cling on to a hope of upward mobility (ibid: 180) and this myth therefore makes the relation between the groups fixated.

58 This particular formulation is indeed found in *The German Ideology*, although it belongs to a section crossed out in the original manuscript. Reading *The German Ideology*, it is nonetheless clear that the aim of Marx and Engels was to dismiss the Hegelian conception of how the real world is ordered and dominated by ideas (1845/1988: 34).

59 Today, the relation between the material base and the ideological superstructures is the subject of long-spun debates. Although this study is not a contribution to that discussion, I would like to add that a ‘safe’ position vis-a-vis the sequential order of these entities is probably not possible. Instead, there is an interaction between two different types of force – the economic and productive forces on the one hand and the superstructure (politics, ideologies etcetera) on the other. The latter will eventually begin to develop independently. Generally, economic factors of the base are decisive, although this base will be affected by the superstructures created by the very same base, since the superstructure is granted some level of autonomy that cannot be easily recovered (See: Letter from Friedrich Engels to C. Schmidt, London 27th of October 1890, see: https://www.marxists.org/svenska/engels/brev/1890_10_27.htm).

thinking. In this study ideology is primarily thought of as tied to material conditions associated with class relations in a more profound way than is discourse.

Functions

Applying the notion of ideology derived from a Marxist perspective, which emphasises how meaning emanating from the top segments in societal hierarchies are made dominant, calls for an expanded layout of the concept, because ideologies may compete with one another and in addition, not all ideologies are equally influential. According to Martha L. Fineman (1991), the point of applying the concept of ideology alongside that of discourse is because ideology 'structures the contours of discourse' (ibid: 289). In other words, a discourse is not formed out of thin air – it is organised by something. For example, a discourse of motherhood will look entirely different when structured by a conservative ideology, in comparison to when it is structured by a feminist one.⁶⁰ This means that ideologies may compete in defining the world, implying that we need to expand the definition proposed by Marx and Engels (1845/1988). We also need to consider the *functions* of ideology. In my understanding, ideology is functional in at least three aspects. Firstly, it gives coherence to discourses. This applies to all types of ideologies, and indicates that meaning may not *only* come from societal groups holding power. Nevertheless, there are ideologies that become dominant in much the same way as discourses, and when this occurs they are so solidified that they become difficult to confront. When an ideology becomes dominant its core images and values are so strong that both the proponents and the opponents of a particular idea need to invest into them, in order to appear trustworthy (Fineman, 1991: 293). The way I conceive of the Marxist notion of ideology is precisely as such a dominant one: It stands out as an intersection between meaning and power, sustaining relations of domination (Thompson, 1988: 370). Secondly, ideology has a cognitive duty – to help us think collectively (Van Dijk, 2006: 116). It feeds into people's aspirations, longings and needs and orders what is possible to dream about or want to achieve, and what is not. Ideologies are maintained by groups of people – they are shared representations or belief systems of social groups and the 'axiomatic principles of such representations' (ibid.: 115). Thirdly, ideology

60 This, in turn, means that a feminist ideology would come out in one way if structured in relation to a conservative ideology, and in another way if contained within a socialist one. It is, I think, not always possible to determine the relation of 'cognitive structural strength' between ideologies (i.e., to answer the question which structures which). This study does not encompass the relation between ideologies, but starts from the assumption that a lived experience (such as parenthood) and the way the concrete action of having a child, living with it and raising it is performed in different discursive settings regulated by overarching models of thought.

is functional because it produces affects. Affect can be viewed as that which ‘enables ideological relations to be internalized and consequently naturalized’ (Grossberg, 1992: 83). One reason why analysis employs the concept of affective figures is to emphasise not only the intellectual contour of ideology but the emotional; how we invest into it and get to *feel* ideology.

Critiquing ideology: Althusser, Foucault and Bourdieu

If discourses of parenthood host some type of ideology, how is it displayed and how can it be detected? The theoretical perspectives chosen for this dissertation leave us with different answers to these questions. Below I will initiate a discussion about the ambiguities that are present at the start of analysing/critiquing ideology – when in company with Althusser, Foucault and Bourdieu. I will sketch the researcher’s diverse possible positions vis-à-vis the formation of knowledge and power, continue with a condensed presentation of the notion of false knowledge (distorted perception) and conclude with a brief problematisation of the position of critique.

According to Althusser (1971), there is an ideological character to exercising power, and power will ultimately distort the perceptions of the under privileged. In this approach Althusser is positioned quite close to the Marxian understanding as described in *The German Ideology* (1845/1988: 42), where ideology is depicted as that which arrange the relations between men ‘upside down as in a *camera obscura*’. Whilst for Althusser distortion primarily concerns a subject interpellated by bourgeois ideology, for Foucault instead all kinds of perception rest upon distortion of different types. When using both Althusser and Foucault a difficult matter is their different approach to knowledge and power. Whilst Althusser calls for a scientific critique of ideology and appoints Marxism-Leninism as the suitable agent for the assignment, Foucault suggests no such agent capable of revealing ‘the truth’ (Ryder, 2013: 153). Althusser and Foucault hold different ontological standpoints in relation to what can be considered the truth and who is qualified to determine it. Although Foucault embraces the relation between power and knowledge, he does not accept the relation between power and the production of *false* knowledge. Instead he employs the concept of *regimes of truth* (1980: 131); systems of discourses that decide what can and cannot be counted as meaningful utterances. Any given regime of truth holds its bearers captive and they cannot exit the regime without becoming aware of the captivity (Hörnqvist, 2012: 110). Furthermore, all critique of a regime of truth must accept its constitutive suppositions to appear trustworthy, which in the

end means that it cannot be transcended.⁶¹ It seems that the definition of the regime of truth is situated close to that of ideology, and the problem of transcending regimes of truths and ideologies appears similar.

My decision to use the concept of ideology, rather than that of regime of truth, should not be understood as a standpoint that in every instance there is an absolute truth situated somewhere, ready to be uncovered. The reason for applying the concept is to highlight a concealing of something,⁶² along the lines in which Bourdieu uses the notion of *misrecognition*. This concept is multifarious in the hands of Bourdieu. On the one hand it is used to exhibit the way that particular (economic) acts are emphasised at the expense of other acts (1977/2011: 172) while on the other hand it highlights processes in which power is transformed into symbolic forms (such as taste) that people profess, regardless of whether or not they gain from them (1991/2012: 23). Bourdieu points out the way in which power (held by particular groups in society) uses representations of legitimacy to justify domination. Cultural and social domination in the given social order is naturalised through a misrecognition that ensures social stratification seems normal and power remains closeted. This is a misperception of social life that Bourdieu calls symbolic violence, and one expression of this closeted power is the way we embrace ‘good taste’, instead of highlighting the economic conditions that enabled it (1998/1999: 47 ff.). The concept will be applied for both these meanings. When I use the concept of misrecognition I will point in the direction of *emphasis*: The manner in which things are narrated with *concealment* of certain experiences, positions or lived lives as the end result. This means that in analysis the fact that there are elements of which we do not speak is more important than whether or not particular ‘facts’ could be found, measured and defined as true. In short, what I consider important is how conversations in the parental communities are organised not only in what they say or state, but for what they *do not* say and *do not* state.

61 Magnus Hörnqvist (2012) argues we should view a regime of truth as a quest for monopoly; it is a set of judgments, amongst other sets of judgments, of what is to be regarded as credible and suitable. This, Hörnqvist propounds (*ibid.*: 111 ff.) makes a regime of truth more related to the concept of hegemony. Hegemony is the striving of dominant groups in society to expand its perspective to subordinate groups. It is never totally solidified, because it can be challenged in the margins and it sometimes has to compete with other subordinate regimes of truths. By valuing and upgrading the perspectives and experiences of the subordinate groups, other types of knowledge can be released. However, this critical potential can in itself be questioned (*ibid.*: 113). How do we, for instance, know that the new knowledge emanating from the subordinate groups has no relation to power? Moreover, much the same as positions of hegemony, neither are ideologies and regimes of truths totally solidified (Fineman, 1991).

62 The concealment does not have to be ‘the truth’ but could be an experience, a particular voice or lived life.

The critic

I have left the question of who is capable of critiquing ideology to the very last section of this chapter, thereby partly revealing my own ambivalent position towards the matter. Critiquing ideology is not one uniform activity and it involves several activities. The critic analyses power to reveal inconsistencies in a phenomenon, an utterance or a situation without pointing to what presumably would be the normatively 'correct' thing to do; and in addition, critiquing ideology involves applying a hermeneutics of suspicion without really having an unbiased point of reference to start from (Jaeggi, 2015: 29). Yet, there is possibly one misunderstanding concerning ideology that might lead us to view the critic in a particular light – the idea that ideology is either true or false, and thus can or cannot be unmasked. Notwithstanding, ideology is neither true nor false – it is both. This may appear startling or troublesome. If ideology is both true and false, why should we concern ourselves with examining it? Rahel Jaeggi (*ibid.*: 30 f.) uses the examples of 'freedom' and 'equality' to illustrate the matter. The contractual notion of freedom and equality that capitalism refers to as its principle of organisation is actually evident in capitalist society. The capitalist labour contract is entered by free and equal subjects (in the formal or legal sense). The labourer is no slave and can end the contract when not satisfied. However, for most workers the need to work is compelling if she/he is not to starve, and when comparing an owner of the means of production and a worker the working conditions as well as negotiation possibilities are not equal: There is a material inequality between the parties that is not due to chance. Hence, 'freedom' and 'equality' both exist and do not exist in a capitalist society. As a consequence, the critic does not critique the concepts of 'freedom' or 'equality' but instead the manner in which they are understood or their inadequate realisation in different contexts. In the case of 'freedom' and 'equality' we may find that the norm is understood in a way that in fact supports *inequality*, or that it is not realised by practice. As a consequence, critiquing ideology means two things: Pointing to epistemological mistakes and achieving an emancipatory change (*ibid.*: 33). As I understand it, this implies that the position of critic is deeply affected by theoretical choices, as well as stating these choices as best as one can. The criteria by which to evaluate whether or not a criticism has achieved anything is to examine the ability of the criticism to highlight (or even solve) the problems created by a particular ideology (*ibid.*: 44). As I see it, this means that criticism takes place in a community of subjects evaluating, co-creating or critiquing the critic.

Central analytical concepts

This marks the end of the introduction of the theoretical concepts guiding the analysis. Despite a putative sensation of a dense presentation, just three concepts are central for the analysis: Discourse, Power (including Ideology) and Distinctions. These concepts should be understood as a foundation for analysing empiric data rather than a development or critique of theory as such. However, in relation to performing an empirically grounded study there are still a few dimensions of these three analytical concepts that have not been highlighted.

In this dissertation the first central analytical concept, *discourse*, is applied in the study of texts of a particular nature. The postings in the parental communities are short, often condensed into two or three sentences and to the unaccustomed reader they may sometimes appear rude or provocative. However, they are far from the highly offensive or outspoken statements that surface in the communities from time to time. Nevertheless, I have focused on situations of tension, disagreement and conflict and as a consequence, many friendly exchanges do not appear in the analysis. This relates first and foremost to the idea that fractions in themselves illuminate a rule, or a framework that is not normally articulated to the same extent. Conflicts may occur in situations where some breakdown in normal conduct has taken place, or taken-for-granted standpoints are challenged. My interest in conflicts is partly inspired by the attempts of ethnomethodology to study the social fabric by interrupting or disturbing it (Potter & Wheterell 1987/2013: 75), although in this case I am not the one causing the disturbance. My viewpoint is rather that in a situation of textual tension, the discourse will putatively manifest a little more defined.

As mentioned, discourse cannot be delineated from ideology in any straightforward manner. Having said that, how would the analyst know when she/he is analysing discourse and when she/he probes into ideology? Perhaps the most honest answer would be that the analyst cannot be entirely sure. In the case of this study, discourse has been scaled down to mean *ways of using language* (ways to position elements or ways to position oneself in relation to 'facts') that *instruct the reader/listener* to notice particular phenomena and disregard others. In my view, to try to detect ideology means to study discourses to see if they repeat a particular message or guide the reader in the same direction (towards the same type of opinions or worldviews). When a cluster of discourses comes across as uniform (manifesting the same message, propagating the same solutions, leaving the reader with the same perception of the world) and when the cluster is difficult to challenge it will be labelled ideological.

The second central analytical concept it is employed in two ways. *Power* is understood as a relation (a relation with oneself, with others, or with institutions) and

as a structure of domination (ideology). I have chosen to intertwine the concept of power as it is laid out by Foucault on the one hand and Bourdieu (and to some extent Althusser) on the other. For Bourdieu power is more constrained by structure than in the case of Foucault, whose emphasis as it is applied in my analysis focuses more upon the interior domains of the subject: Why and how we embrace particular ideals. Bourdieu's work instead focuses on conditions of *maintenance* of power and the social determinants of advantage, i.e., the reproduction of power. The primary reason for applying a Foucauldian viewpoint is to examine how *the subject's internal relations* (the individual that seemingly embrace or propagate certain ideals) may be a case of governmentality, and the primary reason to employ Bourdieu is for his layouts of how power is maintained *within certain groups of people* in systems of differentiations and through certain techniques of distinction.

The other main difference is between a perspective of power that accepts ideology (Bourdieu and Althusser) and the Foucauldian critique of the concept. I have commented above on my understanding of ideology but in addition, I want to point out an intersection between Foucault and Althusser when it comes to conceptualizing power and the formation of the subject. As put forward by Jason Read (2003: 85 ff.) they both conceive of the individual as an *effect* of institutional structures (which, I would like to add, can also be said of the field theory as presented by Bourdieu). They conceive of the subject as defined by ideology (Heller, 1996: 93), although they conceptualise it differently. In line with seeing the subject as an effect they give primacy to the study of language and discourse before the study of 'man'. This is also the point of departure of the present study. Hence, my reason for including Foucault, Althusser and Bourdieu in the analysis is pragmatic. The intention is to probe the subject as constructed both from the outside-and-in (which is covered by Althusser's notion of interpellation), from the inside-and-out (through Foucault's technologies of the self) and to place this subject in a social representation of symbolic production and exchange (covered by Bourdieu's proposition of misrecognition and distinctions).

As mentioned, the third central analytical concept is that of *distinctions*. I comprehend distinctions as political in nature: They are cases of systematic differentiation (although not systematic in the eyes of the subject exhibiting a particular taste). I also view them as linked to systems of economic organisation. Much the same as power conceals itself in acts of misrecognition, distinctions are a case of power presenting itself in a symbolic fashion. Distinctions organise people into groups that are reflections of economic organisation. Jacques Camatte and Gianni Collu (1972/2008) state that capitalism cannot exist without differentiation and that this differentiation creates a societal solidarity in smaller groups that tend to compete with each other:

The groups become gangs. The gang is a reproduction of capital in a *fictitious form* – whilst capital denies the principles upon which it is constructed, it simultaneously re-enacts them in symbolic forms. This is how I grasp Bourdieu's (1977/2011:171) proposal of a socially repressed economic activity – it is denied but repeated on a symbolic level, for instance as the taste embraced by particular groups.⁶³ Each and every gang has an internal dynamic to seek recognition, to ask: 'by what are we distinguished?' and, hence, groups exhibit a tendency to exclude (Camotte & Collu, 1972/2008: 160 f., 168). This interrelates with the type of negative taste that Bourdieu (1984/1991: 190) delineates: If we all like a particular product its value becomes eroded. We thus have to perform activities of distinction to keep particular people outside of the circuits of taste, and so I comprehend distinctions as a mean to disunite social groups that would potentially benefit from staying united. If distinctions are really capital then capital becomes the way of interaction within the group, meaning that the groups arising from distinctions become the reproduction of capital. A dominant taste – much the same as a dominant idea – can be grasped as dominant material relationships condensed into ideas (Marx & Engels, 1845/1988: 67).

63 Camatte and Collu (ibid.) were certainly not preoccupied with distinctions of taste, but rather exemplify the gang by companies, mafia gangs and political organisations. Nevertheless, my interpretation corresponds with theirs in one sense. Camatte (1995: 28) has described the differentiation generated by capitalism as a process whereby the working class becomes more bourgeoisie, which resonates with the notion of a class developing taste or aspiring to a particular taste.

4. Material and methodological frames

In this chapter I will present the exposition of the material and the methodological frames of the dissertation. First, I shall provide more details of the two empirical arenas focused on in the study, as well as information about how the data collection was performed, and I shall relate some of the limitations of the material collected. I will continue with a discussion about the ethical considerations involved in collecting and presenting postings. The chapter will conclude with a description of how analysis was conducted, including a presentation of some of the analytical concepts applied.

The parental communities

In order to make the unaccustomed reader acquainted with the venues in which conversation takes place, this section will contain a presentation of the empirical arenas from which I have collected the material. I will introduce the reader to the way interaction is structured in the parental communities, as well as to the similarities of and differences between the two communities under study.

Both communities are constructed with different levels of publicity. Most public is the *interactive section* (called community or forum), where the content is ordered in themes, such as ‘Pregnant’, ‘Children’, ‘Gardening’, ‘Weight and Body’, ‘Relations’ etc.⁶⁴ A slightly more private level is the nick’s *personal homepage*, where she can publish personal information, post pictures and receive public messages. Both of these levels can be accessed by anyone who visits the communities. The two most private levels are those of *groups* and *personal messages*. The groups are created by specific nicks and organised around particular themes or interests. To join a group one needs an invitation from the founding nick. Personal messages can be exchanged in much the same way as within an e-mail system and the user cannot read messages from other nicks. The empiric material for this study consists of postings from the open and public parts of the communities.

Any kind of community is defined by its discourse focus (Jones & Rafaeli, 2000: 218) which is the *purpose* of the community. At first sight a parental community is a clear-cut case – the users log in to discuss issues related to family life. However, when inspecting the parental communities this is not always the case. Besides themes con-

⁶⁴ In the themes the nicks interact the way that was demonstrated in the beginning of Chapter One – through short messages, and sometimes pictures or links to articles and blogposts are inserted into the postings.

cerned with family life, the nicks discuss a vast number of other topics. Delineating a web community as parental only covers a part of the topics. The feature the most notable is, however, the mix of friends and strangers who interact. Some nicks have been using the community for years and know each other fairly well, several have become friends, and some are only recently registered. In both communities particular nicks seem to have gained a status as *veterans*. They know several other nicks and they are less questioned than a newcomer. The veterans can in some instances control interaction, by refuting certain topics and initiating others, or by joining in teams/groups of several nicks who argue against or ridicule other nicks. Yet, scorn and ridicule are not allowed to proceed in an unlimited manner as the communities have a team of informal moderators, consisting of especially trustworthy nicks who are assigned the responsibility of monitoring the conversation by the editorial staff.⁶⁵ In addition, the nicks also monitor each other. They remember postings from months or years ago and quote them if they were considered especially absurd or if they want to correct another nick's assertion of how she views a particular issue.

The communities also exhibit differences. An apparent feature is the different level of activity, which is discernible in more themes in VEF. Another difference relates to the communities' different types of netiquette, where VEF accepts provocation and less trustworthy postings to a higher extent than TPP, without the moderators interfering. (leading to more frequent trolling⁶⁶ and flaming⁶⁷ in this community).⁶⁸ One final difference is worth considering. To the best of my knowledge the nicks in VEF have never mentioned TPP during the years of observation, whilst it is common in TPP to quote or ridicule postings from VEF. Hence, the content of VEF sometimes appears in TPP, but TPP is never visible in VEF.

Data collection

When approaching Internet communities the researcher faces a delicate problem of having access to an endless amount of material that is freshly produced every minute of the day. This surplus of postings constitutes a rich asset and a source of anxiety. The predicament is not finding data, but instead knowing when to stop visiting the sites for yet more of it. The two communities do not come in one uniform shape

65 The monitoring ensures that community rules and Swedish law are not broken, that the postings are written in Swedish and that advertising is not inserted. The moderators rebuke the nicks who overstep the line, or they report them to the editorial staff.

66 See Glossary in Appendix.

67 See Glossary in Appendix.

68 The non-interfering attitude is presumably due to the high level of activity, which makes it more difficult to monitor every breaking of the rules.

– their figures alter depending on the theme and the nicks participating in conversation. Events reported in the media can influence the topics of conversation, which in turn change during the day or in the course of a week. Certain themes are more popular than others and certain nicks seem to be invested with more authority than others. So, the question is not how to get there but to know when to collect, what to collect, from whom to collect, where to collect, and how to stop collecting.

The TPP postings were collected between autumn 2010 and spring 2015, and those of VEF between spring 2011 and spring 2015.⁶⁹ This does not mean that all postings were written in this period. When I found a topic of interest I searched for postings from before 2010 to see if they remained coherent over time and if they were composed of the same discursive elements. This means I have also collected postings from between 2006 and 2009. However, there is a legion of postings that I neither read nor collected. Considering the vast amount of postings⁷⁰ produced during one day, capturing all of them would be impossible. Because I discovered the TPP community in 2009, I had a reasonably profound knowledge of where different topics tended to emerge. As a result, I decided not to collect postings from thematically narrow themes but rather from those concerning family related matters with titles such as ‘Motherhood’, ‘Teenagers’, ‘Family Finance’, and ‘Disabled Children’, as well as themes allowing for any kind of topic, such as ‘The Floor Is Yours’, or ‘General Topics’.

Delimitations of the study object

The postings collected for the study were written primarily by women. Due to the fact that the vast majority of parental community users are women (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005), collecting postings from nicks registered as women makes sense. Furthermore, research demonstrates that it is the mother who spends the most time with the children, is the main provider of childcare and is more engaged in terms of the relations between the family and school (Reay and Ball, 1998; Nordenmark, 2004: 27; SCB, 2012: 39).⁷¹ This is part of the explanation for why there is such an

69 VEF was included into the study after the data collection from TPP had begun. The reasons for including VEF was that I wanted to collect material from more than one community to be able to reflect upon similarities as well as differences, and to understand which discourses were community-specific, and which were more generic.

70 Counting all the postings written in the course of one day on only one of the many themes on VEF (in May 2011) revealed that 421 threads were started, responses not included (Lind, 2013: 21).

71 According to SCB (Statistics Sweden) men and women work approximately 7,5 hours per day. However, men receive a salary for a larger proportion of these hours as women carry out more unpaid work, (i.e., household chores) and spend time with their children (see SCB 2012: *På tal om kvinnor och män Lathund om jämställdhet 2012* http://www.scb.se/statistik/_publikationer/LE0201_2012A01_BR_X10BR1201.pdf).

imbalance in the material when it comes to gender – it is because the narratives about children and family life are based upon female experiences and positioning.⁷²

When discussing the collection of material there is yet another feature of the arenas worth mentioning: The postings are mostly produced by women who have Swedish as their first language and have not recently migrated to Sweden (Lind, 2013). The format of an interactive community based on textual exchanges hinders the participation of parents with an immigrant background for whom Swedish is their second language. Even if parents with an immigrant background register and intend to participate, it may well be that they are excluded due to lack of language skills. It is thus reasonable to assume that the postings do not reflect society's heterogenic composition of opinions, but instead mirror the perceptions of women born in Sweden or women who have lived in Sweden for several years (*ibid.*: 21). Even so, the perceptions of these women are interesting, because they represent a general norm in matters of family that affects all parents in Sweden. However, the predominance of nicks that speak Swedish fluently makes collection uneven in its character and receptions of the norm from parents situated outside of it cannot be studied. A similar delimitation emanates from the heteronormative structure of the communities. The conversations about children and family seem to use the heterosexual family as a starting point (as well as an end station) and there are few postings articulating experiences from other families or relationships. Hence, collection is affected also by this imbalance.

Coding, saturation and memos

The texts from the two communities eventually amounted to approximately 3,000 pages containing hundreds of conversations, making the material appear less manageable. Every gathered conversation was by the time of collection given labels, so that they were possible to identify. As Derek Layder (2005: 52) points out, the problem is choosing what system or coding frame to use. At the time of collection I found I had to give every conversation several labels to make identification possible. The labels described the content of conversation, a deviation of a content pattern, something that happened in the conversation on an interactional level, or something in the conversation illustrating or contradicting a theoretical concept. At one time I labelled conversations according to what they seemed to be doing, as recommended by Charmaz (2006). This made me look for presumed intentions behind the post-

⁷² In this study the female gender is understood as an analytical place of tension; it is my aim to make its predicament into that of a universal human subject, while simultaneously not concealing the particular discursive circumstances in which it can articulate itself.

ings; were they written to persuade the reader, to please, to impress or provoke? I particularly searched for postings that appeared to aim at impression management, because they could indicate taboos that must be avoided or topics that trigger annoyance (Rivas, 1998/2012: 373). As the labels themselves gradually began to resemble a patchwork I removed them and returned to the 'cleansed' material. In this sense the coding deviated from a grounded theory approach that starts off as an open-coding, and gradually becomes more restricted (Layder, 2005: 54). Instead, the data collection, coding and analysis were parallel processes; categories emerged, and sometimes disappeared, only to appear again come later in the analysis. Sometimes the coding was leaning towards deductive stances, when I scrutinised the material to search for patterns that might validate or counter theory, while on other occasions it was more of an *in vivo* coding (Rivas, 1998/2012: 372) – an open coding that starts from language stemming from the material itself. This oscillation required the aim to be flexible and somewhat imprecise to begin with, after which it was gradually refined.

The way I understand the material underwent several changes during collection, and knowing when saturation had been achieved was not a straightforward decision. Categories are usually deemed saturated when the collection of more material does not generate new theoretical insights, or reveal new properties of the core categories (Charmaz, 2006: 113). However, saturation is not obvious when categories are moved around, lumped together in diverging ways, and when different analytical levels interfere with each other. Another significant feature of performing discourse analysis is that it is the researcher who carries out the individuation of the discourses. Hence, the question can be transformed into another one: When am I as a researcher saturated, rather than the material I gather? I decided to stop collecting material when it no longer delivered tentative answers to the research questions. This could be a sign of saturation being achieved, or it could be viewed as my own limitation as a researcher.

However, coding alone cannot produce the grounds for analysis. Parallel to the categorisation process I made memos. Memo-writing can be used for posing questions to the material and to theory, suggesting tentative connections or contradictions. According to Layder (2005: 58 f.) memo writing consists of two elements. Firstly, a continuous rethinking of what the data means and, secondly, elaborations and modifications of ideas or theoretical concepts that already play a role in the interpretation process (*ibid*: 61). This is also the design of my memos. My notes switched from reflections on something that happened on a certain day in one of the communities to attempts at brief theoretical analyses of threads. Attempts of typification lie alongside cut-outs from articles or blog posts. Layder (*ibid*.: 64) describes his memos

as an amalgam of blind searching and false leads, systematic connectedness and elaborations of ideas. The description is not far from my own experience.

Ethical considerations

In research conducted in and about the Internet, it is necessary to keep the door open to multiple interpretations of the arena. At least two approaches are essential: The arena is a place of data collection and of interaction (Löffberg, 2008: 60). Early cyber ethnography tended to view virtual interaction as a performance of identity, where the arena was conceptualised as a place for identity games. Today, few Internet researchers use notions of identity gaming and ideas of people lying more on the Internet than away from the keyboard have been rejected (Daneback & Månsson, 2008: 161). Instead, research focuses on the relationships established and there is concern about the risk of the researcher disturbing them (Hoser & Nitschke, 2010). If data is considered to be produced by people who mean what they say, it leads to questions concerning research ethics. Is a community a public place? Are the postings just general public texts? Does a nick have a private life worth consideration and protection? How can the collected data be presented?

The Swedish Research Council⁷³ formulates four specific demands that social science researchers should adhere to. The *demand for information* stipulates that the researcher must inform the subjects of research about the aim of the research project. The *demand for consent* specifies that the subject of research must consent to participate and includes the right to withdraw consent. The *demand for confidentiality* prescribes that data about the research subjects must be treated with the highest degree of confidentiality. The *demand for utilisation* states that the data collected must be only used for research purposes (<http://www.codex.vr.se>).⁷⁴ Although the demands may serve as an introduction to ethical reasoning within the field of Internet research, they must be supplemented with reflections upon this particular, and rapidly growing, arena. The AoIR (The Association of Internet Researchers) Ethics Working Committee is continuously reworking ethical guidelines for Internet research.⁷⁵ The guidelines are debated and viewed through different ethical lenses, although based on a set of recurrently advocated questions to ask when conducting Internet research. In my decision-making concerning collection and reproduction of the material I have turned to the AoIR because of its particular experience and knowledge of these arenas.

73 In Swedish: *Vetenskapsrådet*.

74 <http://www.codex.vr.se/texts/HsFR.pdf>

75 See Ess, Charles and the AoIR ethics working committee (2002).

Publicity versus privacy. On lurking and the informed consent

I have gathered postings through reading on the communities without signaling that I am there. This means I have been 'lurking', i.e. reading and collecting without participating in the conversation myself. In doing so, I have disregarded the demand for information and consent. The reasons behind my decision are as follows; to avoid the risk of my presence distorting the material, the fact that the communities in question are public places and the nicks anonymous, because the material presented in the study has been translated from Swedish into English and because I ensured that it did not contain any biographical details. Collecting material in this way is ethically sensitive and my decision needs to be reflected upon from several angles. As I understand it, the ethical reflection has to be made as a calibration of two important features of research. On the one hand there are issues of research quality in terms of reliability (Sveningsson, 2001: 59) and on the other the need to consider the potential harm that the collection method could inflict on the community user.

As a way of obtaining at least a minimal consent I could have posted a community announcement that provided information about the research. The reason for not doing so relates to what my presence could do to the material and to the fact that I had no means of ensuring that the users would continue to write as they normally do. Another reason why I refrained from posting an announcement was because several of the postings collected date from before the start of research in 2010 and 2011. Hence, I could not ensure that the information reached everyone. The second option could have been to create groups for the purpose of research and invite nicks to come there to interact, which would have guaranteed that every participant was fully informed about where their text might end up. However, in much the same way as posting an announcement, this procedure could change the way the nicks wrote and presumably encourage some nicks to enter the group, whilst others would be reluctant, leading to an inadequately balanced collection. The third option could have been to collect material without consent and later contact the nicks responsible for the postings I wished to use, and ask for their permission. The reason not to obtain consent in this way was based on practical reasons. Hunting down each nick whose posting I wanted to include in the analysis would be unfeasible, partly because of the vast numbers of postings included, and partly because some nicks register to post on a single occasion and then unregister, making them impossible to contact. Collecting informed consent from only some nicks would produce a poorly balanced set of research ethics. The reason to collect unnoticed by the users was also due to the fact that both communities are public but enable users to move the conversation to a private space within the community. This resonates with the proposition from

AoIR recommending that ‘the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc’ (Ess & Jones, 2004: 31). This obligation is also reduced if the community provides its user with the possibility of communicating privately within the domains of the arena (ibid.). which applies to the communities focused on in this study.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, dimensions such as private/public are not distinguishable in any simple way. Knowing that a community environment is public and behaving accordingly are two different things, because a community can be understood as public *or* private or both intertwined (Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002)⁷⁷. This applies to the communities included in the present study – labelling them open would be an insufficient description. The impression of being in a public or private arena⁷⁸ may change during one and the same conversation and in the heat of the moment a nick who is normally aware of being in a public space may behave as if there were no bystanders. According to the AoIR guidelines, the next question to ask is, consequently, whether or not the users appear to *assume* that the communication is private (Markham & Buchanan, 2012: 6). The point is that in an open space such as TPP and VEF one can never entirely know the intention or feeling behind a certain posting. I may have collected postings from a nick who, at the moment of writing, perceived the community as private. This double nature of perception may be grappled with in at least two ways. Some claim that if a nick interprets the community as a private arena it means that the perceived audience is not the public and the researcher should refrain from collection (Seale et al., 2010: 598). Others claim that the presence of lurkers (often representing over 50 % of visitors in communities) and the fact that membership is unrestricted would substantially reduce the level of responsibility on the part of the researcher. People writing in communities ‘have no reasonable expectation of privacy, and researchers /.../ should be able to treat online communication

76 At times ethical considerations pertaining to the level of privacy define four levels of publicity. The first level relates to arenas that are open to everyone, the second can be called semi-public arenas, accessible after registration. The third level is semi-private with membership and registration and even more requirements necessary to enter – such as belonging to the organisation responsible for providing the community. The fourth level can be defined as private, where the founder of the arena allows or blocks access (Sveningsson Elm, 2009: 75).

77 When protected by a password it can be considered private, likewise if one cannot enter without being invited by another member or a moderator. This, however, does not mean that all other kinds of communities should be viewed as totally public. Conceptions of privacy can vary within one and the same community, depending on what kind of theme the nick is visiting and on what kind of nick is writing.

78 An arena is not the same thing as a field. I define ‘arena’ simply as the material (or in this case the virtual) place in which research took place. Hence, when I speak of arenas I am referring to places and when I use the concept of field I am referring to a set of structured positions of status.

as public behaviour' (Kraut et al., 2004: 110). This being said, the mere possibility of the nicks perceiving the arena as private is one of the reasons for why it is vital for the researcher to spend as much time as possible in the community, to imbibe the different cultures of writing. I have spent time in the communities every day since 2009 (VEF was not included into the scope of the dissertation until 2011) and onwards, and I consider my orientation reasonably substantial, although this does not put me in a position where I can guarantee that no posting is included that the nick may have regretted afterwards⁷⁹. As a result I took precautions to protect the online identities of the nicks, which will be outlined in what follows.

Exposure

The attempt to protect online identities affected my choices of presentation. For the sake of anonymity the communities have received new names. Postings included in the analysis were translated into English. As a form of spot check, several of the translated versions were translated back⁸⁰ into Swedish again, to check that the version a reader may attain from trying to translate it back into Swedish will not resemble the original posting. Pseudonyms were removed from the postings. Nevertheless, this does not guarantee that there is no risk involved in presenting the translated material as there is evidence that even anonymised sets of data that includes enough personal information may lead to individuals becoming identifiable (Markham & Buchanan, 2012: 7).⁸¹ (This also applies to research outside the Internet arena). Moreover, my

79 It is possible to have a posting one regrets removed by a moderator or host. This implies that the nicks have a high degree of agency when it comes to what is published. However, the nick cannot reclaim written material when resigning from the community. The site operator can keep (and sometimes store) material over which the former member has no control (Hoser & Nietschke, 2010: 182). Nevertheless, if trying to visit the personal web page of a nick who has resigned from one of the communities; one will find it no longer exists.

80 The back translation from the new English version back into Swedish was performed using Google Translate.

81 The ethical risks of exposure cannot be straightforwardly understood as a risk to everyone, and a risk in all situations and contexts. Malin Sveningsson Elm (2009: 81ff.) describes a situation where media and other public areas overflow with people appearing as private individuals relating private situations. Displaying private affairs publically to this extent has made people look differently upon what a public arena is and how it should be used. Mobile phones with cameras, Instagram and similar types of technology make people potentially visible everywhere and have increased people's media literacy and awareness of potentially being observed. Social control becomes more comprehensive as technology moves on and judgments of when one crosses the line between private/public, and sensitive/non-sensitive has gradually become more difficult to define.

analysis cannot encompass the entire context in which something was written⁸² and there is a potential risk that a nick, if reading the analysis, could feel misinterpreted.

Choices pertaining to rendition also depend upon the country and culture in which the research is to be published. Yet another recommendation from the AoIR concerns how to relate the research to the ethical traditions of the researcher's and the subject's culture and country (Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002: 8). This study was produced in Sweden, and its ethical design is inspired by chat room studies by Löfgren (2008) and Sveningsson (2001) where informed consent was not collected, mainly because the object of study would disappear if the nicks knew that they were being observed, and due to the practical reasons described by Löfgren (2008: 63 f.). Nevertheless, the European approach to collecting postings in this way is stricter than in the United States. Malin Sveningsson (Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002: 31)⁸³ has contested this notion of ethical restraint. Guidelines, Sveningsson argues, provide recommendations for *ideal* practice that must be weighed up against the possibilities of probing into important arenas and generating insights into rapidly growing venues that the research community still knows little about. Ethical guidelines do have to be measured against the possible gains for research and in reality practice may not differ very much between Europe and the US. As previous research mainly has focused on user experience and the reasons for visiting the parental communities, I believe that in order to understand part of what shapes a contemporary ideal of parenthood, it is important to also grasp the actual content produced in these places.

The fact that I do not have informed consent has, nonetheless, enforced restraints on which postings to collect, in order not to intrude into the nick's private community spheres. For that reason I have not collected texts from the nicks' personal web pages, nor sought membership in any groups, or written messages to nicks. All material emanates from the interactive community section, visible to everyone, including non-members. Not having consent also affected which postings to include in the presentation of the material. Postings that express personal despair of a biographically revealing character were excluded from the analysis. Postings that contain confessions of criminal behaviour or threats of self-harm are not collected, which also applies for postings accusing others of such deeds. Names, geographical settings, references to age, workplace, children's names or gender, and the names of children's

82 It is often not possible to relate the whole thread, because of its length. Moreover, some threads are written as responses to one (or more) threads written earlier that day. To present them all is not possible.

83 Posting to the AoIR ethics working group on 25th September, 2002. Retrieved from Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee (2002: 31)

schools have been removed or altered. When making these decisions, I have leaned on Kraut et al.'s (2004: 110) factors relevant for whether or not to collect informed consent:

Relevant factors:

1. Is it human subjects research? (see A) If no: Informed consent not required
2. If yes: Is the research exempt? (see B) If yes: Informed consent not required
3. If no: Can informed consent be waived? (see C) If yes: informed consent not required

A. Research involves human subjects if data is collected through intervention or interaction with an individual, or if data contains identifiable private information (information where the individual can be identified and individual had reasonable expectation that no observation was taking place or that information was collected for a specific purpose).

B. Research is exempt if it involves the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interviews or observation of public behaviour, *unless*: (i) information obtained is recorded so that human subjects can be identified and (ii) any disclosures of responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of liability or be damaging to the subject's financial standing, employability, or reputation, or if research involves the collection or study of existing data, document, records... if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator so that subjects cannot be identified.

C. Consent can be waived if the following are true:

The research involves no more than minimal risk to the subjects

The waiver or alteration will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects

The research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver or alteration

Whenever appropriate, the subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation

This study is research that involves human subjects in the sense (and only in that sense) that the *collection* (N.B. not the presentation) contains private information.⁸⁴ I do not know whether or not the information is identifiable (see A) but my point of departure is that the subjects had no reasonable expectation of being observed by a researcher.⁸⁵ Hence, my answer has to be that the study involves human subjects and I need to move on to the next question; is my research exempt (see B)? This study involves no educational tests or survey procedures but may be labelled a study of public behaviour. However, returning to the question of what defines a public arena, the answer to whether the study can be exempted cannot be a straightforward yes, which leads to the third question; can informed consent be waived (see C)? Considering the measures I have undertaken to protect the anonymity of the nicks, in my view there is no more than a minimal risk to the subjects (see C). The waiver will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects, due to the decision to translate the postings, to not collect every potentially interesting posting, and to exclude or alter all personal information. Because of the difficulties involved in contacting the nicks, I consider it less likely that I would be able to provide information after the collection was performed (see C). Therefore, my answer to question number three is that I am in a position where informed consent is not required.

Analytical approach

This study is probably best described as a case study, which involves collecting enough information about a social setting, event or group to comprehend how it functions (Berg, 2004).⁸⁶ The analytical point of departure of the study is one of abduction (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2008), which means I have oscillated between observations of the empirical arenas and the theoretical perspective. It also means that I have fluctuated between an open collection and an intentional search for postings in order to answer questions emanating from previous findings or from theory. The choice to remain in this both flexible and frustrated position related to my impression of the venue's variability. The analysis was based on several theoretical concepts that were found, changed and interwoven in the course of the work. When the data collection started I knew that I wanted to look upon the postings in the parental communities as the way in which subjectivity occurs under supervision, which made me consider

84 However, I do not know whether or not the information is accurate or a fabrication.

85 Nicks nevertheless frequently articulate that they count on being observed by strangers.

86 Often when defining a case study it is understood as involving one singular community, family or organisation (Rutterford, 1998/2012: 120). This dissertation consists of material from two communities, in order to ensure that the material collected was as rich and detailed as possible.

using both Foucault and Goffman, and perhaps intertwining them. Goffman was, however, removed from analysis when I decided to privilege discourse before interaction as main analytical angle. Quite early during the collection of postings I also saw the need for some type of analysis of capital and taste displays, which made me choose to apply Bourdieu. This analysis at that point seemed to point in the direction of a cultural making of class, as the postings orbited around matters of class in their recurrent fixation on the perceived bad habits and poor taste of the ‘underclass’, which made me include a Marxist perspective in the analysis, albeit mostly as a way of reading Bourdieu. All these theoretical strands are all included in the choice of the main analytic tools – discourse, power and distinctions. The decision to include matters of ideology in the analysis came later when I needed to understand why resistance in the communities had adopted what I considered to be a conformist pattern that seemingly validated rather than challenged hegemonic positions. It seemed that the discourses of parenting were organised by something that solidified them, and I wanted to begin an understanding of what that might be.

Having said that, the mere collection of postings was tentative and at first did not so much relate to theoretical choices. During the first mapping of the communities, one persistent pattern of content was that of a particularly dubious or questioned personhood, which I wanted to examine. I found postings about people described as failing in different ways that did not relate solely to their qualities as parents, (they were depicted as obese, depressed or negative and irresponsible; represented as if they could not afford swimming lessons for their children due to a lack of financial priorities or being able to manage a household budget), so I collected postings on these themes. A paragon of a certain dubious subjectivity gradually emerged and it seemed that these failing subjects were presented as positioned differently in relation to an envisioned communality, which made me search for postings that combined the element of ‘people’ or ‘parents’ with the element of ‘society’ or ‘institution’ or ‘welfare’ in various ways. These features of conversation became one route of collection that later developed into an analysis of the concepts of choice, responsibility and the correct version of intimate dependency, but it was not until that moment that I saw the need to include contract theory in the analysis.

Sorting out how to study language became a somewhat discouraging endeavour. At one point I was deeply enmeshed in rhetorical theory; using different coloured markers in the document to highlight how and when nouns, adjectives or verbs were employed, or how certain images or metaphors were applied. The intention to make a first rough categorisation of metaphors made me run out of colours. Metaphors can be sorted by reference (to space, place, directions in space, weight, liquidity etc.)

but also according to distance or closeness. They might aim to disguise, highlight or provoke. These difficulties in sorting the metaphors made me realise something about my analytical level, i.e., I made a decision on how fine-grained I wanted the analysis to become. The decision became to primarily map out figures of thought and only when having done so intend to understand how language was used to support or cast doubts on discourse. The decision not to study how and when nouns, adjectives and verbs were applied also related to questions of the relative innocence in following basic syntactic structures. My analytical point of departure is that many of the things we do with words (such as when we use metaphors), we do unknowingly or because language does not give us much choice. However, this makes them even more interesting, as they pre-structure how we are allowed to express ourselves (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). I chose to analyse how metaphors can be linked to the discourses they support and found that it made the connections between repertoires and particular words and bounded phrases become clearer.

Analytical selections

The selection of material to be included in the analysis was a multi-layered process, partly due to my understanding of the arena as having multiple identities and, as a consequence, having a flexible aim. I initially read the collected material chronologically from the date when collection began to the date when it ended, but later I read it theme by theme. I have broken it down into shorter fragments (consisting of language designs, dominant- or subordinate discourses, interactional patterns and so forth) that I have pieced together and read as one single document, before returning the fragments into the large document containing all the material. At times my intention was to read the texts for what they said, and at other times for what they ruled out. During these first readings my questions to the material were very simple. I wondered what the nicks were fighting about, in what circumstances they received praise or had to defend themselves and I why they kept on coming back to the communities. This was not content analysis in its original form as it was not systematic nor intended to be an objective means of describing or quantifying the phenomena (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008: 108), but I did notice which words, phrases and metaphors that kept recurring, and I wondered why they did so.

Some methods of probing into the texts were more general in nature and some questions to the texts were pervasive. Postings included in the analysis revolve around parenthood or subject production (i.e., they relate to the aim and the research questions) or they relate to the emerging empirical findings (such as the function of the concept of choice for some discourses to operate). Some general questions have

particularly guided the selection. What (experiences, categories, tastes and interests, or ways of being, acting and thinking) and who (in terms of identities) are described as acceptable or desirable on the one hand, and what/who as not acceptable or problematic on the other, and how is language used to support or counter a notion of the desirable/problematic? In addition, I have selected postings that offer explanations of the problematic state and solutions for making the subject more desirable. Postings on parenthood have been selected with the aim of finding common denominators for a desirable and problematic parenthood, respectively. I have focused on the attribution of qualities to imagined others as well as qualities incorporated into self presentation. Furthermore, postings were selected for analysis when language was used to make self presentations, or when textual reproaches for a faulty presentation were handed out. Lastly, postings were chosen when they appeared to be breaking a pattern of content or language use.

Above all, I have searched the material to find *general* discursive patterns. The challenge for a researcher is perhaps never as apparent as when the intent is to point out features that will be labelled common or recurrent, or to state that a norm is generally applicable in an arena. In the case of web communities, one aspect of the challenge lies in the fact that they appear borderless – there are so many themes and threads started every day that it is impossible to catch but a small portion of them. Nevertheless, patterns do emerge, although they are multiple and reside alongside resistance to the general mode of writing. When I have defined a pattern as general the following circumstances have been in place: Patterns were defined as general when they were little contested or received warm-hearted responses, when they reappeared on a regular basis and when deviations produced annoyed or surprised reactions. These types of pattern may be viewed as concerted appropriate sociocultural rules of speaking – rules for acting in a stylistic and contextually appropriate manner (Cohen & Olshtain, 2006: 113). This means that a rule can be a rule even if it is contested.

Analysing discourse

The analytical tools applied in the analysis stem from discourse theory and discourse psychology. Discourse theory presupposes that social identities (subjects as well as objects) are discursive *elements* and that these elements receive qualities and become identified through relations to other elements. Relations can be relations of equality or of difference. Every practice that construes a relation between elements in a way that changes their identity is an *articulation* that makes the element into a *moment* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2008: 157). If the articulation is successful the identity of the object becomes partially fixed and every discourse is established as an attempt

to restrict the flow of difference that may make it unstable (ibid: 168). In discourse theory this striving to fixate discourse and make elements into moments is called a *closure* of discourse. The closure is a result of successful *chains of equivalence*: Empty signs that receive meaning by being connected to other signs (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000: 57f.) with the aim of reducing all other tentative possibilities of meaning. However, because it excludes particular meanings of elements in order for them to become moments, discourse is potentially threatened by that which it has expelled: The moment is at risk of transforming back into an element. That which is 'expelled' in articulation constitutes the outside of a discourse, a meaning or an utterance. When discourse constitutes itself, it expels elements which are made to constitute the outside of discourse (Laclau, 2005: 70) and discourse analysis is, therefore, the study of how elements are connected or separated through chains of equivalence and of what threatens discourse. One way to start an analysis of social identities is to explore the subject positions enabled by the discourse and how these positions are created through chains of equivalence, but also to investigate everything that seems to threaten the descriptions: ambivalences, tensions or incommensurability. This briefly describes the method of deconstruction (Laclau, 1996: 50 f.). Deconstruction means to tear the construction apart – to study how objects are placed in accordance with schemata (the schemata can be a certain narrative logic, a juxtaposition of figures or images, or grammatical rules) (Thompson, 1988: 368).

One of the main starting points in the analysis in this study is the way that phenomena or people are represented. *Representation* is defined as the way that a group comes to life in descriptions of it. Someone speaks about the group – because one is a member of the group, because one claims to speak on behalf of the group or because one states that one has enough knowledge about the group to be able to describe it. When a particular group is represented, a view of society is usually included in the representation, because the group as a whole is constituted in contrast to the perceived characteristics of other groups (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 52). Particular signs are, however, difficult to sort into groups that are possible to label or define. The *floating signifier* is precisely such a sign; a sign that discourses 'compete' to define according to their own logic (ibid.: 50).

The analysis will also comprise a study of how this is facilitated by particular techniques for making, for instance, a chain of equivalence appear trustworthy. Relating two elements, (say for example 'fathers' and 'violence'), does not help much in fixating a discourse of the pathological father, if the audience brushes it off as prejudices. The connection between 'fathers' and violence' has to *look* true; it has to be constructed as an undisputable piece of reality, a *fact*. Discursive psychology has

to a great extent directed its attention towards *fact constructions* (Potter, 1996/2012: 158). There are two ways to study a factual account – for its offensive and for its defensive rhetoric. The former undermines alternative descriptions (by damaging or reframing them); the latter aims to resist the undermining and protect its accounts. Rhetoric is thus the relation between a description and alternative descriptions. Described in this way, rhetoric transforms into a battlefield: ‘a feature of the antagonistic relationship between versions: how a description counters an alternative description, and how it is organized, in turn, to resist being countered’ (ibid: 108). One way to protect one’s account is by stating that its source of expertise comes from one’s own experience. When a speaker/writer wants to put an experience close to him-or herself it is called *category entitlement* (Potter et al., 1993). The narrator with a specific experience (of being robbed or of having a disabled child) has a particular entitlement to feel sad or troubled. Potter develops the notion into entire categories of people (crime victims or parents of disabled children) that in certain contexts are treated as especially knowledgeable. People are handled and handle themselves as if they belong to a special category of ‘knowers’ (ibid: 393). In contrast, one may want to construct the account as neutral, as *not* emanating from one’s own experience, but emerging from a trustworthy source outside of the subject. When the speaker/writer applies the device of *out-there-ness*, she/he constructs versions that appear independent of the agent producing it. (Potter, 1996/2012: 116, 150 ff.). This leads to one important point: There is a relation between the speaker/writer and the facticity in the produced version of the world. Lingering through these concepts is a pattern of distance and closeness. Depending on the situation it can appear trustworthy to position oneself close to the idea or the opinion, or to appear distant from it.

Analysing ideology

When intending to detect ideological utterances the analyst aims to uncover ways in which relations of domination are maintained (Thompson, 1988: 370). For a relation of domination to be upheld, it should not be considered as such and so an ideological utterance needs to conceal, deny or obscure the nature of domination. This can be achieved in a number of ways and in what follows I shall present three concepts that I employed in analysis to detect ideological applications: Dissimulation, fragmentation and naturalisation.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Thompson (ibid.) chooses to call the process of naturalization *reification*. Because I do not wish to conflate this application of reification with how the same concept is applied in Marxist theory, I will instead utilise the notion of *naturalisation* that covers processes of representation that make the politically induced and historical state of affairs into something outside of time and place, naturally occurring and permanent.

Ideology may operate through *dissimulation*, for example by delineating a social event or a process in a fashion that highlights one dimension, and clouds another. When looking at a piece of text analytically, this means trying to uncover the way in which a particular feature is made to look relevant, whilst other features are described as irrelevant, or not described at all. Another way of putting it is that this endeavour intends to find what is missing in a claim or a narration. Ideology may also shape an utterance by *fragmentation*. In this way, relations of dominance can be maintained by fragmenting groups and making individuals appear as if in opposition to each other (*ibid.*).⁸⁸ If fragmentation is accepted by subordinate groups it would, for example, make them turn on each other instead of joining forces, so that the dominant groups are unchallenged. Both *dissimulation* and *fragmentation* are, I think, parts of an affective figure. Firstly, to be able to talk about ‘The Chav’ one needs to highlight some phenomena of the character one wants to illustrate and obliterate others. Secondly, a successful affective figure of disgust may achieve a fragmentation between groups that might possibly benefit from staying together. This would be the case when middle class women are led to despise unemployed young mothers living in disadvantaged residential areas, i.e., encouraged to see them primarily as bearers of bad taste instead of seeing them as belonging to the same sex as themselves and hence potentially being oppressed by the same patriarchal structures. The final concept in the analysis of the ideological contours of discourse is *naturalisation* (Thompson, 1990: 59). Things and events from the social world are represented as if a.): the outcome of natural characteristics and b.): as if they were of a permanent and unchanging nature. Ideology may thus operate ‘by representing a transitory, historical state of affairs as if it were permanent, natural, outside of time’ (1988: 370). Making highly contingent arrangements appear perpetual and inevitable means simultaneously making them difficult to critique and realign.

Alternative routes? On the choice of empiric arenas

I have now presented my analytical choices in terms of theoretical frames and methodological tools. The remaining unaddressed issue is the degree to which the results presented in the upcoming analytical chapters relate to my choice of empiric arena. The short answer to such a question is that the venue in which I collected the material is strongly related to the results. The analysis would presumably have been different had I studied the tension between the perceived demand assigned to the parent and to society, respectively, by probing into other types of material. There are

⁸⁸ One such fragmentation would be the division of poor into deserving and undeserving (Fineman, 1991).

several other empiric arenas in which these tensions could potentially be identified. I could for instance have studied parent-nurse conversations in the setting of child health centres, or perhaps parent-teacher meetings. I could have investigated groups of parents in the open preschools, or chosen other types of texts entirely – such as those introduced in Chapter Two; inquests, white papers and institutional reports. The reason for not investigating parent-nurse and parent-teacher interaction is because the aim is not to comprehend *direct* responses to decrees of responsibility from institutional representatives, such as would be the case when a parent interacts with an institution. In view of the fact that governmentality is one of the study's implicit themes, the conversation between a nurse and a parent would not begin to answer the research questions pertaining to how the subject governs herself and the way in which this is perceived as an act of freedom. This implies that to achieve my aim I needed to find settings that did not contain direct institutional representation. The opposite problem would manifest itself if exploring the 'big texts' in a white paper or in an institutional report. To state the problem in simple terms – in these texts there are no parents responding or reflecting upon what is written. Could I then not have met with parents in the open preschool arenas? Would I not have been able to ask them questions about their notions of parental responsibilities, as well as their view of the responsibilities that society has to assume to enable them to manage the task of parenting? Most likely I could, but the troublesome issue would have been the lack of anonymity. Because I aimed for 'free' negotiations about responsibilities, I would have had to perform group interviews. This comes with two disadvantages. The first is that I would have posed the questions, thereby potentially steering the topics of conversation away from issues of concern for the parents themselves. The second disadvantage is that the parents would have had to face the rest of the group whilst expressing an opinion. The major advantage of entering a web community in the manner in which I have done – unnoticed – is that I could access statements that could be launched without the nick ever returning to the community, launched in pseudonymity, and with the possibility to approach the other participants in conversation in a far more outright way than when people are sitting face to face. The fact that I was not present, either as an interviewer posing questions, or as a participant influencing conversation, has enabled me to access the material in a less polished version.

Reading instructions

Presenting the results of a qualitative research collection involves reducing a versatile and multilayered material, while protecting the study participants. Next, I will present some of the ways by which the presentation of the data will proceed.

In the analysis I will use the pronoun 'she' and 'her' when referring to the human subject. This is because of the fact that the majority of the nicks is registered as women (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005) and because it presumably are women who have delivered the empiric material that compose the foundation for analysis. In the analytic chapters I will specify from which community a posting was retrieved and the year it was produced. Due to ethical considerations the names of the nicks are not written in full. Instead the nicks are named N, followed by a number (N1, N2, N3 and so forth). The numbering follows the order in which the nick enters into a thread. Postings will be numbered according to chapter and numerical order of appearance. In the first analytical chapter this means all postings are marked '5', followed by a number for the specific posting (5:1, 5:2, 5:3 etcetera.). In the presentation of threads I indicate if a posting is a response to another posting and specify which. When I present single postings I do not specify the postings to which they respond but if they were found in extensive threads I will briefly relate the content of the thread. When reminding the reader of a particular sentence in a posting I will repeat it in italics. All the postings have been translated into English. In the translations I have stayed as close as possible to the nicks's original text, which means that I refrained from cleaning the language up, i.e., I retained cursing if the original posting contained cursing and I kept a more academic tone of voice in translation when the original posting had an academic ring to it. Italics and capital letters in the postings have been retained. However, in a few cases the posting that is presented in the analysis was partially rewritten due to the fact that some nicks use recurrent fixed phrases, exclamations or slang by which they might be recognised. In these cases I have chosen to present the posting using another, but similar, fixed phrase. In other cases part of the content of a narration was altered because it was biographically revealing, or specific in some other sense. Each analytical chapter concludes with a summary, followed by a short discussion.

This marks the end of the presentation of the frames of the dissertation. My overall analytical aim has been to find a bridge between contemporary social settings and analysis, much the same as required by Thompson (1988), and I believe that a contextual set-up such as the one in Chapter Two will allow the analysis to point to the way that the economy, politics, institutions and norms inform and guide the conversations that are to be presented. Nevertheless, as the reader will note, analytical

concepts and theory are not evenly applied in the forthcoming analytical chapters, but emphasised in accordance with what is being analysed.

5. Attitude, taste and social status

A quick look at the parental communities leads to the impression that they are inclusive. All one needs to read postings is Internet access and if one wants to write the only requirement is the registration of an e-mail address and a pseudonym. Registration is free, there are no demands to belong to any kind of organisation to participate and the writer does not have to be a parent to be allowed in. All types of conversation are allowed, given that they abide by the Swedish law and the rules of the community. Still, a closer look reveals that participation is unequal. All types of topics are not received in the same fashion, not all postings receive responses and some nicks reap less benign responses. Veterans, or groups of veterans, are generally received in a friendlier manner and seem to be able to dictate the reception of a posting. Apparently, content, interaction and nicks are viewed differently. These features indicates that the parental web communities are fields as described by Bourdieu: They structure positions according to laws specific to the field (1984/1991: 131). Before entering into an analysis of viewpoints on divisions of responsibility between the family and society, we need to become acquainted with the characteristics of this field, its battles as well as the prizes the battles may generate, because they are part of the soil in which discourses are managed – contested and professed. Consequently, the aim of this chapter is to scrutinise what kind of field positions are possible in the communities and how these positions are accomplished. I will examine some of the narrative effects of particular positions and suggest ways of understanding what shapes the preference for particular ways of writing. The analysis focuses on the work the nicks perform on each other, (corrections, advice, reprimands etc.), and on self-presentation with no element of fostering involved. I will start by looking into the work that the nicks perform on each other. This fostering seems intended to mould a particular textual behaviour that I understand as an *attitude on display*. Thereafter, I will present ways in which self presentation is performed, as well as how self presentation is intertwined with the manifestation of taste. Concluding the chapter I will demonstrate an effect of the administration of rules – social control.

Preferred attitudes

There are several ways to write in the community milieus to gain a secure social position. One way is to tell stories, as well as launching ideas and ideals that the other members like. Whether a story will be approved of or not is often something that seems to be decided by the veteran nicks. By responding in a friendly manner or by

correcting a nick, a suggestion is sent to the rest of the nicks, which perhaps explains why the preferences appear so similar.

Nevertheless, there are some ground rules, or laws of the field, to abide by before one can enter into presenting ideas and telling stories. One is to appear sincere. At first, the demand for people to be earnest is perhaps not very conspicuous, but in a web community there are not many signals available to give the other participants the impression of dealing with a person who speaks from the heart. Everything begins at the keyboard. The nick either seems to understand this without much correction or she is fostered into understanding it. Either way, to create a position of status one must adopt certain core values embraced by the community. In the following section I will introduce the reader to three of these values: sincerity, coherence and gratitude, and how they are handled.

Sincerity and coherence

Manifesting sincerity is presumably an easy interactional task; if the nick writes what she means she will be liked. However, in the field of the communities it is a little bit more complicated to define what sincerity is. The nick in the thread below complains about how the others do not like her. She describes being corrected for as long as she can remember, without knowing how to fit in. She is given advice by three veteran nicks: N2, N3 and N4, which seems to result in a suggestion situated at a distance from sincerity: To develop a strategy.

5:1 But seriously? Why do I feel that so many are so pissed off by me and my questions?

Why am I wrong? Or what am I doing wrong?

How should I behave so that you won't be angry/annoyed?

N1 (TPP 2011) Threadstart

5:2 Below you were talking all incoherently, as if you were tired or drunk or affected by sleeping pills. No offence, but since you are not always like that it can be perceived as a provocation, especially because previously you have 'pretended to ask' questions to see the reaction here. I think it's hard to know what you mean, and when you're serious.

N2 (Answers posting above)

5:3 ?? So, are those interpretations ok? 'no offence'...

Pretended to ask? Because I have put it the way I wanted and not how you want me to?

N1 (Answers posting above)

5:4 I feel you are very unbalanced. Like yesterday when you wrote that you thought a particular person was embarrassing. Then it changed into you having heard this about yourself. You snap one second and become almost honey-mouthed the next. I don't know where you're at! You don't seem sincere, as if you acted out a part. Or you are drunk/under the influence. Or you don't feel very well.

N3 (Answers posting 5:1)

The answer in posting 5:2 is common in the communities. If the nicks get an impression that someone is pretending to ask questions or telling 'fake' stories, their response will be negative, or the posting will be mocked sardonically. The advice provided in 5:2 and 5:4 apparently holds sincerity as a part of the guiding ethos in the communities. N1, who receives criticism for her style of writing, states that she has no other way of being.

5:5 N3, you appear to honestly care. Thanks for that.

The problem in my case is that I want to be the way I am. I have acted like this during the years and am not planning on changing it (stupid possibly).

/.../ I will never join the group and be honey-tounged just for peace of mind.
NEVER.

My choice is to continue as I am or leave.

N1 (Answers posting 5:4)

5:6 If a strategy doesn't work one has a choice. Either one changes strategy or decides it's not worth it. You seem to want to be here, so then possibly it is worthwhile trying to change your behaviour? You're not selling your soul by changing your approach.

N4 (Answers posting above)

As it seems, being sincere needs to be supplemented by a strategy for sincerity. The other nicks interpret N1 as using a kind of conspicuous sincerity, as expressed in posting 5:2: *especially because previously you have 'pretended to ask' questions to see the*

reaction here. The question appears to be how to decode sincerity, and how to understand the relation between language and intention. At first sight sincerity appears to stand in opposition to lies, irony or acting with overstated politeness. However, sincerity does not always require writing the absolute truth. The preferred sincerity may be one that is crafted within a community subject production preference which means there is a social performance involved. The strategy proposed in posting 5:5 is a *strategy of truth*. If there is something wrong with statements that N1 declares are from a genuine source, then subjectivity as a display of sincerity becomes a fictional game or a matter of sketching. If, in the eyes of the veterans, the sincerity of N1 is troublesome, it also highlights the manner in which the field specific monopoly is crafted when it comes to attitudes, and the advice from N2, N3 and N4 may just as well be interpreted as conservation strategies from dominant field players (Bourdieu, 1984/1991: 133); a hint on the agreed-upon-taste which that they would like N1 to respect. Apparently, sincerity has its own conventional manifestation, or communication ethics, correlated with reliability. It is not enough that N1 declares that she writes out of free will what is on her mind as that will and intention fluctuate; subject positions must be stable and in accordance with a jointly negotiated ontological decorum. This in turn produces an opposition between handling identity work in a creative manner and the ethical subjectivity demanded by the community. If subject production is informed by codes of how to write, sincerity itself becomes narratively restrained.

Gratitude

As we will see, sincerity and coherence are not quite sufficient to gain a preferable position in the field. Being absolutely sincere and coherent may in fact ruin one's social status if not paired with gratitude, which will be outlined in the following. This preference for gratitude is manifest mainly in two main ways: By the many postings containing excuses for not feeling gratitude when one should, and by what is, amongst the nicks themselves, called 'gratitude threads'. The first postings in one such thread are presented below. This particular conversation was chosen to highlight a recurrent phenomenon in the communities – the celebration of the small details of everyday life. The nicks narrate cooking, baking and purchases as something to be grateful about.

5:7 What are you grateful for today?

Personally it's:

1. That Junior liked my experimental food

2. That Junior ate vegetables
3. That the husband had vacuumed, put in the new rug and scrubbed the floor for Christmas
4. That I make such incredible tasty bread
5. That I have my dream job
6. That there is only one day left before I go on leave for 6 days
7. That the evening with Junior went so well
8. That I have stayed on my diet
9. That I have felt so good all evening WITHOUT extra pills

N1 (TPP 2011) Threadstart

5:8 That the extra load of work went as it should
 That I have purchased almost all the Christmas presents
 That I am free until Monday next week
 That my oldest daughter nailed 3 A* today
 That I have had a cosy lunch with my son and later had a nice afternoon of Christmas shopping with my mum
 That I can go to bed soon

N2 (Answers posting above)

5:9 That my son's stomach virus ended just as quickly as it began
 The Christmas card I got from my former colleagues
 That I'll be having the world's most cosy Christmas
 That I've got the world's kindest mother

N3 (Answers posting 5:7)

5:10 That the roast I made for dinner *like heaving it into the oven* came out and tasted very good, all spontaneously (minimal work at the preparations)
 /.../
 That soon we have been married for 13,5 years and every day find reasons to continue fighting together. Even when we are sulking.



N4 (Answers posting 5:7)

Baking, cooking and scrubbing floors are celebrated and commended in this section of the gratitude thread. The activities are made into something more than repetitive chores, i.e., they are attributed a particular value. The thread does not frown upon worldly chores; it is not a refusal of the world but of particular aspects of the world;

the dreary and sad. Whilst deeply focused on matters of the world, the nicks rise above this mundane level and articulate the way that the concrete household tasks generate positive feelings. I comprehend this celebration as simultaneously being a rule of conduct.

If gratitude is seemingly prescribed, negative emotions are seen as potentially problematic, especially if a certain nick is often tired, down or troubled. In especially severe cases of negativity, the correctional postings come in such great numbers that they amount to entire threads of their own, (followed by ‘meta threads’ a little later, which discuss whether or not the correction of the nick was fair). A fraction of one such thread can be seen below. The participating veteran nicks correct a nick (N1) who is writing about a stressful situation.

5:11 Finally! Christmas is over and I'm sitting here with sick kids, nothing unusual. Fifth day of fever. Too damn boring. At the same time the rainwear of my youngest have gone missing at the day care, shit! And apart from that, it's not enough that I've just managed to survive the death of a close friend last Autumn, now I'm gonna lose yet another friend =(In other words, everything is crap.

N1(TPP 2011) Threadstart

5:12 But you've got a roof over your head and food on the table? Nobody is in hospital or dying? In that case you've got a lot to be grateful about!

N2 (Answers initial posting)

5:13 She is on the way of losing a friend. Sounds as if someone actually is dying... 😞

N3 (Answers posting above)

5:14 Yes my friend is unfortunately dying... But I'm supposed to be happy that I have got a roof over my head!

N1 (Answers posting above):

5:15 I meant in the family. You've got a world to be thankful about, outside of the family it is sad but less of a disaster *crass and insensitive* My children are alive=100 % happiness! It can never get any worse than them becoming sick or dying. Every day I receive, every day they live is a bonus, all the time, and all other sorrows will fade away.

N2 (Answers posting above)

5:16 How silly of me to even come here... Family.... yes, me and the children.
N1 (Answers posting above)

5:17 I am sorry if you get pissed off, but you are not alone in living with that kind of stuff and it was actually a serious and benevolent posting about there still being good things to focus upon. There is always something that's good. Always. The tiniest mite of good can be found somewhere.

N2 (Answers posting above)

5:18 I agree with N2. Life really sucks sometimes, crappy things happen, and of course you need to take time to mourn these things. But it is also important to try and see the light in life. For one's own sake! Not to be jaunty or because you_have to_ but so that you'll get by.

N4 (Answers posting above):

5:19 Yeah, the children have food anyway. Right now I have nothing to be grateful about. If you can't be nice you should refrain from writing like that...

N1 (Answers posting 5:12)

5:20 I have not been unpleasant, I have just said that you have a lot to be grateful about, right? The thing with your friend is sad, it is always distressing but that also means that when you meet the pale face of sorrow and death you become more open to seeing the things in life that really are a reason for gratefulness. A roof over your head, food in your stomach and children that are alive, I feel one does not need more, even if I would feel that everything else is fucked up!

N2 (Answers posting above)

However exaggerated the tone of happiness may seem to the unaccustomed reader, the thread presented is part of a textual routine when correcting nicks who are considered overly unappreciative or sad. This goes especially for nicks who predominantly write about problems, which explains the refutation of N1, who only occasionally logs into the community, mainly to ventilate anxieties. However, there are exceptions to the demand for gratitude and the prohibition against negativity. When initiating a new posting by making excuses for oneself, such as 'sorry for all the whining' before writing about one's troubles, the posting will receive more helpful replies. This means it is not negativity that causes the nick problems, but a *thoroughgoing* negativity.

Stability in itself (the art of writing in a consistent way) is, hence, not the guiding code in all circumstances. It is only valued when used to deliver faith in the future or satisfaction with the present but becomes devalued when used for negativity. Nevertheless, negativity can be tolerated in one particular situation. When the veterans criticise a nick who has no one to back her up, or who represents a minority opinion, the very negativism of the critical attitude is unlikely to be noted. Veterans seem to be allowed to exhibit both types of attitude but for a less accustomed nick it may be safer to stick to a positive attitude. Another rule is to use happiness and positivity when talking about one's own life and allow oneself the odd case of negativity when talking of others. The manifestations of happiness and stability may in fact be a matter of distinction rather than displaying a sensation. This would explain why the veterans can allow themselves more negativity than the newcomers. Since they already have manifested the field specific capital of gratitude, stability and optimism, i.e., 'good taste', they can occasionally allow themselves to display negativity without losing face.

Self presentation

If the first part of this chapter has demonstrated how the nicks govern each other in order for the right kind of narrative conduct to materialise, it is only half the story. The majority of the postings are inserted with no friction or conflict but seemingly out of the free will of the nick. This resonates with Haman's (2009: 38) conception of subjectivation – the disciplined subject's incorporation of values so she feels an affinity with them. In the case of the web community, however, the work of subjectivation must be put on display to be noted. Before presenting how self presentation looks in interaction I will demonstrate the easiest way to display a favourable attitude even before interaction starts. The presentation text visible below the avatar⁸⁹ of the nick is another area of positive attitudes on display. These texts often contain a tone of optimism resembling the tone of voice in self-help literature. The presentation text may give the impression that the nick is an active and choosing subject: *Moment by moment, second by second I choose to be the victim or the creator of my own reality*, or it may stress the need for positive thinking: *Every time we do something positive for someone else we send out a small ripple of hope*. Before the nick enters into interaction, a message is conveyed to the rest of the community. The nicks who read the posting have, besides from the content of the posting itself, this additional piece of information about the nick's self-cultivation that has taken place before conversation starts.

⁸⁹ See Glossary in Appendix.

The presentation text is a piece of symbolic capital invested before the battles in the field have begun: It becomes a safety net.

Self presentation when talking about other people

If the presentation texts can be understood as a kind of safety net, there are other, more robust, ways to achieve a position that the others like. This is mainly operated through distinctions; the next feature of interaction to be presented. This section will comprise an analysis of the ways in which 'good taste' is operated, first as it is used for launching ideals of how to live, and second as it is used for talking about the body. As we shall see, it is permitted to mimic content that other nicks have inserted, which means to become inspired by other types of postings, but at the same time it is vital to exhibit discernment in relation to consumer goods.

Distinctions can be exercised in several ways and through numerous topics. No matter the topic distinctions appear to be crafted by expressing a certain morality and in what follows we will have a look at the way distinction is performed through *moralities*. The moralities are often modelled by narrating warning examples of other people's faults and failures. A common example is asking the community what to do in a particular case of maltreatment of children or raising general questions about problematic parenthood. The following posting tells the story of a problematic neighbour. As we shall see, we get to know something about the two nicks taking part in this short interaction, although they are not telling us very much about themselves.

5:21 I have tried to put her on the right track for a long time.

Like asked – can I watch the kids so that you can take a shower? But she doesn't want that.

Said 'Whoops, it looks messy here, can I help you tidy up a bit?' She doesn't want that.

We live next-door and when I am in the washhouse I have asked 'can I do some of your laundry, I don't have that much myself' but she does not want that.

I have tried to introduce other and better types of food by saying like 'I tried a yummy recipe for a chicken casserole yesterday, would you like to have it and try it?' – Naaah, I'll make fish n' chips instead.

Or said 'I'm free tomorrow, how about we cook something new? We might google a recipe.'

But she doesn't want that, it takes time to cook stuff that isn't semi-prepared.

I have also subtly asked if the three-year-old shouldn't stop having the soother full time and perhaps not use the feeding bottle anymore cause of her teeth, but oh no, she'll scream and yell too much.

N1 (VEF 2012)

5:22 /.../ Fish n' chips? Where are the vegetables? Where are the vitamins and the minerals, wholesome fat etcetera? Children need these if they are to develop normally. NO, only semi-prepared food is not sufficient. I use a lot of semi-prepared food like frozen chopped vegetables, canned tomatoes and beans etc., so sure there is super wholesome semi-prepared food, so you can fix a casserole in 15 minutes that's still HEALTHY.

N2 (Answers posting above)

One appears to be able to gain a great deal in terms of social status by the skill of talking about others. Status is achieved not so much because of what the nicks write about themselves, but through a technique of telling tales of reversed ideals, or of 'bad taste'. In short, the nicks in 5:21 and 5:22 define themselves against a backcloth of disintegrated parenthood. When taste is separated in this fashion a symbolic reproduction of people takes place; some people are described as feeding their children nutritious food, while others are characterised as if they could not be bothered. There appears to be a distance established between these types of people and it consists in differences in parental skills and ambition.

Another way to manifest the right way to live goes through the skill of mimicking. One nick may log into the community to tell a story of an edifying or sound situation, which is well received. This story is later followed by postings that contain exactly the same event and the event is often named after the nick who introduced the story in the first place. In 2011 a nick in TPP (labelled N5 in the thread below) told a story about how her son, when asked, answered without hesitation that he knows he is loved. The following days the community overflowed with nicks stating that they too asked their children if they know they are loved. They do remember who told the story first and so they named their experience 'doing an N5'.

5:23 I have also 'done an N5'... well it's become an expression here nowadays



Me: You know I love you like crazy right?

Ben: Yes I know.

Me: Do you know why I love you like crazy?

Ben: *throws lots of air kisses in my direction *

Me: But why?

Ben: Ehh.... cause you like me?

Well, it's really that simple 😊

N1 (TPP 2011) Threadstart

5:24 *hihi* Go Ben! 😊 I have also done an N5!

Asked all three of them earlier.

Me: 'Do you know that I love you?'

Children: 'Yes' (and here the 5-year-old said 'and I luv you'). *sweetie* 😊

Me: 'Do you know why I love you?'

5-year-old: 'Because you do'.

6-year-old: 'Because you say it several times every day'.

8-year-old: 'Because you're my mum'

So clear and simple! 😊

N2 (Answers posting above)

5:25 What did I miss? Why should one report a reason for one's love?

N3 (Answers posting 5:23)

5:26 Huh, you don't have to of course, but it's always fun to hear children reason about this and that 😊

N4 (Answers posting above)

The two threads presented achieve a kind of *subjectivation-by-proxy*. Through recounting the story of the problematic parent living next door or the children's feelings the nicks manifest how well they have incorporated ideals of good parenting. So far, this means that appealing social positions in the field can be secured through education performed by the other nicks, through mimicking other postings and through subjectivation-by-proxy, in uses of the allegedly well-behaved child or the ill-behaving neighbour. As we saw in postings 5:21 and 5:22, status is also achieved by pointing to the perceived *lack* of status in other groups of people; a typical feature of how a field geared by symbolic capital leads to segmented social structures, e.g., divisions between what is considered 'high' and 'low' (Anheier et al., 1995: 866). The segmentation also includes the child. There is a certain child – overt and public – that is much needed for subjectivation-by-proxy to function in the communities.

This feature of the moralities coincides with Collet's (2005) finding about how children in web community settings are used as identity enhancement. In the fields of the communities where certain subjectivities are the objects of fight, the child can be used as a weapon, but the logic is complex. It is not sufficient to simply love the child. Neither is it entirely sufficient that the child knows it is loved. The child needs to *articulate* this knowledge. The articulate child is simultaneously a narrative consequence of a preference and a field specific capital; this is how the child ought to be described if the nick wants to reap credits. As most nicks in the parental communities have children, that asset alone would not make them stand out in any way and the nicks cannot – as in the case of Berg and Peltola's study (2014) – examine the child themselves to establish whether or not it is a success. What remains to be scrutinised is the *story* about the child and, therefore, certain narrative conditions must be added. These conditions transform the child and it is converted in much the same way as money, although in this case on a market consisting of symbolic goods. Whilst rules of conduct decree that it is acceptable to mimic content, the ontological decorum orders how it should be presented.

Self presentation through consumption

When the reader cruises the communities the many themes, as previously mentioned, seem open to everyone. One can post although one has no academic degree, talk of the small pleasure of having a cup of coffee and still receive polite answers, and self presentation is not damaged due to writing about living in a rented apartment. It is not manifestations of economic capital that govern interaction, but manifestations of symbolic capital. The matter of importance is displaying consumption choices: Knowing how to separate the wheat from the chaff, i.e.. demonstrating acquaintanceship. As it is essential to understand this feature of self presentation we will now take a closer look at the ways in which discernment in matters of consumption is carried out.

The first narrative trick is to display a capacity to *tell the difference* between various kinds of consumer goods. The communities contain an abundance of postings on the skill involved in distinguishing fine art from mass-produced or cheap goods, as in the next exemplary posting that elaborates on differences in the way that alcohol is packaged.

5:27 No, I totally agree with you. And here it comes: there IS no high class canned beer, and no truly fine bag-in-box wine either.

WORTH THE MONEY perhaps, but not top class. It's impossible to call oneself an epicure if one _prefers_ canned beer and bag-in-box to proper beer in a bottle and real wine / .../ Generally, I never buy bag-in-box or canned beer. My husband who enjoys beer prefers to drink one or two truly fine bottles rather than five cans. He would probably never manage five cans by the way, then he would throw up or something like that.

(TPP 2011)

Posting 5:27 makes a simple sorting of the characteristics of refinement: If wine comes in a cardboard box it is less refined and when it comes in a bottle it is more sophisticated. Drinking for the sake of intoxication is dismissed, whilst drinking for the sake of flavour is endorsed. The way to distinction, hence, bypasses material resources such as the money needed to invest in high-quality products, and instead stops at discernment. Keeping this in mind, consumer choices can be narrated as made for financial reasons without being subject to ridicule from the other nicks, but they must appear to be made by a connoisseur, as advocated in the next posting.

5:28 You buy the cheapest you can find, I couldn't give a shit, but don't make it up to be as good as everything else. Sometimes you don't care about quality, it's not always the number one priority, or it's not even possible to buy within the financial limits, but then you'll have to deal with it, and stand by it. I buy furniture at Ikea. Not because I think it's as good as artisanal craftwork, but because that's what I can afford right now. But I still see the difference! On the other hand, I don't buy the cheapest jam from Eldorado, because it tastes nothing but sugar and E numbers, and I can afford 10 SEK to get a tastier jam. It's about priorities. Nothing else. There is no sense in arguing that the cheaper jam is better because it's the one you can afford!

(TPP 2011)

Posting 5:28 points out two different reasons for buying furniture at IKEA – one may fool oneself into believing that IKEA quality is just as good as that of an artisanal craftsmanship, or one understands that the two can by no means be compared but prioritises the lower cost. The skill appears to concern evaluation and informed choice. When money is short quality can lose out, but the point is not the lack of money but that one knew the difference between craftsmanship and mass production. Consequently, it is not consumer goods that are to be accumulated in the conversations about the relation between taste-knowledge-money. What seems to be at stake is displaying calibrated and calculated choices. Choice appears as the true

material of distinction, and the ability to demonstrate the reason behind a choice is to display the symbolic capital needed in this field.

Choosing what to buy is an activity that can be extended beyond craftsmanship and quality, as we will see next; health and ethics are also employed as components for distinctions. The postings below describe evaluations of potential purchases. They say nothing about the monetary value of the items, but about the relation between the purchaser and the commodity. By choosing to buy a particular commodity, a level of *consciousness* is manifested. The first example below signals consciousness in matters of health and the second in matters of ethics.

5:29 I think the recipes one finds on the net are only so-so, feels like they've squeezed in unnecessary calories in the shape of high-carbohydrate accompaniments, dressings etc. Have also checked at Pinterest, but the wholesome recipes there are peppered with peanut butter and white bread and the likes...? / .../

Stuff I eat a lot of are for instance chicken filet with grilled root vegetables, perhaps a cold sauce made out of low fat yoghurt, heaps of curd, vegetables, salads, lentil soup etc.

(VEF 2013)

5:30 I don't notice any differences in flavour, but I'm not so good at that...

However I do know how I want the world to be. And I don't want chemicals polluting nature, and I don't want meat factories with stressed-out animals. So I chose WWOOF-certified⁹⁰ or the likes, when it's possible.

So quality for me lies not in the flavour but in the world in which the food is produced.

(TPP 2011)

Postings 5:29 and 5:30 describe being interpellated (or resisting interpellation) by consumer goods and the value they represent. In 5:29 the nick is too proficient to be fooled by recipes with unnecessary calories and in 5:30 the nick is too ethical to be bothered about flavour. The question is: What kind of self presentation is achieved

⁹⁰ The Swedish equivalent of WWOOF is the KRAV certificate.

in this talk about calories, carbohydrates, chemicals and certifications? Who turns around to respond to the hailing, who establishes a relation to the product, and what happens when a consumer choice is made? One property of the conversations is, I think, that it is an act of *becoming*. The consumption choice articulates the subject more clearly. The position of ‘Nobody In Particular’, an indistinct subject, is converted into a more visible position and a personal value is created that resembles the value of the choice. By avoiding unhealthy calories and by opting for ethics rather than flavour the two nicks in the postings above becomes distinct – one as healthy and the other as ethical. Differences between products are accentuated because they translate into differences between subjects. The subject that materialise in the postings has a reasonable level of expertise to make the consumer choice, and the articulation that there *is* a choice implies other subjects that putatively do not make the same choices. When this process of becoming is rejected, as in the next posting, it receives no response.

5:31 The difference is not always notable, just because you’re told it’s better quality and more expensive it doesn’t have to be true. Sometimes it may of course be true but far from always... but some like to believe it.
(TPP 2011)

Posting 5:31 does not receive any answers. One way of interpreting the silence is that the posting violates the ontological decorum. It breaks up the relation between the goods and the subject by stating that there may be no differences of quality in a particular product but that *some like to believe it*. This means the posting perforate the activity of distinctions. It negates the constitution whereby the subject is allowed to come to life through ideological applications. Instead, what is articulated is the mere hoax, or; the face of consumer ideology.

Self-presentation through body talk

As noted in the self presentations described in this chapter, status is achieved by means of displaying discernment and through the nick staging herself as healthy or morally upright. So far the preference seems to lean towards immateriality: Taste and knowledge, i.e., capacities residing within the subject. We will now turn to the body and the ways it can be narrated to generate a social position of status.

The body is yet another surface for distinctions, although it seems that its mere appearance matters less. When the nicks discuss the body it is mainly treated as a problematic object and the recurrent issue is that of control. The most important

thing to manifest is not the right kind of body but the very *endeavour* to achieve the right kind of body. Again, the capital to demonstrate in this arena is not material in the sense of narrating corporal perfection, but is generated by telling a story of having particular *dispositions*. This tendency is notable in the two postings below. They talk about setting limits for oneself, sticking to them, and controlling desire.

5:32 Second week of shaping up.

I have been even stricter during the second week of shaping up. Only one glass of wine, Thursday evening when it was the husband's birthday. Three small pieces of dark chocolate on Friday evening and a tiny piece of fruit pie as dessert after lunch last Sunday, that's the only gluttony I have indulged in. Well, a handful of home popped popcorn twice. Apart from that, healthy food and an insane amount of exercise. Have been working out every day except two, and those days I walked for 80 and 120 minutes! /.../

The result was -0,2 kilos. During the first week of shaping up I gained 0,3 kilos. So the result after two weeks of shaping up was +0,1 kilo; a standstill in other words. Feels far from fair, but that's the way it goes sometimes. All in all I am stuck at my + 1,5 summer kilos.

I won't make any big changes this week and I'll give it another go. If there is still no result I'll shape up even more. *grumbling*

(TPP 2012)

5:33 The hardest part is becoming surprised.

I have decided to do without sweets and biscuits. I don't see it as me sacrificing or mortifying myself or something like that, I abstain because I know I feel better doing so. I have no problem with this. Most of the time. But like yesterday a colleague bought a whole box of cream puffs. Cream puff is my absolute favourite type of pastry! I LOVE cream puffs. Had I known before I would have pulled myself together, even asked the colleague to not buy one for me. Now instead I had to go through an inner struggle for quiiiiite a while. Should I eat mine? Never mind sort of, just one cream puff? Or should I split it and have half of it? One quarter? Or perhaps have it all anyway? What difference does it make in a hundred years? Yadadayada in my head... Til' I finally got sorted, that no - I don't want it - really. As N6 says, if you need to negotiate with yourself it means you should refrain. Otherwise you wouldn't have to negotiate! And when you leave as a 'winner' of that kind of inner struggle your determination becomes so much stronger. And vice versa, if

you constantly allow yourself to deviate from promises made to yourself they become worthless in the end.

Today my kiddie turns 5. I will not eat his Batman cake. It doesn't even feel difficult. This time I come prepared. ☺

(TPP 2013)

The postings above do two things. They talk of temptations, almost as if eating has transformed into paranoia, but first and foremost they celebrate how the nicks rose above sinful thoughts and continued to live by the rules and so, the very rules appear just as important as the physical result. The postings confirm that the nicks are believers in a particular life style of abstaining and celebrate a belief and memorise codes of conduct in one move. The preferred conduct should, however, not be read as a mere denial of needs or a refusal of the world. I would say there are echoes of the Foucauldian take on askesis in the postings about resisting temptation. Through askesis, Foucault argues, the subject is able to grasp, or subjectivate, a reality inherent in the world (1971/2008: 277 ff.). One such truth might be the notion of the growing subject – a subject perpetually becoming stronger, as 5:33 articulates: *And when you leave as a 'winner' of that kind of inner struggle your determination becomes so much stronger.* When one gains strength, the sacrifices cost hardly anything. In this case the art of abstention enlarges the subject – when the body shrinks the mind grows. This also entails that eating healthy is an achievement in itself – it needs introspection and self-control. Narrations about toning the body, hence, achieve two things: a public announcement of a system of beliefs, (the best way to treat the body) and a meditation directed inwards (how do I achieve this body?). At the very same time a taste display is performed – the taste for abstention. In that sense one may understand the postings as displays of a kind of negative satisfaction. The accounts of abstention seem to celebrate another type of satisfaction altogether – that which resides in *not* enjoying a particular type of item that an ideological commitment has labelled unattractive. The way that this taste for abstention is applied will be further displayed in Chapter Eight, where we will examine accounts of food and social hierarchies. For now it is perhaps sufficient to state that the dieting body can be understood as a manifestation of ideology.

Just as in the case of consumption there are differences articulated in the ambitions involved in training the body. Abstention is in itself a distinction, and other types of distinction come from clothing, as described in the next posting, and from measurement in the subsequent posting.

5:34 /.../ running feels more serious than jogging. I have no 'jazz pants' or sweatshirt but real runners' clothes, however I still want to lose weight. Nevertheless, I register all my results and have a goal to become faster and run longer distances so I think I can call myself a runner anyhow 🤖.

(TPP 2012)

Distinctions apparently relate to identity and the nick in the posting above staggers between two types of identity – 'the jogger' and 'the runner'. The preferred one seems to be the calculated competitor: The runner. So, when discussing weight and exercise in the communities, the preferred narration is one of a professionalized body – work and leisure conflate. The preferred narrated body is characterised by abstention, discipline and measurement.

5:35 I've been working out about 2-3 weeks now, 1 session per day, started with 10-15 minutes on the stationary bike and then I did away with like 150-200 calories, little by little I reached 400 calories/34 minutes.

My goal is mainly to get rid of all the fat around the waist and down, and obviously to lose weight. I notice that when I have cycled that much I have lost 1,5 kilos, but I want to exercise more to reduce the waist and the parts below the waist faster.

I have a treadmill at home where I do maximum of 10 kilometres per hour and, as I mentioned, a stationary bike.

Will it work with 2 sessions 6 days/week? and do I have any chance of results?

(VEF 2013)

In the communities, distinctions are not hidden, coded or decided in any secret space for the specially invited or knowledgeable. They are for all to know: Articulated, explicit, measured and published. Just how articulated and how measured the body can actually be is notable in posting 5:35. The body is not described as simply moving about, but as a data producing entity and an arithmetic number. The movement itself is dismembered through the numbers produced and this dismembered movement is later reported in the communities. The physical exercise – and certainly writing about it – represents a flow of value. The exercise is assessed and the value

of the exercise (Am I a ‘jogger’ or a ‘runner?’) is transported back to the subject. According to Bourdieu (1977/2011: 88 f.) there are recurrent and coherent principles in every social practice and when we grasp the structure of these principles, we embody the world behind it. The world behind this social practice comes across as fragmented, hierarchical and public.

Thus an appropriate self presentation is also performed in narrations of the body. The body does not need to be perfect, but the will must. By disciplining the body it is as if the interior of the subject is accessed and in that sense the prescribed conduct that ensures social status is rather monastic. Although the first impression of the parental communities is that they are egalitarian (everyone is allowed in), we see that in fact its social topography is defined by core values that need to be put on display through manifesting an on-going gratitude, by launching moralities and displaying discernment and discipline.

Rejected self presentations: On gender and decorum

Nevertheless and contrary to the impression given above, the communities do not solely comprise of self-governed, disciplined subjects. We will now become acquainted with the reception of nicks who fall outside of the formula for self presentation. Occasionally a nick stands out through another type of self presentation – non-positive, non-constructive or non-balanced – without seemingly being harmed by objections from the others. Usually, most of them adjust. Either they adapt to community discourse or leave.⁹¹ There are, nevertheless, other ways to deal with the preferred self presentations when one does not fit in. One is to ignore reprimands from the others as best one can; another is to try and open separate threads where one invites people who share the same experiences. The way these strategies receive responses seemingly relates to gender. In what follows I will introduce two nicks whose subjectivity falls out of the general matrix. The first nick (N1) is registered as a man, the second (N2) as a woman.

The fact that N1 cannot be bothered by people’s perception of him is already obvious in the way he introduces himself in the presentation text attached to his avatar: *Same shit different day: The man who can neither debate, nor write more than 2 sentences. Logged in around the clock, every day of the year.* This nick apparently does not care much about obtaining a position of status in the community. N1 recurrently refers to himself as a slave, a proletarian alienated from his place of work, stating that

⁹¹ In the VEF community it is more common to break the accepted self-presentation rules. At the same time the rules appear a little more flexible. Because this community has more visitors, it appears the rule breaking activities are lost in the vast amount of postings during one day.

he has no interests and describing himself as passive. He declares he has no interest in having a sexual relationship, that he does not want to gain friends, that he is a male chauvinist and that he has no plans for the future. In short, this nick ignores all forms of ontological decorum. He has seemingly become a hero to some groups of nicks, and an abomination to other groups. The latter criticise N1 persistently, but the reprimands seem to have no effect.

About his level of intelligence, N1 writes:

5:36 /.../ i'm totally aware of the kind of odd muppet I am.
(TPP 2011)

On the importance of sex, N1 comments:

5:37 Sex is clearly overrated. Ol' one-eye going in and out... ha ha such a silly thing really. I'd rather spend time at the computer. 😊
(2011)

In a gratitude thread that extols the joys in life, N1 enters and make a joke about this community trend:

5:38 /.../ if you complain someone will come and point out that they know someone that has no arms and legs and he is both blind and deaf but soooo grateful and happy and thinking about what kind of pizza to order. 🍕🍕
(2012)

When considering the objections his postings receive from time to time N1 is really inflicting some kind of damage by expressing his negative views on life. Nevertheless, his postings do not belong to any dominant discourse. Instead they belong in the margins of community opinion and, arguably, constitute only a minor challenge to the preference for sincerity, coherence, gratitude and choice. Having said that, the predominant way of writing apparently does not influence him either – N1 does not seem to learn anything, neither from benign comments, nor from reprimands. He does not improve. Does this mean that he does not become a subject when discursive power hails him? Is he not interpellated?

One way of answering these questions is to ask who the discursive calling is for. Are the demands for gratitude, optimism and coherence mainly assigned to the

women in the communities? Are these arenas mainly fields of femininity? This would explain why a man, when ignoring the ontological decorum, does not inflict too much damage, in contrast to women who fail to display the agreed-on taste. In that sense, N1 is *less of a subject* in these particular arenas of female bonding, affirmation, competition and speculations in value. N1 may be just a bagatelle, someone who provokes a slight irritation but nothing more. In that sense his rebel position is quite comfortable, because he simultaneously has a dominant and a subordinate position. He gets away with violating the rules that generate status because on the one hand the rules are not for him, but on the other he cannot change them.

If N1 represents a subject that is neither bothered nor embraced by the rules, there are other subject categories that are the target of much blame and complaints. One is the poor mother. Disliked subjects, such as the poor mother, sometimes create separate threads where only nicks who share the same experience are encouraged to write. Separate threads are one way to prevent critique in the conversation and initiate support. These threads may be started to debate a variety of delicate matters – spouses who take no interest in the children, disease and psychiatric illness, problematic dealings with authorities and experiences of poverty or sexual assaults. However, because the communities are open the threads are obviously easy to invade, and the recurrent pattern is for attempts at such separatism to be interrupted by nicks, particularly veterans, who want to express a divergent opinion. In the next example a query for advice gets interrupted by the veteran nick N4.

5:39 Hello all you ‘poor’ and/or ‘single’ parents out there! I have a child who is 3 years old. A wonderful daughter. Have been alone with her since she was a baby, because her daddy does not want to participate. I am single and smashing... We live in a two-room apartment in a rather big city here in Sweden. My daughter is at the daycare 15h per week. I’m employed by the hour. We are very poor but still happy. /.../

My income looks like this:
Salary: About 4000 SEK⁹² per month
Child benefits: 1050 SEK
Alimony: 1273 SEK
Housing benefits: 2100 SEK

92 1 Euro is approximately 9,30 SEK.

That is about 8500 SEK every month. When bills and food are paid for we have about 3000 left to spend. In other words not much.

But now to the point:

I thought I'd ask if there are more parents living like us? In this thread we can tip each other off about everything, how to save money, how to find the cheapest food, low-price recipes, cheap stuff to buy, sales etc. Hope you understand.

N2 (VEF 2010)

5:40 I can immediately advise you that with your income you are probably eligible for complementary economic support. I made a preliminary estimation and counted with you having about 4.700 SEK for rent and electricity and I arrive at a deficit of about 1500 SEK for you. You probably also have a household insurance, fees for the residents' association and bus card that would reside, so you could perhaps even get 2000 SEK a month. That's a lot of money when you're living on the edge.

N3 (Answers posting above)

5:41 But why choose to have children when you are already in such a financial mess???

N4 (Answers posting above)

5:42 Probably it wasn't planned. We live in Sweden so things have a way of sorting themselves out anyhow.

N5 (Answers posting above)

5:43 Yes, because others pay for it!

N4 (Answers posting above)

5:44 Perhaps you could respect and accept that one actually doesn't want comments from you since you're not helpful at all, plus simply makes stupid comments that no one wants to read, as you may have noticed? Moralists come in great numbers in VEF, so you may want to keep your thoughts and

opinions to yourself /.../

N2 (Answers posting above)

5:45 Likewise, nobody is forcing you to read or comment, right? Can understand that you find my question stupid, because none of you seems to be able to answer it in any concrete manner, but yell ‘moralist’ as soon as someone talks back.

N4 (Answers posting above)

The interchange presented is one example of the recurrent problems in the fields of the parental communities when it comes to interaction: Although a question or a story was never intended to create a social position of status, such a position is appointed anyway. Establishing a separate thread in a public environment becomes hazardous because of the fact that every presentation of self can be received as something it is not aimed to be, or received as a proposition about social value that has to be evaluated according to the principles of the field. In this case it may be that N4 actually reads posting 5:39 as a case of *publicatio sui* – a public attempt to beg forgiveness for having children when poor. The self presentation is embraced as something it was perhaps never intended to be; when N2 inserted posting 5:39 she presumably did not conceive of the story as laden with potential social value. As noted by Beverly Skeggs (2011: 496); if we want to perform a publicly appealing self presentation we need to put certain aspects of ourselves on display as investments in value, and conceal others. The nicks relate to a kind of market of moralities and in the thread above, not much social value can be excavated by being a single and poor mother, because it is a well-known and disliked character among the veterans in the communities. Whilst actually receiving some advice, N2 also receives an evaluation of status.

In summary, one possible reason for why N1 (registered as a man) does not defend himself may be that the rules of value are not applicable to him, whilst the reason for the defence from N2 is because the rules actually assign a value to her. This is not to say that the separate threads are of no value, considering the concrete advice handed out in the example. Nonetheless, when one enters and registers as a woman, one is co-defined by the other nicks and becomes someone in particular, either liked or disliked. The reproaches that emerge when a woman is positioned outside the ontological decorum – the agreement about the world – seem to inflict some kind of harm.

The dying community and field prizes

So far this chapter has revealed generic rules for achieving social status in the communities, and what can happen when the rules are not abided. This section will outline some of the consequences of these rules, especially when they are administered by the veterans and when the rules of status solidify into social control.

Sometimes nicks articulate that they want to leave the communities because of the harsh tone of voice and quarrels are often initiated on the basis of rules of conduct. In what follows we will view a debate about ‘community climate’ in TPP, where the number of members began to drop in 2012. In discussions in the spring of 2012, some of the problems caused by veteran nicks in the community were brought to the fore. The veterans were considered to constitute an opinion police that scared people off, and some of the nicks described the community as dying. In an effort to recruit new members, new personnel were employed by the editorial management of TPP 2013. One of the tasks of the new employees was to increase the level of activity. Some months later an idea for improvement was launched; the idea was to find suitable ‘ambassadors of the community’ amongst the nicks. The ambassadors should initiate new topics of interest in the various themes and keep conversations flowing. The veterans considered this an artificial respiration that would promote nothing more than pseudo topics. The first posting below comes from a veteran who does not like the idea of ambassadors and it is followed by a response from a nick who does not like veterans.

5:46 /.../ I believe the idea of ambassadors is not wrong. But sending out peppy ambassadors into the community may be a bit weird. I believe that a lot of us ‘veterans’ are reluctant to engage in all that peppy attitude and the ‘hughsies’ and being part of the ‘TPP Family’, and in that case the ambassadors do more harm than good.

N1 (TPP 2014 answers an initial posting from the editorial staff)

5:47 It is exactly that which some of you (no names mentioned) manifest that causes new members to back off before even entering. The self-righteousness. The opinion that you are an exclusive secret assembly – better and more mature and more intellectual than other parental communities. You even have the nerve to spell it out!

Although the messenger function is overheated with slander, more childish than in grammar school.

I actually think this community needs to substitute some members with more normal and stable parents. Who would like to use the community for the kinds of discussion it was meant for.

N2 (Answers posting above)

Although posting 5:47 is immediately rejected by several veterans it may have opened a floodgate of latent discontent. The heterodoxy displayed in the posting apparently threatens the stable positions of the field and forces the veterans to speak. In the next posting another veteran, labelled N3, explains how the drop in the number of visitors is a result of competition from other platforms rather than the climate in TPP.

5:48 Killing competition from Facebook. When I once became a member of TPP (it was called Wired Parents at that time) there were no social media. No Facebook, no Instagram, no Pinterest, hardly even any chat channels (well ICQ existed, perhaps also MSN had started...) Nevertheless, there were forums and communities and when I discovered Wired Parents⁹³ it felt totally fantastic. Wow, a place where I could talk to like-minded persons, ask about things I didn't know and whine about pelvic girdle pain and other stuff that was difficult and in return get compassion, good advice and a pep talk.

TPP's strength resides in the 'anonymous' discussions. Here you can raise questions that are perhaps too sensitive for Facebook, questions where you want several approaches (the circle of friends in Facebook easily becomes too homogenous), debates where you want to use sharper argumentation than in a context where you are more personal etcetera.

This is my idea anyway. How do you see it? =)

N3 (TPP 2014)

This defence seems did not seem to put a damper on the discussion. In yet another thread on the topic the discouragement is even more outspoken, and the blame for the situation clearly placed upon the veterans. Several postings point to how the rules of status have transformed into social control.

⁹³ Wired Parents was the predecessor of TPP. It was started in 1997 and when sold the name was altered.

5:49 I think it (partly) could have been different people here, and that it could have been much more pleasant. That people could have discussed stuff that the community is designed for – that is child-and parent related issues etc. That one could have received support if one had a problem in one's parenting.

Instead there's a bunch of veterans (you used the word yourselves!) who answer each question of that kind by a) picking on the writer and b) talking about how much better parents they are themselves and how much better their own children are. Plus they back each other up, make fun of everyone with an opinion not tolerated by the opinion police in the community etcetera.
N4 (TPP 2014)

Posting 5:49 states that the community is not used for its original purpose – the arena is described as derailed. Considering the vast amount of similar criticism towards the communities it would be difficult to understand why people tolerate this enforced control and the risk of blame. Arguably, there is something to be won by staying on, despite the supervision. One of the rewards in this virtually mediated interaction is maintaining face but that is perhaps not be the biggest trophy. Posting 5:49 highlights the struggle about how to define, own and distribute field specific capital: A collectively approved identity of being a good parent. This makes the battle into a contest of control; not only does the veteran wish to control her own self presentation in order to secure capital, but *to control the self presentation and capital of others*. One can really establish social control in an interactive, as well as a discursive manner by fighting for a particular textual conduct and enforcing norms much like local law enforcement in charge of the symbolic violence. The importance of gaining access to the field specific capital explains the relative conformity of topics and manners of interaction.

Still unanswered is, however, why people keep on coming back to a place of such tensions? Obviously there is always the possibility of exit; to unregister and never come back to the particular community where one feels uncomfortable – disappointed members leave and new members register. But the more important issue is to understand why nicks who express a sensation of discomfort still stick around? One reason could be that one has private contact with one or more nicks who provide valuable support. There may also be other and quite banal reasons for staying. Maybe the contact with the others, despite the high level of conflicts around accepted ways of writing, makes the nick feel *rewarded*. The conflicts themselves may generate sensations of gratification related to the very strain of combat. One of the problematic

features, Bourdieu notes (1984/1991: 133), in analysing any field of interaction is to comprehend the strain between heterodoxy and orthodoxy. This strain has a particular outcome in the communities. If the heterodoxic position aims at reformation (the dissatisfied nick who still stays in the community) and the orthodox position (the veteran nick) tries to maintain authority by preserving the structure of the field, we can understand the terror balance: Some nicks try to gain the possibility of defining status, and are hindered by nicks who already have this privilege. Still, the supervision, the assignment of status and the reprimands from the veterans appear to be accepted. This, I think, depends precisely upon the fact that the field is not just a place of surveillance, but a place for rewards. There may be a consensus shared by everyone who participates – a consensus that the game is worth investing in and simply by taking part in it the value of the field prices is reproduced. This in turn entails that even the revolutionists among the nicks are pre-structured into valuing the reward of social acknowledgement and this disposition, this pre-conceived making of the subject, becomes an obstacle to change. Simultaneously, it indicates the strength of the sensation of being assigned, or deprived of, social value. It is possibly so strong that surveillance now is internalised. The panoptic surveillance that makes the nick aware of the putative presence of other nicks would clearly describe the situation in a parental community. Even more important, the inmate of the ‘community prison’ is no longer uncertain whether or not surveillance is being carried out. She knows that it is and, hence, the relation is not fictitious as propounded by Foucault (1975/2009: 175 ff., 202 ff.). By staying in the community and trying to become accepted, the nick needs to adapt to the rules of status. This in turn means she has to monitor what she is writing and so, the majority of the nicks behave as model prisoners.

Summary

This chapter was written with the intent of introducing some of the general rules of status in the parental communities and the manner in which they are observed. I have demonstrated how the subject is crafted either together with others according to certain rules of conduct and ontological decorums, or performed by a willing individual – by the subject upon the subject. Particular values guide this performance, and particular ways of interacting.

The most important core values to apply when ensuring a solid community position are sincerity, gratitude, stability and coherence. Sincerity in itself is of low or no value in terms of community status if it is not considered to be reliable, stable and disciplined by the values held by the veterans. I have argued that sincerity needs to be understood against the background of these preferred values; it is thus a *pseudo-sin-*

cerity. In this sense the world in the parental communities does not differ much from the world in any type of community that one enters voluntarily. The major difference in this case is that the rules and constraints are spelled out in words, and that they remain visible for every participant in the community. This implies that the rules of conduct need to be obeyed in closer detail than away from keyboard.

A position of status can be achieved through different techniques of presentation. It can be done by describing failed subjects who are positioned as a comparison with oneself, by mimicking other nicks' success stories, and by narratively evoking an open and articulate child. A particular way of aiming for status goes through distinctions, and in discussions about taste and consumption a relation between the purchaser and the product is established. In addition, social status can be produced through narrations of the body, where mastering it is described as something beyond becoming physically fit: A strong body is a sign of a strong subject and is characterised by abstention, discipline and measurement. Two features of distinction particularly stand out; how materiality or material results are not made to matter. Instead it is *discernment* (when discussing consumer goods) and *attitude* (when talking about weight and exercise).

The values and the distinctions, especially when guarded by the veteran nicks, transform into social control. The control itself may lead to two possible outcomes; a decline of activity, or rewards in the shape of the field prize of reputation, at least for those who manage to abide by the rules. Regardless of the fact that the terrain in the communities shifts depending on the participants and topic and although boundaries of identity are negotiated, the stage appears set in advance – set with particular ideals and meanings – in a way that thwarts identity diffusion.

Consumer ideology and distinction

In the case of the parental communities yet another feature apparently hinders diffusion. Consumer ideology seems to model the subject just as much as interaction and rules of conduct. When applying the Althusserian view on ideology this is not surprising, given its far-reaching scope: There is no practice except by and for ideology and there is no ideology except by the subject and for the subject (Redclift, 2005: 175). Nevertheless, in the postings about consumption the double constitution described by Althusser (1971: 171) – how ideology models the subject and the subject materialise in ideology – seems to be something more than a constitution. It may, I think, be a dependency. The commodity obviously needs a subject-in-the-flesh to buy it but, more importantly, the subject-in-the flesh needs the commodity to sharpen its contours. There is a relation established where the article communicates

something back to its owner; something besides its content and use and in that sense the product is transformative and exceeds its content. When accepting and buying the commodity, the subject is incorporated into its symbolic content. Hence, the path to distinction goes through a knowledge of *what* one is buying (and what kind of status position can thereby be accomplished), and through the competence of not living through and by illusions. This competence makes up the distinction, which in turn preserves the social world. This means that interaction in the community milieu constitutes limits for people, much the same as proposed by Bourdieu (1991/2012):

The sense of one's place, as the sense of what one can or cannot 'allow oneself', implies a tacit acceptance of one's position, a sense of limits ('that's not meant for us') or - what amounts to the same thing - a sense of distances, to be marked and maintained, respected, and expected of others (ibid.: 235).

Through the discussions about purchases positions of social status are defined, tested and accepted – both positions of the subject writing and positions of others (for instance people who believe that furniture from IKEA and furniture sold on High Street are equally refined) are affirmed. In essence, the assignment of value onto commodities (such as jam, furniture or wine) or onto particular practices (such as exercise, baking or cooking) enables a ranking of subjects. This ranking is the end result of a preference drawn from consumer ideology. The mechanism of competition that regulates the producer of a commodity is also visible on the side of the consumer.

Still, in spite of the many obstacles that prevent diffusion, the game of this field is not invariably rigged. If disliked in one of the themes it is possible to choose another theme where one's opinions and tastes are more tolerated, and if still disliked there is always the possibility to bargain with sincerity, or apply a strategy of truth to receive a warmer response. The point is not that the nicks reach a point of no return and are doomed to a certain position; the point is that there are preferences towards which the nicks need to relate and that the preferences are less restrictive for some, and more so for others.

6. The tyranny of choice

6:1 I do believe that there are poor children.

But that only depends on the parents prioritising like assholes and putting the money in all the wrong places. And the children are exposed to the family finance decisions that parents make.

(VEF 2013)

In Chapter Five some of the ways to achieve status in community interactions have been delineated. The codes of conduct promoted a relatively stable sincerity, sensations of gratitude and crafting the self as a responsible governor of the body as well as of the interior domains. This chapter starts with the short posting 6:1 about parents who make the wrong type of choices. It is taken from one of the numerous community conversations about the nature of poverty and it is a good representative of the common viewpoint about poor people, and especially poor parents. The focus of this chapter is another common denominator in the presentations and positioning of subjects; the ability – and obligation – to make choices. The responsible governor would, as an example, be impossible to narrate without also taking a stand on choices, as the whole apparatus of distinctions is built upon an idea that the individual chooses who to be through consumption choices, choices of how to exercise, choices of how to feed one's child and so forth. The rule of performing choices forms a foundation for community readings of several domains of life – the intimate spheres such as family life or family finance and likewise spheres outside of the intimate, such as professional life. Making choices is equated with assuming responsibility and choice and responsibility are often intertwined. While Chapter Five probed into preferred self presentations, this chapter will investigate the discursive foundation for self presentation. The aim of this chapter is to deconstruct usages of the concept of choice and to look into the distilled subject ideal formulated as a result of celebrating choice.

The chapter will start by introducing the reader to how choice, attitude and change are related, i.e., the relation between choice and effects of choice, and what little critique there is of the notion that choice means change. Lastly, other concepts that help fixate choice will be introduced and we will investigate how choice, control, self-knowledge and responsibility buttress each other in a kind of favoured subjectivity; the Homo Eligens.

Choice and change

This section will comprise a presentation of the dominant and the subordinate community discourse on choice and the effects of choice, demonstrating how the preference for choice enables images of more and less responsible subjects. Following that I will introduce a conversation about a highly concrete, although imaginary, subject (in the conversation she is labelled *Jane at Tesco*) that the nicks employ to debate possible limitations in the activity of choosing between life options.

The choice and attitude themes in the communities appear to belong to a highly dominant discourse, because they are professed by veterans, because they appear on a regular basis and because they are rarely contested. These themes are used in a number of ways. One such way is to construct differences between the preferred, responsible subject who knows how to choose and who assumes responsibility for her choices, and the problematic or irresponsible one who avoids choices and puts the blame for failures elsewhere. Choice is understood as a watershed between different types of subjects: Some are not afraid of choosing whilst others hesitate, do nothing at all and do not understand that it is their *obligation* to choose. No one escapes the need to make choices, as the following posting explains.

6:2 On having choices.

Every morning we have the privilege of waking up we make choices. We choose all the time. Most of the choices we make in a day we don't think about but we all choose. Whether it's about moving to the other side of the country or what kind of attitude we want to have that day. Sometimes I wake up and decide to be in a bad mood - and then I'll take my chances to find something to sulk about. That's a choice too. Other days I may feel bad from physical impediments such as pain, but I decide to find the silver lining that day. We choose as long as we breathe.

(TPP 2011)

Posting 6:2 represents an everyday understanding of choices and is a supposition shared by many. We are, according to the posting, not always aware of our disposition for choice: *Most of the choices we make in a day we don't think about but we all chose*. This means that to choose we do not need to focus much upon cultivating the self, as it is what we do if we allow ourselves to act according to our nature. But the posting also addresses situations when we need to be more active in choice-making: We need to monitor ourselves to decide what attitude we want on a specific day. In that sense the human being moulded in the posting can be read as an expert in

different aspects of her subjectivity – an expert in the ability to fraction the self into bits and pieces that do not have to be guarded and bits and pieces that need a little more attention. The nick admits that she does not always succeed in making the right choices, but she is aware that the bad mood on a particular day is a choice. The posting can be comprehended as one of a productive reminder of a responsibility on behalf of the subject – it does not prohibit any reactions but point to the benefit of some of them.

Jane at Tesco – to landscape choice

There is not much visible critique of the idea that life can be turned around by choice. When the concept is challenged it is usually because it is conceived as inflated; it is seen as invested with too much hope and too many aspirations. Nevertheless, in the main body of postings in both communities choice is appreciated as something that produces a healthy subject.

The major tone of voice in the communities is an optimistic one. When the nicks relate life circumstances to the possibilities of making choices there seems to be no limits to the suggestions. We will now follow a section of a thread that debates choice. The first two postings advocate that choice is something everyone can do – and gain from – while the subsequent postings contain criticism of this assumption. The first two postings are made on the topic of what low-wage employees can do to improve their standard of living. The employee is given a name; she is called Jane and she is described as if she works at Tesco. The question in this conversation is what Jane at Tesco can do to make a change in her life, to earn more money and find a job that she likes better. As we shall notice a little bit later in this interchange, the main benefit of choice appears to be a reformed attitude.

6:3 I don't think that each and EVERY ONE has a choice. Surely there is the occasional human being caught in a trap where it just won't happen. But I think 99,99 % of all people has the possibility of choosing! Jane at Tesco can apply for several types of grants. She can ask around amongst friends and acquaintances if they know of any fun and good place to work, that's often how you find a job. She can sit down and contemplate: 'Where do I WANT to work?' and then she applies for a job at the places that might be possible. She can start up her own business. She can apply for an apprenticeship (for instance through grants). She can study to improve her grades.

N1 (TPP 2011)

6:4 One can apply for grants AND have a job on the side as a telemarketer? Sell children's clothes / make up / spices / whatever? Become damned good at net poker? 🍪 Bake delicious buns and sandwich layer cakes and sell them to workplaces nearby for their coffee breaks. One can become a substitute teacher or a phone interviewer for NRS [a poll institute] and work when one is able to. Perhaps one is amazingly good at taking photos and could do the odd wedding job once in a while, or one is excellent at needlework and could sell it at local fairs and earn money from one's hobby. I mean there are no limits.
N1 (TPP 2011)

In the first two postings about the possibilities open to the imaginary Jane a whole vista of choices seems to stretch out before the reader's eyes. Jane is painted in a *landscape of choices* (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz 1994: 75) – pictured as both made *of it* (the present choice to work as a shop assistant) and described as soon *in it* (the endless choices that lie ahead). Landscapes, however, do not exist without an observer, (in contrast to rivers, mountains or forests that are there with or without somebody watching them). There is a difference between the land and the scape. The land in itself exists – the very 'scape' is a projection of our consciousness; it is an image. We put a frame around the view and the way in which we describe it represents our frame of mind – what we know, what we find valuable to know, and what we want to know (Erich, 1987: 25). In the two postings above the land exists in the sense that people can and do sell spices, apply for grants and work as supply teachers. The only visible framing is performed by N1 who tells the reader that all this is in fact possible. The frame that N1 puts around the land, apparent in the unswervingly optimistic tone of voice, is recurrent in the communities when discussing different options in life. The debates on topics such as options, opportunities and planning all blend together, and it is as if choice was an end in itself. The outcome of the choice is rarely a topic of concern. We may want to call this a language of choice (Ball, Bowe & Gerwitz, 1994: 67).

Nevertheless, in the thread from which postings 6:3 and 6:4 were extracted, there are objections to the claim that the choice itself has any capacity to *change* the life of the narrated cash assistant called Jane. The first posting below questions whether the choices themselves are real choices that just anybody can make; the second whether or not there are any real differences between the options.

6:5 Weeell it's easy giving others advice if you possess a brain, energy and creativity. Not all of us have this brain or other possibilities to study, if you lack

the brain, the energy, you will hardly start up your own business. Apprenticeships, yeah right, like how many offers that today? Grants, how many even know about grants and besides everyone cannot get grants, and I suppose it's not simply a matter of sending in one's name and then getting money?

N2 (TPP 2011)

6:6 / .../ That the supply of new jobs with better hours/salary whatever isn't there for everyone for different reasons. Another job sure, in another home for the elderly with the same type of hours or in another supermarket with the same salary etcetera.

N3 (TPP 2011)

The first objection (posting 6:5) receives a response from N1, who states that the content of 6:5 is coloured by an attitude problem.

6:7 But a person with your attitude can neither get a new job nor find the capacity to study or receive grants (because you have to make the effort of finding them and then applying). But you can chose to WANT to change your attitude, and then work for it in different ways, and be capable of both studying and getting a new job and applying for grants. I am totally certain of it.

N1 (TPP 2011 answers posting 6:5)

The second posting (6:6) does not receive a response, although it touches upon a conception of labour market structures beneath the discourse – the choice market in itself where options are countless but change cannot always be promised. Posting 6:6 points to how there are differences between choices and suggests that some choices do not take you places – for some people they simply take you to the same place you just left. It hints at a difference between choice on the one hand and *opportunity* on the other. The posting suggests that everyone can make a choice but we do not have the same opportunities in life and some of us do not have very much to choose from. In this case another kind of difference is highlighted, that relates to access to resources, profitable relations and skills.

The reply in 6:7 instead equates choice with the right kind of attitude, which means it opts for a focus towards *individual qualities* rather than structural conditions. What needs to be manifested, as argued in the posting, is a particular attitude, rather than actually turning life around. Once a choice is made it is a sign of having the expected attitude and the generalised subject thereby would be off the discursive

hook. Consequently, when choice is celebrated it is perceived as if improving the attitude and when it is challenged instead differences in opportunities are stressed. Whether or not Jane can make a change that leads up to a real material improvement (a better job or more money) remains uncertain.

The thread as a whole is a typical example of the two community discourses on choice, the dominant one that embraces choice and the subordinate that criticises the concept for raising expectations too high. Whilst the subordinate discourse brings in structural impediments into the narration, the dominant one leans on much the same type of promise that was delineated by Nikolas Rose (2000 a: 1400 ff.); that everyone can be reconstructed into a subject of responsibility, which equals holding the right kind of attitudes. Whilst neoliberal politics prefers to talk about citizens in terms of responsibilities (Jensen, 2010; 2012), so does this local discourse prefer to highlight the obligation to choose, rather than tangible outcomes of choice. In this dominant discourse what matters is the *potential* self, whilst the actual self (or the actual result of the choice) is downplayed.

Cloaking resources

Choice is a popular concept for several reasons. It is described as making us take responsibility for ourselves, as we saw in the dominant discourse previously presented. Choice is represented as something that allows us to reflect upon the way our life is going or enables us to change our lives and, if nothing else, choice helps us improve our attitudes. We have already looked into the tendency to talk less about hands-on resources when advocating choice, as visible in postings 6:3, 6:4 and 6:7. As a matter of fact, in the preferred image of choice, resources enabling choices are hardly mentioned at all. The next posting is an example of this downplaying of resources. This nick talks about prioritising between the many consumerist urges that one may have but it does not mention how money might influence the capacity to prioritise. In this fashion, choice becomes part of a particular kind of concealment that is ideologically structured.

6:8 You don't see how others prioritise. We do have decent salaries me and my husband but we could easily have spent it all on a more expensive house with higher mortgages and/or an expensive car. The same people asking me how we can afford to travel around the world for three months drive an almost new car. This has to be paid for somehow, even if they've borrowed money to buy it. And the car costs just as much as our trip...We are fortunate

to drive a company car which we have deliberately stripped of all excess gadgets, and we have another car but it is older and costs us very little.

Also, we have prioritised not to live in a house with a lot of extra square meters. We made a strategic choice to stay in our detached house. For a long time we looked at houses with more space and a better location but they went for 1-1,5 million more than the house we have and for that kind of money one can do lots of other fun stuff we figured and we prioritised our travelling.

Right now we prioritise that one of us works 80 % - that affects our 'traveller's income' so we obviously cannot not spend that money on trips right now - that may also be the thing that differs. Two parents working full time naturally earn more than in couples where one works 75 %.

Surely there are those living beyond their means, but in a lot of cases lifestyle choices have an effect. You cannot have it all if you're not richer than God, some invest in a home, some invest in having lots of stuff, some invest in interior design, some in designer babies' clothes, prams and other types of expensive baby crap (not me as you probably have understood ;)) and some chose to travel.

(TPP 2009)

The advice on prioritising in 6:8 is demarcated by two typical features: Resources are narratively cloaked and instead the ideal of *staying in control* is brought to the fore. Posting 6:8 talks of affording as a matter of lifestyle choices rather than of having the necessary monetary resources. The nick describes a situation where she chooses between two things conceptualised as equal: The possibility to purchase a new car or the opportunity to travel. The fact that the narrated husband drives a company car and that the family owns a second car – and thus there really is no reason to perform the choice in the first place – appear to have little bearing on the conclusion. The very resources themselves are never mentioned as facilitating the priority. Instead the posting stresses how it is *controlling the consumerist urges* that is the key to success, i.e., management of the interior of the subject. This is accomplished through strategic choices performed by a subject with access to autonomy in a material sense. The posting mostly talks of the nick's own financial situation, but when other subjects enter, the rhetoric switches into techniques of out-there-ness: *Two parents working full time naturally earn more than in couples where one works 75 %*. In this piece of fact construction differences in salaries are not included. Another example is the statement: *but in a lot of cases lifestyle choices have an effect. You sort of cannot have it*

all if you're not richer than God. Here the stipulation is that everyone has the financial margins to make choices whether to travel or stay at home. Prioritising implies that one has things to choose between, just as 6:8 suggests. Because this piece of advice does not include the material resources behind such a consumption choice – priorities become a tool for the affluent. Prioritising is supposed to give positive effects but the necessary condition for it, the money, is not made important. This would be one way of apprehending the reason for why the narrative conditions of choice are so stable: It makes the affluent come across as less endowed with money and benefits and instead they are made to look more dedicated to acting rational. The posting is part of a narrative formula of choice. This formula highlights the motives of the subject and downplays that which surrounds it. In other words, the posting is ideologically ordered in the way it uses dissimulation (Thompson, 1988: 370) – it highlights one dimension at the expense of another. The reality of economic acts or of privilege is concealed (Bourdieu, 1977/2011: 177), i.e., misrecognised.

The result: A Homo Eligens

What was celebrated when talking of priorities was, as we noted, maintaining control (in this case over the urges to consume), because by maintaining calm and staying in control the right choice was presumed to be made. I would like to summarise these preferred character traits into a subject ideal labelled the *Homo Eligens* and which is described by Zygmunt Bauman (2005:33) as ‘the man choosing’. This choosing subject, Bauman points out (ibid.), should not be confused with the man who *has made* a choice and who settles for that choice. This subject ideal is instead compared with a cyclist who has to keep on pedalling to remain upright and not fall: The choices have to be made anew and if necessary, identity is renegotiated at every instance. The *Homo Eligens* is a consequence of individualism acted out in the form of emancipation and self-assertion facilitated by the free market (ibid.: 18). In fact, the *Homo Eligens* and the market coexist in a kind of symbiosis: ‘they would not live to see another day if they were not supported and nourished by each other’s company’, and that is because: ‘[The] market would not survive if customers held on to things’ (ibid.: 33). In the arenas of the parental communities the *Homo Eligens* is demarcated not only by *choice* and *control* but in addition by manifesting *self-knowledge* and *responsibility*. This discursive figure of admiration will follow us through the analysis, sometimes as an articulated ideal, sometimes as a backcloth against which complaints about faulty subjectivities should be read. This section contains the first presentation of this subject ideal. We shall become acquainted with the ways in which control,

self-knowledge and responsibility are talked about in the communities, as well as the interpretative repertoire upon which the Homo Eligens rests.

The Homo Eligens can be described as a cliché, a stereotype and an ideal. She functions best in a reduced type of narration – a kind of staged example. I have already described the Homo Eligens as characterised by control, self-knowledge and a sense of responsibility – in other words the regular introspection performed in a self-help culture to ensure a kind of constant readiness (Cederström & Spicer, 2015). The Homo Eligens, as she is applied in the communities, is an embodiment of a preference that keeps on coming back in these arenas as a way to talk about choice, attitude and opportunity. The notion that the human mind is or can be cultivated into conquering the surrounding material dimensions is the foundation for the organisation of the discourse of choice and its organisational powers are so strong that I have understood this conception as an interpretative repertoire: *Mind over matter*. It receives much of its content from classic positive thinking and self-help literature stipulating that our inner sensations and the way we control them determine how the material side of life will turn out; if we will have a job, if we will have enough money, if we will live in a decent house etcetera (ibid.: 66). We have already seen how the preferred type of subject knows how to choose and how to control her desires in order to live a controlled and well calibrated life. To exercise control, however, one needs to know oneself and in what follows we shall look into the way control and self-knowledge work together.

Control and self-knowledge

The concept of control is articulated as essential to properly know oneself (if no control over the situation there can be no self-inspection) but the concept seems to behave discursively unruly and apparently needs to be regularly discussed. Control is not appreciated as the same thing in every instance and in every type of conversation but is treated rather differently depending on the subject-matter. It is hardly surprising that the basic rule is not to lose control, as advocated in the posting to follow, which exemplifies with people who need to borrow money to buy furniture. This is understood as a loss of financial control, but as it turns out, it is actually possible to borrow very large sums of money and still not be described as if losing control. It all depends on what the money is for.

6:9 Firstly I don't understand why you would take up a loan or a credit. If you lack the money for a sofa or a TV, well, you don't buy one. Who is that poor that s/he needs to take a loan to buy furniture? In those cases life has gone

down the drain, hasn't it? Obviously I understand if you need a loan for a car or a flat or as an investment to start your own business. Who can stump up several hundred thousand just like that? But to buy a sofa? Come on!!!
(VEF 2012)

Posting 6:9 discusses differences between debt and debt and, consequently, differences between control and control. At the beginning of the posting being in debt is a sign of a loss of control: *In those cases life has gone down the drain, hasn't it?* In the very next sentence the reasoning makes a turn: *Obviously I understand if you need a loan for a car or a flat or as an investment to start your own business.* The lack of several hundreds of thousands or even millions to buy a flat is depicted as the normal state, whilst to lack a couple of thousands to buy a sofa is sketched as a loss of control. The issue becomes a question of how much money one needs to borrow and of what kind of consumer goods the money is for. According to the logic in 6:9, bigger is better. The worldview in this posting may come across as drastic – when indebted you should ‘go big or go home’ – but the logic should come as no surprise because borrowing money is what most people in Europe need to do to find a place to live. In light of the abysmal indebtedness forced upon subjects trying to buy a home, posting 6:9 can be read as a way of reducing anxiety. Tracey Jensen (2014) touches upon this issue when she analyses poverty porn in British mass media: Some subjects are made to carry a sense of societal crisis, which is simultaneously removed from other subjects. Control, hence, may vary depending not only on subject-matter, but depending on which subject that is thought of as displaying it, or not.

Control seems to be a concept of a porous character, and it is not embraced by all nicks. Some even argue that taking up a loan, although it is an investment for the future, can be a problem.

6:10 Myself, I am worried about my student loans. Cause it's hard to get a job, even if everyone thought it was sooo good that I studied 'something useful' at university, I read every week about how there is a surplus of man-power within my field. But this is not mentioned to new students at the university. And my mother cannot help me, neither financially or by supplying work life contacts. So let's see how it goes. I live cheap and have saved up some, but if I am unemployed for a year after completing my exam that money will probably not be sufficient...
(VEF 2012)

The perspective of helplessness in 6:10 manifests another experience of control. The investment is now portrayed as unreliable and unstable, and the potential outcome as if beyond the nick's control. The account of control is totally different when outside resources are allowed into the narration. In posting 6:9, there is only one subject choosing, and there is only one investment made (either a flat or a sofa; either you start up a business or you buy furniture), i.e. two factors to compare. In 6:10 there is one subject choosing, and there is one investment made (education). In addition there is one labour market, one institution delivering the education and one mother who cannot aid her adult child. All in all the latter posting hosts four outside factors of a highly material character that could possibly determine the outcome of the investment. This feature of the two accounts is typical when control is ventilated: More factors involved in the assumed outcome seem to weaken the representation of control. When functioning as a prescription for how to choose, control needs to be reduced to minimalistic proportions. This is presumably one explanation for why the relation between control on the one hand and resources on the other is so vague – because if resources are made more specific we see that it is not really the subject controlling resources, but instead access to resources controlling the subject. In 6:10 the nick voices a situation of silent despair – the money will perhaps not be sufficient if she is out of work for too long. If an absolute material level is accepted, it becomes impossible to promote control, because you cannot control something that is not in your possession. To make a concept such as that of control function one *must* down-play the interdependence between control and materiality.

Being such an undisputable ideal a concept such as control can also be reframed and used to enhance local status in the community so that one comes across as a Homo Eligens. The posting below is extracted from a thread about raising noisy kids and parents who are too permissive to really engage. In this posting, the meaning of the word control is remodelled. Although its obvious connection to choice is weakened, it relates to an idea of choosing educational *strategies* when dealing with children. This indicates that control is important not only to promote an image of knowing oneself – it is just as important to have knowledge of other people. When raising a child, the parent should go about the task in a controlled manner, and it should be built upon a firm and solid knowledge of the child.

6:11 my son is 3 and totally at the defiant age and he knows we think it's tiresome when he yells, so then he simply yells a bit more to test the limits /.../ and as I have argued before parents know their children best and possibly

that type of corrections that other adults ask for simply provokes even more yelling?

For ex. my son lies down on the floor of the supermarket, probably tired after a day at the day care centre, screaming at the top of his voice. If I interfere it will perhaps last for 15 minutes, worst case scenario he doesn't give in until he falls asleep in the car and perhaps I need to do some purchases?

So I calmly stroll along... ignore the outburst and continue shopping, talk loudly about what we need, receive a lot of impatient glances from adults wondering why I don't drag my child off. Maximum 5 minutes later my son catches up with me and wonders what else we need to buy 😊

You as an outsider choose to judge me although I have complete control over the situation?

(VEF 2013)

This posting argues that control can be achieved in different ways – and that some of them are less visible to the eye. Parental control, or rather, maternal control must be managed at all times but the techniques differ. Although bystanders in the supermarket are described as if impatiently staring at the son's behaviour, the mother has calculated how the tantrum will end. The scenario looks messy and out of control to a bystander, but it is still a manifestation of control *of another type*. This viewpoint of control is often spelled out in quite concrete terms and also directly followed by placing blame on parents who seemingly cannot manage the task, as we will see in the next posting.

6:12 It is obviously me controlling when we leave the park, not my son. I am responsible for him! The kind of parents who allow the kicking and the screaming, it's enough to drive you crazy...

(VEF 2009)

This posting is generic in the way that the ideal is coupled with the warning example. To choose and to control is perhaps not such a complex thing; it might simply be about deciding when to leave the park, as the posting proposes. Suggestively, what is important in 6:12 is not the fact that the narrated parent decides when it is time

to go home, but how this parent is put up as a counter example to the more inferior parents who do not exercise control to the same extent.

I have described choice as affected by concepts of responsibility, control and self-knowledge. As we saw you must know yourself as a parent and you must know your child. This is not always depicted as an easy task and descriptions of control are sometimes laden with tension. In a thread that debate problematic parents as subjects who give in to every lust or craving, (i.e., who fail to choose a strategy for action) a nick gives an account of her own longings, and how she manages to ignore them. The posting professes the idea that choices need to be preceded by self-knowledge. It also shows us that control can be a lonely struggle.

6:13 Heart of flint answers:

Personal responsibility. At some point one has to realise it's impossible to act upon every craving. I have numerous times longed for a whole lot of things (babies, a dog, moving to the mountains or abroad) but I have allowed for the pale cast of thought to fall upon my ideas. You need to consider reality in all of the cravings, as dull as that may sound. If you cannot manage your children when there's four of them you'll hardly manage better when there's five. Obviously there's no one in the world that can stop them [the problematic parents] from having thirty kids, so my opinions are totally irrelevant to everyone except myself. At every instance I start with what I can cope with MYSELF. I don't take on more than I anticipate I can manage on my own. Several times over the years I wanted a fourth child but since the children are mainly my responsibility I feel that alone I cannot cope with more than three if I am to satisfy everybody's needs. Consequently, I refrain, no matter how strong my desire is. My desire is not more important than the already existing children's needs.

(TPP 2011)

The subject in posting 6:13 stands between desire and control, and the weapon against the strong desires is described as the virtue of reflection. It is a fairly classical example of a caring for the self. Rules are repeated: *One needs to consider reality in all of the cravings |...| At every instance I start with what I can cope with MYSELF. I don't take on more than I anticipate I can manage on my own. |...| My desire is not more important than the already existing children's needs.* In 6:13 these rules are contrasted with desire, and living responsively is sketched much like a duel between strong forces. But this nick knows herself, her strengths and limits, which enables her to take

control, i.e., to act responsibly. The link is complete: Self-knowledge enables control, which enables the responsible choice.

The posting also demonstrates the idea that it all begins within the subject. She has to be able to cope using only her own forces, and she is alone in trying to make it work. Not only does the subject need to investigate if the parental work is performed properly, but she has to know – in advance – how much strain she can handle. This type of inspection is a test of abilities that ultimately guarantees freedom; it is ‘a way of continuously ensuring that one will not be tied to that which is not in one’s power’ (author’s translation) (Foucault 1976/2002: 64). When one knows oneself one can exercise control and a sound choice can be made which in the end becomes a safeguard against irresponsible actions. The Homo Eligens is certainly a lonely figure, but she is potent and she is her own coach and therapist.

Responsibility

In the previous section we saw how self-knowledge is perceived as the main factor for successfully taking responsibility for one’s life. The deep introspection that was advocated in posting 6:13 enables a policing of the soul. The key suspect is the subject; the interrogator is the very same subject. In other words, the preference for choice and the celebration of the Homo Eligens enable a fairly unforgiving view of individual responsibility.

In the more extreme interpretations of how choice should be understood, everything is construed as the responsibility of the subject. The following posting is a summation of the whole discourse of choice, as I have delineated it in this chapter; everything is pinned down to choice and choice is related to both control and responsibility. That which is situated outside of the subject (in this posting a lack of a job, other people, the winter season and a problematic partner) is not allowed to influence how she feels.

6:14 It’s the life you have created for yourself and you cannot blame circumstances. (there is obviously one exception. Illness. That is something you cannot control).

I think people are too quick to blame others instead of assuming responsibility.

‘No I feel bad because I have no job, because that person did this or that, because it’s so dark in winter etcetera etcetera’.

No, you feel bad because you choose to feel bad. It is a choice you have. You don't have to feel bad. And you can choose if you want to let other people make you feel bad. They can, but only if you let them.

And yes if you have got a man who will not move his ass and help at all, or if he is just generally mental it is not because of him that you feel bad, it is because you chose him and you simply made a bad decision. Very easy to change. /.../

(VEF 2015)

Posting 6:14 composes the entire ontological decorum of choice: The link between choice, control, self-knowledge and responsibility inevitable leads to the dismissal of subjective suffering caused by phenomena from outside of the soul. Choice makes these phenomena fade away and become less significant, because it is possible to opt-out – to choose something else. Posting 6:14 axiomatically stipulates it is not unemployment that causes anxiety or troubles; it is the choice to *allow* for these sensations. Anxiety and troubles are represented as if signs of a loss of control. This viewpoint comprises the dominant discourse in the communities – if the link starts with choice it apparently ends with the notion of personal responsibility. This latter notion results in reproofs or accusations of the less fortunate; the single mother, the overweight, the depressed, i.e. subjects situated far away from the Homo Eligens.

Effects of choice, but when?

So far we have seen that the construct of choice points in several directions. It is viewed as an innate quality in all of us but it can lead to different effects. The dominant understanding is that choice leads to betterments – either because the situation itself changes for the better or because the subject's attitude is improved. We also noted that when choice is coupled with different types of opportunity the future prospects seems to become bleaker, and the same goes for when it is coupled with access/no access to resources. Hence, to truly function as a prescription for how to act, choice should be described in non-concrete manners. In short, it appears that choice holds promises, but vague ones; we do not know when we can expect choice to mean change, or what that change will consist of.

The major unanswered question when handling the concept of choice seems to be this: If we are promised a change will come when we choose, when can we expect it to arrive? The chapter will conclude by exploring the effects of choice a little bit further, such as the way it is thought of as strengthening the subject, and we shall

have another look at the promises residing in choice, especially in terms of the *time schedules* of choice. By doing so, I shall demonstrate the precarious nature of choice, and how it is embedded in another one of the communities' interpretative repertoires: *Mind over matter*.

Mind over matter and the time schedules of choice

The communities view choice as a remedy for the soul. The concept is not only envisioned as an aid in vital decisions such as where to work or how to feel, but represented as if strengthening decisiveness even in the small, futile decisions we have to make on a daily basis. The exemplary posting below consists of praise directed at a nick who previously told of having chosen to refuse a piece of cake despite longing to eat it.

6:15 Every time you train the 'muscle of decision' it gets stronger, and it will be easier the next time! Good work.

(TPP 2013)

In posting 6:15 the virtue of choice is to become strong, and decisiveness is delineated as the exercise of a muscle. This echoes the ideals, as we saw them in Chapter Five, where a strong body was understood as signs of a strong will. In this case it is instead the *will* that is represented as a potent body part. Will is apparently comprehended in metaphors of fitness, and so it becomes a matter of exercise. The following posting also points towards exercise. However, although choice is seen as performing a kind of work out on the will, it should not be considered as an easy way out of a problem. The posting gives advice on how to turn into a happier and more productive person. This can be done, the posting claims, *if you make the effort*. _

6:16 It obviously won't work to simply wave the magic wand and decide to be positive – toodiloo. It is working with oneself, and giving it time.

(VEF 2013)

On the one hand, choosing makes everything easier because you become stronger (as argued in 6:15), but on the other hand it does not help to simply choose; real improvement takes time, (as we see in posting 6:16). Choice is apparently related to determination and hard work – it does not come for free. If work and time are combined the promise of improvement through choice will be kept, but there is no promise made of *when* we can expect to see the improvement. The effects appear to

be indefinitely postponed: We cannot know whether making one single choice will help us improve or if three or even five choices are necessary. The work needs to be done without time schedules, which makes the promise of choice into a precarious one. Perhaps what is promised are *possibilities* of change rather than visible change? This is illustrated in the next posting. Choice does not promise anything but a kind of possibilities for possibilities.

6:17 The point in realising you have choices is that you don't have to be a victim to the same extent, you get the possibility of moving in the direction you want.

(TPP 2011)

In posting 6:17 choice is not suggested to be a miracle cure and it does not promise us a rose garden. In fact, not much happens at all – the posting states that when we understand that we have choices we simply receive a *possibility* of something happening. We should be prepared and ready to move ahead, out of victimhood to a place not defined. Choice is, once again, sketched with a precarious contour. Notably, the concept of choice has so far been applied to talk of future prospects more than promises of turning around the present situation. But there is yet another time span in which choice can be promoted – the past. In the next posting, choice has already delivered what it should and its work is completed.

6:18 Then you meet people who had a broken childhood, to put it mildly, and have been subjected to things you and I don't even want to have nightmares about and who ended up in criminality and drugs but who made the choice anew. Who chose to embrace life and get ahead.

(TPP 2011)

In posting 6:18 the conditions surrounding the subject look terrifying indeed. This time conditions outside of the soul are actually allowed inside the narration, but in 6:18 the things that happened to the subject in the past were all undone by the cure of choice. This particular relation between elements is recurrent in the way choice is handled; the world outside of the subject can be narratively applied to *embrace* choice, but not to criticise it. In 6:18 the unlucky but choice-making individuals are bestowed a category entitlement. They are especially knowledgeable as to what choice can achieve. This posting is an example of how one of the parental communities' strongest interpretative repertoires is put to work. I have called this repertoire

Mind over matter. Choice can command the world outside because that which is located on the inside of the subject (inside the mind) is perceived as stronger than that located on the outside (the matter). But, as posting 6:16 pointed out, choice is no magic wand. Despite the fact that the will can be trained to function better, and although the will to make choices is potentially fertile, the worldview of the repertoire is only true *if you allow it to be*.

All the same, the narrations of the indefinitely postponed effect of choice or the assertions of its effective achievements in the past give the mere concept an ethereal character. If choice is used to talk of a promising future or a heroic past, what kind of strong soul can be constructed for the here-and-now? If descriptions of choices only consists of times that have passed and times to come it comes forth as lacking a present. Some of the postings that advocate choice appear to call forth a subject in which the work is already done. The following posting gives advice on how to handle depression. When this posting suggests there is a choice to look on the bright sides of life instead of being sad, it seemingly addresses a subject who already has these capabilities. How to get there remains unarticulated.

6:19 And to choose to always see to what you have got? Lovely kids? The world's best partner? Wonderful friends? A dog that gets happy every time you come home? An insanely fun hobby? 😊
(TPP 2013)

Arguably, the time schedules are not to be taken literally but metaphorically. The concept of choice appears to establish conditions of *before-after* (in posting 6:15 before and after exercising the muscle of decision), or *worse-better* (in posting 6:16 waiving the magic wand as opposed to working on oneself). These conceptual metaphors would give us an indication of the structure of the concept: The condition established after the choice is made is perceived as better than before the choice was made. The concept is applied in simplified and univocal narrative situations – you were in an addiction but chose to leave it, or you were tempted to eat cake but chose not to. When applied in this simplified way it structures conversation.

To sum up, irrespective of the crude simplicity of the concept of choice, it carries a world of hopes and aspirations, and even if the effect of choice fails to materialise, it is still expected. If nothing else it is applied as an approved trope through which life can be narrated. The hopes for personal transformation that the concept holds are, nevertheless, one-sided. Posting 6:19 demonstrates the general expectations of what to do when one chooses – to focus upon the positive and disregard the negative

aspects of life. This general expectation leads to demands for responsibility, no matter what. The work that can be done to become a strong subject seems uniform in shape. As it is so uniformly articulated, the concept of choice becomes tyrannical simply because choosing to be critical, negative or even undetermined, are not options perceived as refining the soul. Possibly, the ideal effect of choice is nothing more than just that; making a choice. Nothing much really has to happen once the choice is made. Because of the fact that the material or tangible effects of choices are seldom articulated we may want to think of choice simply as a lifestyle marker – by using the concept a suitable self presentation is ensured. As such it may be apprehended as quite innocent. However, the concept also becomes a backdrop in the constructions of the non-ideal subject, as indicated in the very first posting at the start of this chapter. It is employed as an explanatory factor for that which is considered a failure. Moreover, choice appears to function as the *primus motor* for the *Homo Elector*, making the subject ideal's character traits just as equivocal as that of choice. What type of subject is advocated through the preference for choice? Perhaps it is situated not far from the ominous image painted by Bauman (2005: 33): 'a permanently impermanent self, completely incomplete, definitely indefinite and authentically in-authentic'.

Summary

The aim of this chapter has been to deconstruct the concept of choice and explore how the effects of making a choice are conceptualised, as well as begin a mapping of the choosing subject, the *Homo Eligens*, as a type of ideal subject. This subject does not only choose consumer goods by way of distinction, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, but chooses who to be and how to feel. It is a subject that inevitably needs to manifest a level of control, achieved through self-knowledge, in order for it to take charge of itself and be able to act responsibly.

The concept of choice, however, seems difficult to manage and the communities come across as ambivalent as to its constitution. The main contradictory feature resides in what choice can achieve. Although there is a discursive dictate to choose, choice is visualised as leading up to two disparate conditions. Either your attitude improves but not much more happens, or choice is understood as restrained due to the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities (although you choose you cannot always achieve a change for the better). Having said that, the general tendency is to conceal resources as factors influencing the outcome of a choice. The embodiment of the interpretative repertoire of *Mind over matter* I have labelled the *Homo Eligens*. This subject paragon is a discursive offspring of a self-help tenet promoting

positive thinking and affirmation and its contours are shaped in much the same way as the concept of choice; by leaning on self-knowledge, control and responsibility.

A problematic feature in the narration of choice is how to deal with the timescales of choice: How and when can we count on choice having an effect? It appears as if the effects of choice are treated as if indefinitely postponed or already terminated – change will come but perhaps not in this very instance, or choice has already performed the miracle. In spite of the porous character of choice and its indefinite promises it has another function in which it rarely falters: It helps in attaching blame for a lack of responsibility on the suffering, weak or unfit subject. The way choice and responsibility is employed this blame can actually be articulated more sharply. As so few material or concrete resources are allowed into the narration, the culpability for the failure of, for instance, the poor subject is deepened.

Existing through choice

As I have come to understand the preference for choice, it is employed as a narrative ID-card. When ‘choice’ is inserted into a posting what is written receives a particular credibility – more if one made ‘the right’ choice and less if the choice was considered corrupt or even worse; not made at all. Nevertheless, to make choice function as a concept that gives the subject credibility it needs to obliterate *change*. This is, I think, the very point where we get to study a piece of ideology. According to Martha L. Fineman (1991), a dominant ideology ‘is transmitted through everyday language, symbols and images’ (ibid.: 290). A close examination of discourse, she suggests, will reveal aspects of a non-articulated ideology, because ideology ‘structures the contours of discourse’ (ibid: 289). Experiences, phenomena or opinions seem not to be able to bypass the demand for choice in the communities. In almost every instance; when being a poor parent (posting 6:1), when borrowing money (posting 6:9) or when raising a child (posting 6:12) one is responsible for making a choice. Choice is in these accounts of everyday life not really put to the test of changing the outside world – the salary that Jane gets at Tesco being an example. The ideological contours of discourse remove the world in which the choosing subject exists, and leave only the interior domains: Making a choice can change your outlook upon a world that stays the same. This is the possibility of social existence for the subject defined through consumer ideology – you can and should choose because that which you purchase is not change, but identity. What may be purchased is a suitable self. This is, perhaps, the ‘scape’ in the landscaping of choice; the frame that organises the view. If what is to be accomplished is identity rather than a better salary or better working conditions we have already achieved the goal when we celebrate choice. Choice comes

across as if rigged in much the same way as the Danish responsibility games where the questions are designed to produce particular answers (Knudsen & Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2014). When applying the discursive resource of choice, one must not look for its concrete material effects. One should look for the way the opportunity to choose facilitates responsibility. The invisible is prioritised over the visible.

7. There is no society

I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand 'I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it' or 'I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it' 'I am homeless, the Government must house me!' and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first... There is no such thing as society. There is a living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate.⁹⁴

The quotation above is a community matrix for talking about society. It comes from the former Prime Minister of the UK, Margaret Thatcher, and it was uttered after she won the general election for the third time in 1987. Margaret Thatcher has, at a quick glance, little to do with virtual communities or contemporary subject ideals mediated through virtual interaction, and yet she can be seen as one of many precursors of a particular way of looking upon the welfare state, or the societal Commons, which in turn moulds the demands on the citizen-subject. The way these words have been received in a Swedish context is beyond the focus of this dissertation, although it resonates well in some publications from the same era, such as the preoccupation with the alleged dangers of the welfare state published in a book written by former Swedish Prime Minister, Fredrik Reinfeldt, in 1993.

Citizens who strive for independence in the political meaning/sense of the word are characterised by not trusting or assigning the State or other political organs to provide support or guarantee welfare. This goes for the short term perspective but to a higher extent for a longer perspective, lasting several generations. The striving for independence makes this citizen aim for financial independence but also to provide for his own care when ill or old by himself and in his more intimate settings. In Sweden that which receives attention is solely the opposite, when citizens are dependent on their fellow human

⁹⁴ The quote from an interview with former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is taken from *The Spectator*. The full-length interview may be found at The Margaret Thatcher Foundation: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=106689>.

beings, which oddly enough is described as a big problem and is used as an excuse to expand the general welfare (author's translation).⁹⁵

Regardless of how rejected or embodied the Thatcherite position or the argumentation from the young Prime-Minister-to-be was in Sweden at the time, it is interesting to note how the quotations could stand as a synopsis of many parental community understandings on how to mount the subject into a context of other subjects – into institutional, bureaucratic, publicly and formally organised mutual responsibilities towards one another – that which in this chapter will be summarised as ‘society’. Uttered and written in the 1980s and 1990s these viewpoints were later reflected in the statements from the British cross-party think tank Demos on failing parents and character development that I presented in Chapter Two, where we also saw them launched in a contemporary Swedish context, in visions of a metaphorical handshake between politics and parents, and in the reproaches towards ‘malfunctioning parents’ in the editorial pages of Swedish newspapers. All of this seeps into the parental communities.

Accordingly, the focus in this chapter is directed towards the manner that the parental communities deal with society and society's responsibility towards the individual, and vice versa. In the previous chapter we became acquainted with a somewhat lonely subject, interpellated by choice, the Homo Eligens. This chapter will inquire into how this subject is understood when she exists in organisation with other subjects. If the subject is interpellated as alone, not standing in a dependent relation with outside structures or other individuals as much as with herself, the question is how can societal organisation take place? Is cooperation possible in a world inhabited by Homo Eligens and if so, how can these solitary agents of choice be made to work together, submit to rules or invest into society? If narration generally avoids material resources and structures outside of the individual, is it possible to conceive of a society at all?

When approaching community conceptions of society and societal organisation there is one premise that, by way of introduction, needs to be reiterated: The notion of a social contract (for a lengthier presentation of the social contract, see Chapter Two). This notion of contract is liberalism's answer to how societies can be established based upon free subjects. When considering the liberal view of human interaction or organisation as subjects choosing for themselves and competing for resources with

⁹⁵ Quotation from a book written in 1993 by former Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt (term of office 2006-2014). The book is entitled: *The sleeping people* (my translation). In Swedish: *Det sovande folket*.

other subjects, the question of how societies are possible arises. Liberalism's answer is usually that this is accomplished through contract relations (Brennan & Pateman, 2006: 184, 199). The social contract theories that emanate from the seventeenth century break off from more traditionalist views of hierarchies and subordination. The contract relations, instead, rely on a mutual consent – for instance abiding by the law and in return receiving legal protection. In the parental web communities the discursive issue is seemingly how to understand a layman version of this contract, and how to assess its potential capacities. As we shall see, in the layman version two types of subjects are presented – one who has signed the contract and one who avoids signing.

Opening the chapter we will look at how two opposite strands are presented, or opposite stances on what the contract can and should do for, or demand from a subject. This means that the focal point is the perceived responsibilities of the subject, as well as of society. I will continue by illustrating how these notions of responsibility are linked to particular favoured moralities rather than material security, which enables a division of individuals into different subject-types: Those who contribute to society and those who solely insist on receiving support. I will furthermore demonstrate how the latter type of subject, described as a free rider, is constructed through a narrative downplaying of *need* or *suffering* in favour of *agency*. As the nicks use themselves as examples of how to responsibly utilise the social contract I will round off by demonstrating a couple of narrative techniques by which blame is attributed to particular categories of people.

Way back when

In community conversations, the notion of social contracts is often applied to talk of the present through comparison, either to complain about it or celebrate it. In what follows I will present two outlooks upon two homegrown social contracts related to the ideal of responsible choice. One position leans towards a defence of the Swedish model of a distributive welfare politics, while the other manifests as critical towards the very same policies. The first exemplary posting debates the reasons for why children of non-academics less frequently enter higher education than children of academics. The posting responds to several earlier postings in the thread in which it was proposed that it is an individual choice to enter higher education and therefore not a societal problem of injustice. We will look into the posting for its account of responsibility.

7:1 It was only twenty or thirty years ago when for example unemployment was considered a societal problem that was to be solved through politics and by structural changes, now we view it as an individual problem that is to be reduced by sanctions towards the individual. Who gains from that transference of responsibility? And why don't these children from families with no experience of studying grab the opportunities for higher education when it is even free of charge to study in this country? What is a genuine free choice?
(TPP 2011)

The most important feature of posting 7:1 is, arguably, that it stipulates there has been a shift in the construction of responsibility, from a structural or societal responsibility towards the citizens of a state or a local community, to a standpoint where responsibility is linked to the individual's management of her life trajectory. Two potential subjects are identified: One who nowadays is punished and one who gains from it, pointing to incompatible positions within the discourse of choice. The posting discusses a theme of blaming the individual through pointing out how certain concepts (such as unemployment) are elements that are not fixated but have moved from one end of a spectrum to another due to stake and interest. The linking of unemployment or lack of higher education with choice establishes a moment of context-free choice-making, the posting intimates. By asking who gains from constructing this moment, (or this stake) the posting becomes political.

One type of societal contract can thus be advocated using the non-chooser or the 'irresponsible' subject, as a starting point. In these narrations the subject is not blamed but rather employed as an argument for a society built upon solidarity. Defenses of the irresponsible subject can also contain suggestions of institutional improvement that themselves are grounded in a critical understanding of the present state, as in the posting below.

7:2 There really are only two options. Either you force employers to hire 'unattractive' work force, or we need higher taxes to fund society's obligation for people who are being rejected. You cannot take away both of them, if we aren't to accept that 'unattractive' and eventually homeless people should starve in the streets, like in the old days.
(TPP 2012)

The two postings presented both advocate a view of the subject as dependent upon worldly resources, and propose a societal organisation that takes this dependency

into consideration. They employ precisely the notion of the citizen's dependency that was embraced in the publication by Fredrik Reinfeldt, a dependency on *their fellow human beings*, only in this case the fellowship is institutionalized instead of intimate. Both postings are advisory (Fischer, 1970/2009: 132): They aim for us to comprehend the situation as one of misrecognition. They argue for another standpoint – that politics impacts on the subject.

Although repeated on a regular basis, these postings do not represent the dominant opinion. They are strongly debated and contested and often they become the object of ridicule. The most common matrix in storytelling about the past is rather different. The following postings constitute a representative example of a standard narration about society, and how it has deteriorated. In much the same way as postings 7:1 and 7:2, they are based upon a comparison between now and then, but the morality distilled is quite different. We shall look at them for the way they envision another type of ideal contract.

7:3 Both my parents grew up in rather poor environments, especially dad. None of them became thugs because of that. On the contrary. But in those days you had to help yourself and make the effort. Nowadays you can/shall sit on your arse and just receive way too often.

(TPP 2012)

7:4 My grandmother was a single mother and my mother grew up in deprived conditions and wasn't allowed to proceed to higher education although she performed well in school. My grandparents started a class journey when they started their own business and my dad started working there right after secondary school. Hence, none of my parents have a higher education but they have three children who became a civil engineer, a graduate economist and a doctor.

So how did they do that? They read to us and made sure we had lots of books around during our entire childhood. Taught us numbers and letters so that we learned to read early. None of them hassled us about higher education, I have never felt pressured in any way but it was sort of implied. 'What do you want to study?' not 'Are you going to study?'

So I do the same with my own three. Have pointed out the benefit of good grades and later a good university degree and the freedom of choice it gives.

I'm aiming for a triple of engineers with the first one well on the way 😊!
(VEF 2014)

Posting 7:3 seems to articulate a broken contract relation. However, in this particular posting there is no relation to disrupt, because instead there appears to be a *new* contract installed. This contract stipulates that in this day and age one can be passive (*sit on your arse*) and still receive. If liberal contract theory was designed to avoid conflicts between free and solitary agents, there really appears to be no societal conflicts whatsoever in posting 7:3, but a regret that society is in decline. The contract has apparently ceased to act as an attenuator of conflicts and now works more like a breeder of free riders. As an alternative to this breeder state the posting celebrates the more industrious habits of the older generation. The second posting (7:4) does not speak of contracts but still hosts a vision of agreement, or convention. This agreement is a family affair – the transference of sound habits between generations and a step-by-step-amelioration for each new cadre of children being born. This picture of generational transference (apart from echoing the Thatcher statement and the aspirations for the future citizen as envisioned by Reinfeldt) constitutes the very remedy for the dependence on welfare state subsidies and safety nets that have taught people to sit down and wait for handouts, rather than perform great deeds under their own steam. This time the salutary contract is generational: Situated inside of the grandparents in their quest for betterment and the voice ending the posting is the grandchild, ready to carry on the investment.

The prescriptions for self-care and planning even surface on a level of everyday, hands-on investments. The next posting worries about people not opting for the driving license anymore and the major conception is one of decline.

7:5 When I got my driving license it was common to save some of the month's allowance and money received at Christmas especially for the driving license. Plus you worked during the holidays when you still lived at home. But for some reason the driving license is considered less important in the last 20 years or so (environmental brain wash?), young people who perhaps have the possibility of saving (living at home) have no such priorities, but waste their money on nightlife and other delights /.../.
(VEF 2012)

The three postings above reverse the picture in postings 7:1-2. Although growing up poor, the narrated subjects in 7:3 are not affected by it and the main deficiency in so-

ciety of today appears to be individuals lacking a sound morality. In 7:4 parents with a poor educational background but equipped with the right kind of moral values aspire to give their children the resources needed to proceed into higher education. In 7:5 it seems that this type of striving and the virtues of saving have gone astray. In the three postings a particular character from the past is promoted: A hardworking and diligent subject emerges in front of the reader's eye – no self-pity and no doubts but only ambitions for the future. The interesting thing about these flashbacks to the imagined hardship in the childhoods of the nicks' parents or way back when the nicks were young is that there is basically no society left in them – no welfare programmes and no comprehensive education are let in to help explain the success. Striving is the sediment that is left in these accounts and it comes across as a vehicle, perhaps the best vehicle, for governing oneself. All three postings rely on category entitlement (Potter et al., 1993: 393). Experience comes from up close (the parents in 7:3, the grandparents in 7:4, and the nick herself in 7:5). The morality distilled emanates from people who know from lived experience.

Morality comes first

So, what does this tendency to honour rectitude and ambition instead of outside help achieve? Why do the narratives about personal strength remain privileged? It is as if community narration aims to secure certain repertoires. In this case the stories about the hardworking era become a part of a formula for the technology of the self. The complaining, or the sitting on one's arse, as 7:3 puts it, equals bad rules for the self – rules that will not refine or enhance it. If the care of the self is a net of obligations by which the subject performs duties towards the soul, the passivity delineated in posting 7:3 implies a duty not completed because the soul is left unguarded. The stoic tradition of evaluating actions rather than qualities of thinking is reversed: Here the way of thinking undermines the focus upon action. To be able to perform the right kind of action, you must first have the right kind of thoughts, and in the communities the right kind of thoughts seems to be equated with the right kind of morals.

In the next exemplary posting the right quality of thinking is articulated as assuming responsibility. The posting was chosen to illustrate the way that accounts on morality often end up in attributing blame. If the individual would only display the preferred responsibility, much of society's problems would fade away.

7:6 Where is personal responsibility in Sweden? Everyone feels sorry for themselves. The poor can't afford their trip to Thailand or their caravan vacation? All? fat people have some kind of problem with their glands making

them fat (? It's not my fault I have a disease ?) and I have to pay for that persons gastric bypass. No, that's not the case, if you feel insulted by this it's because you're lazy. Stop taking up credits, never mind if you haven't got the latest phone. Save money! Eat a salad once in a while.

No, this 'allowance society' has to end. Take personal responsibility for yourself and your family. /.../ The solution! Get yourself an education, don't have more children than you can support. Move to the places where the jobs are! Have a salad!

(VEF 2014)

Posting 7:6 is emblematic in the way it makes responsibility into a moral duty. It describes a kind of deterioration where people now want to harvest before they sow and if that is impossible they invent excuses. The posting exposes a taste for perseverance and hard work, i.e., a particular type of morality. When morality is installed (when people stop blaming overweight on their glands or save up money for a phone rather than buying one on credit), the rest will follow – morality comes before satisfaction of needs. But 7:6 also positions some subjects outside of a moral order (for instance people who take up credits and blame their obesity on their glands). There is, hence, an 'inside' and an 'outside' and a sorting of people, which according to Thompson (1988) should make us suspect an ideological ordering of discourse; a feature that will be addressed towards the end of this chapter.

The simple axiom of *Morality comes first* is yet another interpretative repertoire of the communities that organise much of what is possible to write. The repertoire can explain the relentless community focus upon what other nicks are perceived to think, the many corrections inserted and the preoccupation with being grateful and thinking positive. Without these fundamentals of thinking, all the rest – living the perfect life – would be impossible. When the nicks talk of society the main way to understand it is through a metaphor of inner growth that partly explains why the element of striving stays inside the narration and the element of societal organisation or civil/legal rights are more often than not kept out. It seems that this particular stance resonates well with the contemporary ethopolitical proclaiming that the main rationale for the individual is ethical. When debating moral decay in particular it appears the focus is directed towards a relation between thoughts and actions. The defective subject described in postings 7:3 and 7:5 is corrupted by a changing society outside of her. What lies outside can apparently, in some cases, move to the inside. Put another way: in *stories of moral decay* what has to be cultivated, guarded and maintained (i.e.

what is threatened) is the interior of the subject. The postings reverse the moral logic of the German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht: Food comes first and then morality.⁹⁶ Instead the message in the postings appears to be: Morality comes first and then food. It is quite the opposite in *stories of a less compassionate society* (such as denoted in posting 7:1-2); that which has to be cultivated and maintained, is the exterior, the material dimensions of existence, the political- and civil rights of the collective of individuals. In these instances the subject is mainly perceived as a body that can suffer (such as in posting 7:2). The main reason for why the viewpoints of postings 7:3, 7:4 and 7:5 are preferred is because they resonate well with what we already saw in Chapter Five and Chapter Six – they are positioned closer to the already existing subject ideals; ideals of individual achievement and investment that in turn resonate with the tapestry of individual lives that Margaret Thatcher evoked in the quotation that opened this chapter.

Social contracts and free riding

To obtain a clearer picture of the two outer-points of this continuum, of which the preferred ideals were more fully introduced in Chapter Five, I will continue by a short excursion to the rejected subject positions. This is just a taste of what will be more fully illustrated in Chapter Eleven, but will serve as a means to also present the consequences of the notion of people deliberately taking advantage of societal contracts; they are depicted as free riders. The notion of free riders, in turn, enables an ideological split that divides people with little money into two separate groups.

One of the major topics of conversation in the communities' general themes is how and in what way society can compensate individuals for misfortunes. In these themes the preferred and the rejected subject take turns in exemplifying the perceived limits of the welfare state. Again, the past may be used as a reference point. The dominant discourse of welfare stipulates that the welfare state of the old days (meaning in the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s) kept the free riders afloat and pampered them into a dangerous passivity. This passivity, however, still seems to threaten society and its institutions. The rejected, non-choosing and irresponsible subject is not only conceived of as a passive receiver as was implied by posting 7:3 but also represented as a threat to society by demanding but not contributing. The threat is summarised as a lack of activity and as a moral deficit, that make it difficult for societal institutions to administer help, as presented in the two postings below.

⁹⁶ In Swedish: Först kommer kâket, sedan moralen.

7:7 I think we already do a lot for the sick and the unemployed in Sweden but some people don't want to become well again and some don't want to work, nothing helps and certain people lack the drive and the motivation. People also need to help themselves but they seem to have forgotten that.

(TPP 2012)

7:8 /.../ Unfortunately I see many in my surroundings that simply sit at home and live off benefits and their major excuse is, there are no jobs ... blablabla.... I just can't understand it as I've always pulled my own weight.

/.../

(VEF 2008)

The irresponsible subject delineated in postings 7:7 and 7:8 appears to lack the reciprocal disposition necessary for the contract to function. In these postings the rejected subject relies on a contract but has seemingly forgotten that it is supposed to take place in a relation. The contract appears to be grounded in a link between contribution and reception, in that particular order, and the irresponsible subject simply disregards the first clause. Inclusion into rights and benefits is represented as a case of moral integration, or of following the rules. Because these subjects are not fully integrated morally, they do not want to better themselves.

It is worth underlining that the representation of irresponsibility highlights capacities for action, even among the free riders. A subject of agency resides beneath the descriptions of exploiting the welfare state and its benefits, but it is as if agency has been transformed into a game amongst the irresponsible. They know their way around the welfare state terrain and are capable of arranging things so that they receive service but do not have to contribute. These subjects are, consequently, represented as if challenging the rules of morally upright societal behaviour – and doing it in a quite cunning manner. This is set out in the posting below, which was extracted from a long and indignant thread about the characteristics of free riders.

7:9 me and my husband we work our arses off to avoid having to live on benefits! To give our children everything they need. And then there are those who sit at home year in and year out and just receive benefits. And on top of that plan to have children. FUCK THAT.

(VEF 2009)

The subjects living on benefits represented in 7:9 are understood as kind of a homo economicus. Much the same as the way the shape of the homo economicus is delineated by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1993: 84 f.), the assumption is that this subject type is a sovereign individual who intends to maximise her pleasures and take care of her needs, and in the posting this trickery is compared with the preferred subject of moderate demands and hard work. The relation between citizen-subjects is here presented as if mainly a moral one but in this case it is a story of betrayal. Whilst one party is fulfilling their part of the contract through hard work, the other is idle. Postings 7:9 and 7:8 allude to two different subjects of the proletariat – a freeriding underclass and a prudent working class. By ‘mobilising meaning in a way which fragments groups’ (Thompson, 1988: 370) the concept of freeriding is made to refer to (only) the impecunious. The moral extracted appears to be that there is nothing wrong with being poor, as long as you do not demand to be released from poverty.

On the one hand the rejected subject is perceived as if having no agency, no inner drive or motivation, but on the other hand she is sketched as capable of planning children, counting on institutional aid to get by. Two different conclusions are seemingly drawn from these disparate representations. One is that when the subject demonstrates a lack of activity or flaunts helplessness it can be *difficult* for the welfare institutions to administer help (as proposed in 7:7). The other conclusion is that when the subject instead displays cunning behaviour it may be *morally corrupting* to deliver help (as would be the consequence of 7:8). In both cases – when the incapacitated subject is passive and when it is active – support is not the solution. These two conclusions have one thing in common – they do not take need or suffering into account. The fact that the incapacitated subject is not narrated through elements such as need and/or suffering gives this subject a particular contour. I see this contour as relevant for understanding how discourse handles agency – and in the long term culpability. We will therefore stay on the topic of need and agency.

Need and agency

If need is omitted from the possible explanations for why dependent, non-choosing, poor or feeble subjects exist and if suffering is taken away from the representations of illness (as was the case in postings 7:7 - 7:8), then agency as a resource that is equally present in us all can be articulated even more strongly. To invite agency into the explanations does two things to the ways need can be read. First and foremost, agency transforms need into irresponsibility. Postings 7:8 and 7:9 describe a subject who does not display need as much as a lust for exploiting welfare state institutions. Secondly, need is converted into fraud. The subject who plans to have children with

no means to support them (as depicted in posting 7:9) is situated close to the homo economicus: The cunning poor insisting on resources that others have provided. This kind of agency is one of control and most certainly one of choice. In addition, agency becomes an explanatory factor for social exclusion – the narrated poor parent-to-be in posting 7:9 has reflected upon the existing choices in life and entered upon a journey away from the rest of us.

In addition, conceptions of social contracts are dependent upon another assumption that relates to need, namely that benefits are often too generous in comparison with the salary from employment and it establishes a particular difference; that between money and money.

7:10 When I worked at McD I met some parents who were receiving income support but were forced to work occasionally. They said they earned less when they worked than what they got from the income support, so they didn't see the point in working. In my world it's clear that work should give you more money than staying at home.

(VEF 2012)

Money can, as posting 7:10 intimates, carry different value. Using the example of McDonalds in this particular posting can be lined up alongside numerous similar postings on topics of dignified and less dignified kind of money. It is of course possible that 7:10 is actually arguing for salaries to be increased rather than for a reduction of benefits, but this viewpoint is very rare in the communities, if it exists at all. Instead, the predominant view is how money earned in the right kind of contexts (paid employment) metaphorically speaking cannot be too scarce, as the next posting suggests.

7:11 hmm, I would never chose an allowance rather than work. In the meantime one can look for other jobs or start up a business of one's own.

If you feel so bad psychologically there are doctors to turn to for help, but you should not turn to Social Services for money. Even if work pays lousy!

I don't want my tax money to go to people that could get a job as a telemarketer or something else but won't take it and rather go on the dole (i.e., tax money that I worked hard to provide).

(VEF 2007)

The message in posting 7:11 is simple and outspoken – one should work in order to receive money. This axiom presumes that ‘dignity’ comes before needs. Adding parental responsibility and a low-paid job to this equation the discursive consequence would be severe: Poor people ought to take an ordinary job, irrespective of how low the salary is and the number of children that must be fed on this salary, instead of turning towards the welfare state institutions. However, dignity is not the only reason for why working for money is perceived as better than money received from social security rights. Another reason for why the communities prefer money gained from employment is that recipients of different types of economic support are considered parasites preying on *other poor people*, as implied in posting 7:11 above, and in 7:12 below.

7:12 And yes, how benefits are distributed matters because there are those who are not well off that are forced to pay taxes to support people even worse off.

(VEF 2013)

In the type of accounts represented by postings 7:11 and 7:12 need is once again made less important, but this time because of an image of how some poor people exploit other poor people. Two types of poor subject are compared, and one is described as if feeding off the other. The undeserving poor (Fineman, 1991: 282) do not only exploit the welfare state, but are represented as if disloyal enough to claim resources that other poor people have provided. Money and need are indeed related, although perhaps not as one would expect. The type of money received seems more important than the type of need displayed. Whilst Fraser (1990: 199 ff.) describes needs-talk as part of a political discourse, the communities appear to hide this dimension. Still, the fragmentation of groups (Thompson, 1988: 370) demonstrated in postings 7:10, 7:11 and 7:12 points to an ideologically structured discourse: In this piece of fact construction poor people are not the same, do not share experiences or predicaments and do not need to stick together.

Blame yourself

We will now turn towards the particular subjects focused on in this dissertation – parents. The ideals of the choice-making and self-interested member of the middle-class family revealed by Gillies (2005 b) and Karlsson, Löfdahl and Pérez (2013), seem to affect the representation of other families, positioned in other strata of society. This is also notable in the parental communities. I will continue by demonstrating the way

need is transformed into responsibility and how this displacement helps to attribute blame to particular subjects. The resource debated here is not money, but rather a socio-economic position in society and the question for debate is: Can and should the parent be responsible for compensating the child for a disadvantaged position?

As already mentioned, the communities are well aware of what is going on outside of it and community conversations are flooded and highly influenced by debates in other types of mass media. Consequently, socio-economic differences are noted, alongside topics on the labour and housing market, psychological research findings, newspaper articles about educational stratification, political scandals etc. Topics that touch upon issues of stratification, questions of distribution and the relation between social class and living conditions seem to interest the communities. Debates occur on a regular basis about the potential links between poverty, deprivation and impaired life outcomes, especially when it comes to children's living conditions and chances of educational success. However, it is worth noting that poverty and deprivation are not understood as producing negative life outcomes. Instead, an idea of how the *warmth* of good parenting strengthens the child and compensates for an uneven distribution of resources has an upper hand. The fact that, in general, wealthier households produce children who manage to succeed, as we see in Gillies' (2005 a) work, is not interpreted in terms of that wealth, but as due to the *responsible* parental practice of the wealthier parents. Put simply: Socio-economic class is obliterated from the conversation; a discursive feature we will examine in more detail in Chapter Eight.

This omission of social class will be illustrated by the next extract from an extensive thread that was selected to demonstrate the way that a clouding of need paves the way for blame. The thread was written in response to the news of the physical assault on an elderly man that took place in a disadvantaged residential area of Gothenburg in the spring of 2012. The first posting laments the fragile state of the man, who at that time was hospitalised with serious injuries, but the thread soon develops into accusations against the parents of the teenage boys responsible for the assault. Not everybody agrees on blaming the parents and what is about to be presented from the thread is a short skirmish between two nicks.

7:13 / ... / They [local newspaper] also write that the boys' lives are ruined because they have been in custody, how do you figure that one out? Yes, it is true that their lives are ruined but if you clobber an old man you cannot have had such a fucking brilliant and lovely life before that! How the hell have they been raising their children, I get so fucking mad - it's the parents that have

ruined the children's lives!

N1 (TPP 2012) Threadstart

7:14 Yes it is a terrible tragedy, I DO feel sorry for the boys as well, I really do think so but I get so tremendously provoked by the family's attitude to what has happened, teenagers that feel alright and are loved and respected at home do not fight, and they do not almost kill people either. 😞

N1 (Completes her own posting above)

7:15 It obviously does not depend solely, or even mostly, on the parents in many cases, you are pretty stupid to reason like that. Especially not if you belong to a marginalised group in a ghetto.

N2 (Answers posting 7:13)

7:16 The parents can in some cases totally lose their parental powers, if they for example are unemployed, belong to an excluded group and in the eyes of the children are weak. Then the children often live their life outside of the home and friends and society becomes that which influences them the most.

N2 (Completes her own posting above)

7:17 Well, then it comes from the parents and the upbringing anyway, you don't lose your powers over the children just because you're ill or unemployed, respect and love are not based on what kind of social status you have because they are 100 % free to be earned, you can't force someone and that's probably where it all went wrong.

N1 (Answers posting above)

7:18 With unlimited love and respect you'll go ridiculously far, even if you live in a ghetto, you need to be moronic not to understand that.

N1 (Completes her own posting above)

7:19 Well, you're an idiot if you're not sufficiently well-read in sociology and haven't learned that it is not always enough just with the parents, but that other factors may have an influence.

N2 (Answers posting above)

7:20 Of course there are other factors, I won't argue against that – but the upbringing and the parental influence are crucial for how they will turn out as adults

N1 (Answers posting above)

7:21 No, that's definitely not true. Take me for instance, I am a crappy person to some extent, and sort of bad at child-rearing, and the same goes for her dad, but my daughter has always been a wonderful angel that everyone looks up to, grown-ups have taken her advice ever since she was a child. My child-rearing (or daddy's) has nothing to do with her being a wonderful angel.

N2 (Answers posting above)

The blame attached to the parents in this thread is conveyed through suggestions of a work on the inner family structure of love and respect being poorly executed. In this case it seems the interior domains of the family, when well-maintained, will become a force that can beat external conditions. Posting 7:17 argues that respect and love are not based on what kind of social status one has; they are free to be earned. This dictum echoes the notion of warmth and responsibility as replacements for wealth, but the picture of the loving parent who compensates the child for disadvantages nevertheless uses one particular presumption to function: That of warmth being something stable. Irrespective of the hardship, warmth is presumed to be unshakable. It keeps up the good work and is not overwhelmingly harmed by the parental subject taking ill, by drugs being sold on the street corners, by cut-backs at school or by the parent losing the means to support the family. Warmth becomes an entity inside the subject that should be maintained so that it can live separately from the subject's potential afflictions. Because the focus remains on the parents' capacities for love: *With unlimited love and respect you'll go ridiculously far, even if you live in a ghetto* (7:18) and *teenagers that feel alright and are loved and respected at home do not fight* (7:14), there is little room left for what the parents may need from the outside world. Due to the focus being on capacities as opposed to needs, the possibility to stress culpability is even greater.

There may be an explanation for why parents have to be narrated as strong and warmth as stable. If the dominant discourse on choice and responsibility is to be maintained it has, arguably, to prove itself through its subjects. If this is true, what type of demands can be placed upon children? Apparently discourse falters in the face of the child. To demand self-knowledge, control and responsibility (i.e., all those

small parts that make up the preference for choice) when it comes to children is difficult and would perhaps come across as blunt and insensitive. This difficulty may be solved by transferring the blame from the children to the adults. One explanation for why the majority of all threads about children usually orbit around their parents (attaching either shame or praise to them) can be that discourse has left few recommendations for how to handle the irresponsible subject who cannot be a target of judgment; the irresponsible subject in the shape of the child. This, however, leaves us with a peculiar 'logic of blame' that is never addressed in community conversations. If the poor child cannot be blamed, because it is a result of the parents' faulty decisions or lack of stability; at what point *can* the child be blamed? When turning 18? When leaving the home? When graduating from Upper Secondary School? What is it that changes between the point where the child is represented as a victim of circumstances (where the parent is described as the most severe and damaging circumstance) and the point that the same child loses all the status of victim and rather becomes a perpetrator? The incommensurable axioms of the poverty discourse – the axis of innocent victim on the side of the poor child and cunning free rider on the side of the adult poor – is perhaps never as articulate as when debating the blame attributed to the poor parent and trying to determine the potential guilt of their children in one breath.

The defence of the parents that are inserted in the thread is ambiguous. It does acknowledge outside structures as potentially threatening the interior domains of the family, but it is at the same time based on much the same types of premises as the blame attributed to the parents. One such premise is that of the home as an entity with innate capacities to compensate for what goes on outside of it. The problem depicted in posting 7:16 is that the boys live outside of it, thus allowing for other factors to determine the outcome. This idea indicates a similarity between the accounts, because they both advocate something that is stronger or equally strong as structural impediment and differences in societal distribution of resources. The closing posting, however, does something that is rare in the community milieu. All credits for having had a child who is a *wonderful angel* are in 7:21 renounced. Responsibility is normally relinquished when a nick confesses to having a child who did not turn out very well, but it is rare for a nick to stand back from credits for having succeeded. The confession of being *sort of bad at child-rearing* was the last posting from N2 and it received no answer. What makes posting 7:21 stand out is that it hints that there is no particular subject needed to raise a child. Bringing a child into the world is sketched as the flip of a coin; you can win or lose, but this has less to do with parenting skills and is more a matter of luck. This posting hosts no elements of choice,

control or responsibility whatsoever, but a self-knowledge that allows for the nick to state she has not been an all-in-all brilliant mother. It is one of very few break-ups with ideologically ordered repertoires of parenting. It combines two elements in a seemingly impossible chain of equivalence – ‘parental shortage’ and ‘successful child’.

Conveying the message

So far, this chapter has mapped out how the very contract between the subject and society is envisioned in community conversation through a combination and separation of particular elements. Typical characteristics of narration are the separation of need and resources that enable the combination of need and agency. If a subject with a need is represented as a subject of agency, need can be delimited to indicate that the subject is exploiting the welfare state. To conclude the chapter I will demonstrate some techniques of turning need into irresponsibility. Focus will be on how the proliferation of choice and responsibility *is made to look convincing*. We will start out with the most common way of constructing the individual as a primus motor of change and achievement; the technique of using one’s own experiences as advice for how other people should act, and continue with the simultaneously customary way of handing out advice that fails to consider more than one dimension of the problem.

Marie Antoinette and the principle of experience

Using oneself as a point of reference is a way to convince that obviously is not exclusively used in community conversation, but may be more effective in computer mediated environments, because the possibility of refutation is weaker. Hence, a narrative principle of experience is displayed in different ways. This principle means providing illustrative examples or telling stories of experiences that emanate from oneself, one’s friends, relatives, colleagues or one’s partner. Using one’s own experiences can be a way of either claiming or refuting a stake but the most common way of applying the principle of experience is introducing an ‘I’ that has already succeeded in managing the hardships and wants to celebrate it, or administers advice. This ‘I’ has category entitlement. The following two postings apply the pattern of turning one’s own experience into a rule of living.

7:22 Did you read my posting? I have several times, as mentioned, been living way below subsistence level. It’s not always easy, I have not claimed that, but I promise you that my children have received what they needed and a little

more than that. It's about priorities!
(TPP 2012)

7:23 / .../ I've been through some really heavy stuff, BUT I have chosen not to be discouraged by them but to turn them around into experiences and I think many many more could do that. If I can do it, so can they!
(TPP 2012)

The rules seem to be that priorities solve poverty (7:22) and that problems should be mined for the experiences they hold (7:23). So, how do these moralities function, and what view of the subject do they embrace? To be able to state that everybody could do what the narrative 'I' did a condition of *convertibility* has to be established; meaning that the conditions of the abstract subject is thought of as convertible to the conditions of the nick writing and vice versa. We may want to think of it as a narration where forms of capital are considered to be convertible: The assumption is that agency is proportionally distributed amongst us all. When drawing conclusions from one's own life in this fashion one does not need to take experiences of other people into account. When wanting to accuse the dependent subject more sharply, one may bracket even more circumstances or experiences, i.e., reducing the narration even more. When this type of bracketing is a little more outspoken all that is left is the narrative 'I' and her experiences – making the statement into a kind of *Marie Antoinette moment*.⁹⁷ This more fundamental disregard for the experiences of others means that the advice is totally without context.

At times, the visionary advice handed out on how afflicted subjects can ease a troublesome situation appears endless. Some advice is based on suggestions that are free from the rest of the context needed to evaluate it. Again a separation is performed – this time the problem (in the postings below the problem is poverty) is separated from the suggested solution. One example of this dislocation can be found in a type of community accounts that I have labelled *berry-picking advice*. The label itself is distilled from the salient community suggestions of berry-picking – aimed at nicks writing about financial strain. It is employed to articulate that there is always a solution to one's troubles, if one is – literally – willing to go the extra mile. These types of advice aimed at the poor have the common characteristic of disregarding all

⁹⁷ The naming of the suggestions is obviously related to the alleged infamous utterance about the situation of the poor made by Queen Marie Antoinette during a famine that took place under the reign of Louis XVI: *Why don't they eat cake?* Being bluntly insensitive about societal and material differences is sometimes referred to as having a Marie Antoinette moment.

other aspects of the problem and targeting only one small part of it. This delimitation has obvious associations with the alleged advice that is said to have been handed out by the disreputable Queen Marie Antoinette to the starving population of France. Below are cited three of the abundantly emerging postings on the particular topic of berries.

7:24 There are lots of berries in the woods this year and after having read here [in the community] about lots of people struggling with economy, and having no job: Pick berries. Either you make jam or you make lemonade or you eat them. (Lots of vitamins that may be missing if you eat bad food) or you sell them and get some extra money. Also, it's fun to pick them together with the children and delicious in for instance blueberry pie or homemade cowberry jam.

(TPP 2009)

7:25 Take the kids on the bus to the woods on Saturday. The bus trip may take 2 hours but so what? Get out there and pick berries with the kids. Go home and make jam/lemonade/bake on Sunday. Healthy stuff for the grown-ups, for the kids and for the wallet. And what an adventure too ☺

(VEF 2012)

7:26 How lazy can you get? Single parents that complain about the lack of money but refusing to work full time, sometimes even to work at all. /.../ Refusing to pick berries and mushrooms. Expecting ripe plums to fall into their mouth. Really, how are you thinking? Why is it the responsibility of others to support you and your children?

Am myself a single parent and I work full time and more than that. I pick berries and mushrooms with the children, make jam, make lemonade and bake and do what I can so that we can live economically. It is not impossible to live a good life despite being a single parent but you mustn't be lazy, which I notice that many people are.

(VEF 2012)

These postings seem to host something besides mere advice. Reflecting on the actual money that might be generated by a bus tour to the woods, or the short season of the year when berries are ripe, the presumed outcome of berry-picking would probably

not be impressive. This is in itself an indication of the separation of the problem from its proposed solution – going to the woods to pick berries will not begin to solve the problem of being poor. To be able to bring this entrepreneurial subject to life the concrete financial outcomes of berry-picking have to be excluded from the narration. The usage of the putatively experienced ‘I’ makes this clouding of outcomes occur – as the nick writing tells us that she achieves a financial safety margin by her trips to the woods. In these solutions, reproduced by an experienced knower (Potter et al., 1993), the community understanding of the social contract appears in its most pure form. It is possibly not comprehended as a reciprocal relation between society and its subjects where the subject is envisioned as first contributing and then receiving, but as a contract between the ‘I’ and ‘I’. It is the ‘I’ that goes to the woods, the ‘I’ that refines the raw product and the ‘I’ that reap the rewards. It is, once again, the Homo Eligens – alone in her prospecting, planning and realisation. The representation of the experienced Homo Eligens is one single representation treated as if it was universal, and beneath representation there is an assumption of *ceteris paribus*, or the isolation of one single parameter in a model that normally consists of several variables. The notion of convertibility, where one subject’s experience can translate into advice for another subject, is treated as a case of universalism. Within the social contract where we first invest and then receive, we are conceived of as abstract equals. This may help to explain the one-dimensional advice in the postings presented. It is written by someone hosting a Marie Antoinette outlook upon the world: If the problem is that people are starving, they should eat – not pastries, but berries.

Summary

In this chapter I have aimed to present the ways in which community understandings of choice, control, self-knowledge and responsibility have consequences for viewpoints of how societal organisation can and should be handled. The focus in this chapter has therefore been directed towards community dealings with what is summarised as ‘society’, or a perceived social contract where individuals contribute and receive. The present state of this contract is in the communities often evoked through comparisons with an imagined past condition. The topic of concern in these conversations seems to be the subject who makes herself dependent on society’s welfare institutions. This subject is introduced to reinforce two diametrically opposed arguments – either to defend the welfare society and become an incitement to maintain generous levels of support, or to accuse the same support of breeding weakness and passivity. The critics of the welfare state and its presumed incentives to passivity instead articulate a *broken* social contract where some individuals contribute and

others exploit. This critic stance argues that the contract instead ought to be of a *moral* character and situated inside of the individual or inside of the family, rather than being formally constituted on the outside in the form of legal rights and vindicated benefits. This critical viewpoint dominates the communities presumably because it mirrors prevailing subject ideals of self-knowledge, control and responsibility, and because these virtues are understood to bring about subsistence and empowerment.

The non-choosing, dependent subject presumed to result from the nation that breeds weakness, is comprehended in two ways that both result in the same solution – she should ideally receive no or little help. Help can be understood as either difficult to deliver because the subject is so incapacitated that she cannot be reached, or harmful because it may make the subject even more morally corrupt. This representation of help in turn depends on how the needs are narrated. Because the dependent subject is talked about in terms of agency (referring to descriptions of a homo economicus capable of reaping support and aid from welfare institutions), need can be downplayed. Need is also omitted from the very techniques by which the message can be conveyed. I have presented two of the more common narrative techniques by which choice, self-governing and responsibility are proliferated: The first one being a narrative principle of experience and the second a staging of *ceteris paribus* – which I labelled a Marie Antoinette moment.

Exploiting exploitation

Similar to the results in Chapter Six, the general finding in the analysis presented in this chapter is the transportation of need into agency, which in turn paves the way for culpability. That notwithstanding, yet another transport attracts my attention. Descriptions of particular subjects as demanding without contributing to society enables perceptions of *exploitation*, albeit not exploitation in the Marxist sense: The assumption that owners of means of production exploit the labour of the working class. This particular idea of exploitation instead employs a ‘down-top’ model where the subject with less or no means takes advantage of a collective of individuals that have mutually brought their means together. We can see the idea in posting 7:3 where people are reproduced as sitting on their arses and still expecting to receive, in 7:8 where poor people sit at home and live on benefits and in 7:9 that complains about people on benefits who have the nerve to want children. What does this discursive employment of exploitation mean and how is it used? A suggestion is that it enables a particular worldview, and precludes another. To allow for a notion that some subjects have easy access to resources and some experience a shortage (depending on the wage being too low, or on the income support being insufficient) may

threaten a joint understanding of system legitimacy that the abstract social contract enables. If subjects suffering from low wages or subjects suffering because they are unemployed were delineated as one group with joint interests the down-top model of exploitation would not function. This, I argue, is the reason for the general emphasis on *the essence of the subject* rather than the assets: It is a way of separating poor subjects from each other. The preference for immanent qualities is a work of ideological formation, not only a formation that makes the subject without means turn out in a particular way but also, and perhaps more important, a work in which the subject *with* means is crafted in a distinct fashion. I think that what we see here is a disguising of the self-interest economy (Bourdieu, 1977/2011: 172) in which the system of distribution of assets remains closeted, and it is performed through fragmentation (Thompson, 1988: 370). The picture is reversed – subjects with access to resources are robbed by subjects with no such access.

According to Bourdieu, the categorisation of the world that makes knowledge possible is at the heart of any political struggle, and knowledge is possible by ‘the almost magical power of naming’ (1991/2012: 236), i.e. by a labour of symbolic production. This means that for something to be socially known it has to be socially recognised as significant (ibid: 237). Hence, this particular perception of exploitation constitutes a category of perception that the nicks view as significant: The notion of a ‘down-top’ exploitation is a model for thinking. Differentiating people by how much they ‘exploit’ the welfare system (i.e., breaks the social contract) defines the same people. Because need and suffering are narratively suppressed they are simultaneously perceived as less significant, which means that they also *become* less significant. I understand the discourse of the inverted exploitation as an awarded significance that in the micro-level context of the parental community echoes the social contract. Society is us, just as former Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Fredrik Reinfeldt seem to imply, but not in the material, collaborative or collective sense. What is narratively embraced is the *intimate* dependency and a kind of private contract. While these are situated inside the family, their benefits are visible on the outside in the shape responsible behaviour from self-contained subjects. The subject in community conversations is not described as if she does not need resources. However, when this need is to be made into a social contract, the focus is less on redistribution and more on moral improvement. The formula for the ideal social contract is this: A morally healthy subject is a sound investment in society, whilst (too much) redistribution can become potentially harmful, because it turns the subject into an exploiter. If ideology shapes the contours of discourse (Fineman, 1991: 289) this is a piece of ideology defending class formation, and separation.

8. No society, only families?

If the most important social contract is understood as situated inside a private family setting, as I have put forward in the previous chapter, what is made to matter in conversations about society are individuals, families and kinships and the responsible choices made by them. As argued by Wendy Larner (2000: 255), new political problematisations involve multiple and diverse objects of governance. If the parental communities display a tendency to criticise the welfare state that is founded on universal societal responsibilities between its citizen-subjects and instead advocate self-governed individuals and families, this indicates we need to study these objects of governance and lay bare how the hopes and aspirations for the individual and the individual family are presented. That is, consequently, the aim of this chapter. It intends to answer two questions in particular: How is the transference of ideals and ethics to take place inside of the family and how is the role of the parent visualised within such a requirement?

The chapter will start by mapping out community conceptions of good or non-problematic parenting, the way the child should be fostered and what type of result (what type of child) that is envisioned as the result of this fostering. We will continue by looking into the more subtle ways of steering the child, where it is groomed and nurtured more than fostered and disciplined. The chapter ends with an analysis of how this subtle steering forms part of the making of the middle class family. Initially, however, I will present a very general and comprehensive community appreciation of what parenthood is: It is work. Arguably, this very metaphor shows us that what is propagated is not only a conception of the primacy of the intimate before institutions, bureaucracy or legal civil rights, but something else – a formal sector such as wage labour lends itself to a description of the family. Intimacy receives a particular, and indeed less intimate, shape.

A ‘workified’ parenthood: An egalitarian outlook?

If forced to submit only one result from studying community discourse on parenthood it would be that it is considered work, both in the meaning of an endeavour that can be repetitive and tiring and in the sense of an activity in order to achieve a result. As proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980: 3) the way we describe the world defines everyday realities. In this case, descriptions of the intimate relationship have a flavour of work to them, or in other words, in community narrations parenthood has become ‘workified’. It can be noted in two types of postings.

The first type describes parenthood as exhausting and to make the point applies a comparison with the workplace where money is earned.

8:1 / .../ So he has got a full time job? But you know by now that having a child equals work 24/7 ? Try switching the roles and you'll see who is the most tired.

(VEF 2015)

The second type of posting describes the commitment that comes with parenthood. This commitment can revolve around fostering the child, equipping it with the right kinds of moral values, keeping it safe, or providing for the child emotionally, which is the topic of the next exemplary posting.

8:2 But that's the thing, you cannot take a holiday from the parental role for more than a night or when you're at work because this child is so emotionally dependent on you as a parent.

(VEF 2012)

If the activities of a parent (of fostering, cleaning, cooking and comforting and so forth) are conceptualised as work, as suggested in these two postings, one may need a holiday. Postings 8:1 and 8:2 are typical examples of the conflation of spheres that takes place in the communities. Working to earn money switches places with, or becomes nearly the same as, the time when a parent spends time with her child. The way this work tends to fall to the woman is illustrated in the next posting.

8:3 If you've got a man that works 12 hours a day it is only fair that the woman who chose to stay at home also assumes responsibility for the home and the children, since it is YOUR job.

I am myself a woman with children btw.

(VEF 2015)

It is possibly the metaphor of work that enables the communities to narrate parenthood as a verb (*parenting*), more than an identity, an experience or a life phase (parenthood). The number of community postings inserted that describe what the parent does for the child by far outnumber the postings describing the parent's feelings towards the child. This is in itself not very surprising, considering the fact that parental activity surrounding children and household is precisely that – an activity.

The axiom of action, however, receives a particular nuance in the communities: It is envisioned as if endowed with very strong forces. If summarising the presumed capabilities of the ideal parent it would be that her actions should have the capacity to overcome almost every type of hardship. The posting below uses the ideal of parental action to suggest that low or no education do not matter much when helping the child with its homework, but rather the capacity to motivate the child.

8:4 But I get it, the risk of failure for the child is probably higher when the parents lack education but that's not an absolute truth. Ambition and the capacity to motivate mean more than what kind of education I have.
(TPP 2013)

Ambition and capacity to motivate are what is promoted in this posting. This is, I think, a part of the *workified parenthood* – it is activities performed to achieve a result, and as we have seen in the previous chapters, interior qualities are perceived to matter more than the assets of the subject. The posting captures the community preference for how the work of formatting and supporting a child should look. It should not be about formal qualifications, thus skills such as training or education should not be allowed to influence the way we think about the parent's possibilities. The posting, hence, resonates with institutional ideals of the professionalised parent, ready to share the burdens with the school, as described by Gillies (2005b) or Baez and Talburt (2008), and much the same as captured in these studies socio-economic differences are not considered decisive for success. However, the workified parenthood, as I have labelled it, differs from the professionalised parent in one important way: Work is not confined to cooperating with institutions or making one's child benefit from the resources of institutions. Instead, when parenthood is conceptualised as work it seemingly covers all areas of life. At a first glance, it is a quite egalitarian outlook upon parents and their capabilities: If they have an ambition for the child and if they try their very best the chance of success is good.

To bring up the child

This tells us very little about what it *is* to succeed as a parent, and what a good upbringing consists of. In fact, the prescriptions for how to manage the verb, the primacy of *parenting*, are many and at times incompatible. In the communities conceptions of whether or not parents do their job of childrearing fluctuate and therefore I will initially present three different but possible positions on childrearing. What is vital is not necessarily to appear as a strict parent, but to come across as a parent who

has a child-rearing *strategy*. Parenting can be carried out with more and less interference, as is evident in the first three postings that are quoted below, which are placed in a continuum of fostering and guiding the child, with the most authoritarian style first and the most tolerant viewpoint last.

8:5 / .../ Children may be competent but they still need rules and directions. I seriously almost freaked out when my nine-year-old son refused to put his homework in the satchel and his teacher almost cried when she phoned me after having tried to make him put his books in the bag with a lot of pedagogical efforts for about 30 minutes. I asked her what kind of approach she had used, and she said the only thing she hadn't done was shout because it 'harms the child'. I sneered, demanded to talk to my son and said in a sharp tone-of-voice that it was time to put the books in the satchel and stop being silly. Five minutes later he was standing in the hall with the books in the satchel. The HELL he was harmed by me raising my voice. The only one harmed that day was probably his powerless teacher who truly showed how incompetent she is when it comes to discipline. SURE, fine, you can definitely try the pedagogical approach first if that makes you comfortable (I don't) BUT you cannot chicken out and not discipline the child when it's needed. Sharpen the voice, use the angry eyes and tell the child off. It's very effective without damaging anyone.

8:6 I am by Swedish standards an authoritarian parent just like my parents were. However, it takes an enormous amount of love and communication to make this successful / .../ It is probably the cornerstone of the successful parenthood. Also, I think that children should learn to be polite and to behave themselves - this I do a lot for the sake of my child. I think it'll be easier for a child who knows how to comport in the future, particularly in an international family such as ours.

8:7 I definitely don't believe in flogging or overly authoritarian child-rearing. Neither do I think that Swedish children are badly raised, in that case perhaps Swedes in general don't have that many social codes in comparison with other countries. You may say it's right or wrong, but that's how the culture here is.
(VEF 2013 three separate postings)

The three postings above promote different levels of communication and demands raised upon the child. In posting 8:5 there is basically no communication with the

child articulated, or rather communication is reproduced as the narrated teacher's helpless surrender. The nick describes her own blunt commanding of her son as successful, while the teacher's educative approach is represented as fearful. In contrast, the last posting (8:7) employs a relativistic perspective by pointing out that the behaviour of children is related to the culture of a country and to how the adults themselves behave. Both postings belong to the outer poles of community discourse. Posting 8:6 is the most common narration of parenting. This is also the most complex narration – the balance between discipline and warmth – to pull off. It is this balancing act that the communities display as their preference for a decisive parenting strategy.

Tough love and the independent child

The parental strategies – regardless of what strategy that is evoked – seemingly aims to enhance the future social value of the child. The preferred community ideal that guides conversation is that of *tough love*, because this ideal seems particularly calibrated to maximise the efforts. Tracey Jensen (2012) describes the ideal of tough love as a promise of social success and as a remedy for social immobility. Tough love is:

the elusive, correct balance of discipline and warmth which is said to guarantee educational and social successes. Tough love names the crisis of social immobility as one of parental indulgence, failure to set boundaries, moral laxity and disciplinary incompetence (ibid.: 8).

In the communities, to intertwine the capacity for love and the ability to receive respect from one's children is indeed a piece of fragile narration. The mother should on the one hand pour herself out for her children, always be there for them and manifest a love without end, and on the other hand set the moral standards and regulate the children's actions. Her love must be planned and have a direction in its output. These conflicting ideals are situated not far from the ideal of 'sensitive mothering', presented by Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey (1989): This style of parenting is not conceived of as shouting at or punishing of the child, but instead discipline is carried out through a soft imprinting more than by means of absolute boundaries.

The following thread demonstrates how the concept of tough love functions in a conversation about an adult child. Its content is situated in an everyday arena far away from political demands on parents and it consists of accounts telling us about the trivial facts of life – looking for a job, moving house and sons who stay too long in the shower. Nevertheless, the demand for a well-balanced parenting that is oper-

ating in the thread resonates with many of the demands from political campaigns to promote the responsible parent. However, in this thread the demands from these campaigns that were outlined in more detail in Chapter Two, are brought down to the world in which parents actually live; in the world consisting of the day to day chore of raising a child. It is, as I see it, the layman's version of political discourse. The thread, which will be presented by the opening postings, concerns setting limits for a child and accommodates notions of pushing the child forward. Hence, what we will be looking at more closely is the disciplinary part of the discourse of tough love, but a tough love that makes the mother aim for an independent rather than a subdued child.

8:8 Initial posting

I'm so neeeeervous!

My son is about to spontaneously apply for a job. I said: go there early in the morning, show them that you ARE interested and offer to work for free one day to be able to get the training.

He woke up one hour ago. Then had a shower for 20 minutes. NOW when I asked him what he is waiting for, he starts to get ready...Sure, I can understand that he maybe feels nervous and worries a bit but still!! Speed it up, I want to scream. I go bonkers with him being so sluggish...

N1(TPP 2010)

8:9 Maybe he has become a little bit comfy? Yes, we have talked about this before (and I know you'll get angry and say that it's not at all like that, but right now I don't give a 😊).

I am all for supporting one's kids in what they undertake. But sometimes one has to let them fix the shebang themselves. Just so they won't be sluggish and lazy. He is a grown up for God's sake! A long time ago!!

And then I can understand that he isn't in too much of a hurry to get a job. He lives super cheap and comfy with his mother? The urgency is not great. But I hope though that he'll pull himself together and go there and give the best he's got, and that he gets the job!

N2 (Answers posting above)

8:10 Well, I think he's more preparing in his own way. Me and M. have been given him a good scare about what kind of demands that he'll be faced with if he is to work there, it's sort of no playground 😊
He fixes everything... this time he got a tip from a friend - who hasn't got that sometimes? I got all my jobs through contacts when I was young. /.../

He doesn't want to live here... he is looking for a job as hard as he can and has been to several job interviews. That's more than his mates have accomplished. He has also checked out courses to take, since it's hard to find a job here

think you're barking up the wrong tree 😊
N1 (Answers posting above)

8:11 What I mean is that so many times you have written about how you help him with this and that. But of course, perhaps he just feels nervous. I'm sure that's the case.

N2 (Answers posting above)

8:12 I honestly don't know what it is I am helping him with... he got help to scribble down a CV and a letter. Help. I did not do it for him. As for the rest he manages by himself. Does his laundry, cooks his food if we don't help one another. Everybody do their own dishes since a couple of weeks back - before that we used to take turns but that always resulted in more for me so they changed that themselves...

Don't actually know what you are talking about if we aren't to travel a few years back in time...

N1 (Answers posting above)

8:13 I'm referring to your whole attitude. How they didn't help you unpack when you moved and you had pains, cause they were busy getting their own rooms in order, you explained. But you were also busy, right? Plus, soon after you wrote and asked for tips for one of the son's room, because he didn't have a lot of stuff there. So what was he so busy doing while you were unpacking and had pains?

And you often talk about how over crowded you live. But at the same time you sanction that two grown up men live there and have their own rooms, while you and little sister crowd together?

N2 (Answers posting above)

8:14 You're drawing your conclusions AGAIN 😊 I said even back then that I WANTED to do it myself, I want to have it my way in my cupboards /.../ What William did... is that any of your business you mean? In that case I can tell you that he put up our paintings, fixed curtains and curtain-rod and unpacked in wardrobes and shelves – he is the one with the most clothes in this family and he is the most meticulous regarding them – folding and putting into the right place was important.

No, the 'men' don't have a room of their own. Helene and Kevin share a room. William has the small room of 9 m².

You want to see the negative; you have your own image of how my sons are and will probably never change it. It doesn't matter but I hope you could get that you actually have a warped image of the whole thing. You make me laugh cause you are so... no I can't spell it out 😊

N1 (Answers posting above)

In this thread the discourse of tough love is present both in the reproof and in the defence. It is as if the two nicks agreed on the urgency of fostering with a grain of discipline. The defences inserted aim to prove something – because the son does his laundry and cooks his own food (posting 8:12) he is a living proof of the disciplinary part being handled. For both nicks, it would presumably be wrong to create an irresponsible child, and for both the cure for irresponsibility is a combination of warmth and discipline. This, I suggest, points to a joint interpellation as well as to the feature of the child being the most important field specific capital in a parental community – fail to raise your child and you have achieved a failure from which there is no restitution.

In this thread the anticipated outcome of the love and discipline combination appears to be the independence of the child and what N2 is hinting at is that the son of N1 has not done so well in that arena. The formula producing the go-ahead capacities in a child works in two ways, as described in posting 8:9: *I am all for supporting one's kids in what they undertake. But sometimes one has to let them fix the*

shebang themselves. Just so they won't be sluggish and lazy. Support and demands are to be combined, yet separated when necessary. This double and calculated movement appears to be comprehended as pushing the child forwards. An expression such as *to let the child fix* (posting 8:9) is a signal of how discipline is envisioned, not as a tool of force but as soft governing. Permissiveness would be to manifest a supportive love that has no demands attached and in 8:9 N2 uses the son as an example of what may happen: *And then I can understand that he isn't in too much of a hurry to get a job. He lives super cheap and comfy with his mother?* Hence, being overly supportive is a sign of permissiveness and means that the parent risks losing control of the child's outcome. This soft version of discipline appears to belong to a more controlling kind of parenting, whereas love and support belong to the more permissive side, but both versions come across as necessary for success. The trick is to keep love and discipline both interconnected and separated, and to calculate which type of approach is needed in a particular situation. When calibrated correctly, a governable space is retrieved in the zone between love and discipline. Love and soft discipline are investments into that space.

It is vital to understand that in this thread the ideals of independence and responsibility play a major part both in the blame and in the defence. The notion of children as possible investments is part of a basic community manner for understanding human success, failure and striving, and it can be captured in an interpretative repertoire that I have labelled *You should reap what you sow*. It is based upon a morality already revealed in ideas about the subject's responsibilities towards society in the previous chapter. N2 intimates that the investment in the son of N1 did not turn out very well; he now lives cheaply with his mother instead of finding a job and moving out. N1 is described as if she has abdicated her position of power and, hence, from responsibility. She has been a poor investor.

Judging from the thread above one may gain the impression that discipline would be the favoured position in relation to the child. However, tough love is about balance. In some instances the governable space is comprehended as ruined when the parent exercises the rules too rigidly and too much discipline is construed as tilting the balance in the wrong direction. The following posting describes the problems that arise when a parent disciplines the child too much.

8:15 I think you're creating a vicious circle at the dinner table by using those strict rules of yours. That he has to eat at least one third of the portion and so on. Among our acquaintances I have seen that too many rules only make the

children 'bullheaded'.⁹⁸ don't know if that's what happened with your son?
(VEF 2012)

Posting 8:15 contends that children can become obstructive when discipline is over-emphasised and, therefore, no character building can take place. Shaping and moulding the child appear to be an activity a little more complicated than being warm on the one hand and firm on the other. 8:15 points to yet another way to ruin the investment. When disciplining the child one should be careful not to trigger resistance.

It may seem that the topics of debate are small or futile: A child who does not help the mother to unpack and a small boy who is forced to eat one third of his dinner portion. The point is that regardless of the magnitude of the topics ventilated, the demands on the parent are the same. She is to monitor the development of the child, maintain balance both in love and in discipline, exacting neither too much nor too little. She is the manager of the child.

The manager

Character building and independence have destinations when debated in the parental web communities and one such destination is the labour market. We will now move on to parental issues of another magnitude, that of delivering a child who fits into society and that can contribute to it. Worries and anxieties about children's chances in the labour market are recurrent topics of conversation and in these debates the parents are once again represented as crucial components in the child's potential success. Thus, one major part of the envisioned good parenting is a demand that the parent produces a well-functioning child. For this subject to happen the child needs some basic training and the parent comes across as the one who ought to shoulder this specific responsibility. The parent is, so to speak, responsible for the management of the child and for the resulting product. One way of discussing children as future subjects is through narrations of cases where the parent is described as being incapable of pushing the child forwards. When the child is faced with a challenge and hesitates, faulty parental subjects tend to side with the child, as the posting below proposes.

8:16 It's a difficulty that many can overcome but every now and then you see parents who want to free their children from tasks that are a bit more difficult or tough. That just screams attitude failure. To get by in life you need to also

98 In Swedish: motvalls.

conquer the difficulties. Perhaps you will never master them fully or feel comfortable with the more difficult tasks but you can work on your resistance or reluctance. Because, as you write, if not you cannot manage a job interview either. Generally you hear the argument 'it's not so easy' as some kind of obstacle that prevents you from even trying. With that attitude we will never again see any participants in the Olympic Games, no surgeons, no skilled craftsmen and hardly any accomplished people at all.

(TPP 2012)

The particular parents narrated in posting 8:16 fail to deliver a child capable of dealing with a future full of demands. What 8:16 might be suggesting is that an entrepreneurial type of governing from the parent is missing in certain cases. Between the lines one can catch a glimpse of a contract relation between the parent and society: In the narrated factory of the family the parents are described as managers and the children as products to be delivered in an acceptable condition; they should become subjects that society *needs*. This type of favoured governing resonates well with research on the 21st century ideals – promoted by a vast range of institutions – of how to help children overcome deprivation. According to Gillies (2005 a: 838), the ideals include: 'strong relationships with parents, parental involvement with education, appropriate role models'.⁹⁹ The parent appears to be a base from which citizen security can be accomplished (Rose, 2000 b). In this particular case the analysis coincides with the credo formulated by Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose (2008/2011: 148 ff.): The way society is organised will define what kind of subjects is needed. One of the manager's functions seems to be to deliver this subject to society.

Planning the child's leisure time

Above I have delineated some vital characteristics in the work of formatting the child: The ideal of tough love and the demand to deliver an acceptable product to society. This section will consist of accounts about a very different type of fostering. Although they are the basic requirements of parenthood, the formula of tough love and the duty to push the child forward are simply starting points. They are the basic requirements of parenthood. According to the communities, the ultimate way of shaping a child's behaviour rather involves more refined techniques – forming its movements, its preferences and its taste – in other words through less interfering or visible techniques. The child should ideally be nurtured, put in the right kind of

⁹⁹ See also Bowe, Gewirtz and Ball (1994/2006: 68 f.) for a perspective on the concept of responsible parenting as displaying the traits of the ideal consumer, which presumably makes parental choice into a case of selecting goods from a market place.

environments, encouraged and inspired. The governable space where the child can receive guidance and fostering appears to be more for formation than for training. This formation is not therapeutic but close enough; a process not of forcing the child to become docile but of helping it find its aptitudes, its qualities and preferences, to 'open up a field of possibilities' (ibid.: 147) and shaping it beyond simply learning rigid behavioural rules. The parent alone cannot achieve all this, but is responsible for facilitating the process. This may, for instance, be achieved by choosing the right kind of school.

8:17 Our oldest son will start elementary school next year and we have recently moved to X-town. It's hard to know which schools are good. I'm in need of advice from those of you who have gone to school here, which ones are good? Advantages and disadvantages in different schools would be great! It's such an important decision that feels so difficult to make considering we don't know anyone who attended school here. The schools obviously advertise the very best they've got, which makes it even harder. So please help us sort out the qualities of the schools here in X-town! ☺

(VEF 2013)

In community conversation the ideal of a covert steering is visible not only in the anxieties that apparently reside in the activity of choosing the right school, but is visible also in narrations about leisure time. Discussions about designing children's leisure time is a frequent topic in both communities – what they do after school or what they do for stimulation and fun. The zestful parts of life are fields of possibilities too and they are choreographed by the parent. In the next posting this choreography seems to have resulted in a busy schedule.

8:18 My 7 year old son has the following activities:

Guitar lessons (first term)

Gymnastics (two terms)

Scouting (started 1.5 years ago)

Swimming (since he was 3 years old)

Earlier he played football too (but changed to gymnastics) and then he took Street Dance (but they changed the teacher and the new teacher wants the children to be at least 8 years so he has to wait until autumn to start again).

/.../

(VEF 2011)

When having children that do not want to engage in activities, the tone-of-voice is often one of concern, such as in the posting below asking for advice about how to handle this situation.

8:19 Have a 7 year old daughter. When she was between 3-5 years old she went to children's gymnastics once a week. She really enjoyed it. The place where we went only accepted children up to 5 years of age, and she has not wanted to start any new gymnastic lessons afterwards, for older children. I have also asked her if she wants to sing in a children's choir (got a note about that in the letterbox this spring), children's football (she tried it when she was 5 years old but only went once before she wanted to quit). She hasn't been very interested in the choir either.

I am thinking about how much to push them to start extracurricular activities? It may well be that she just feels it's tough to get started but when she has started she may think it's really fun.

Or should I just ask but if she says no simply let it go?

(VEF 2011)

Why is it so important to keep the child occupied when not at school? One answer that keeps recurring is that the main benefit of extracurricular activities is their salutary promotion. 'Society' seems to be viewed as simultaneously a threat and a terminal station – the children will end up in this society, which has more and less productive places to stay and ways of being. Berg and Peltola (2014) captured this worry when talking to Finnish parents, Glenda Wall (2010) detected the same anxiety in her interviews with Canadian mothers and in many ways this feature resonates in the communities. Activities may foster for a particular place in society, or a particular way of being.

8:20 Extracurricular activities are super important as they keep children busy so that they don't end up wrong in society. good that they start early so they've got the habit. it's also good to exercise 😊

(VEF 2011)

As argued by Rose (1999: 31 f.): to govern something or someone is to fraction experience in particular ways to constitute governable spaces – populations, nations,

societies, economies, families, schools etc. Aside from the governable space constituted by the family, I believe that also the extracurricular activity manifests as such a space because it regulates behaviour, relations and time. It fractions the child's experience, thoughts and focus, transporting her/him between different zones of security. We may conceive of a *gated child* rescued from the dangers residing in passivity and fostered for the most desirable subject position: The active one. When away from the other governable spaces available to the child, (the family and the school) but engaged in an activity he/she is still structured by something. The child is put in a landscape of activities that frames his/her view of the world. Posting 8:20 is characteristic in placing the corporal benefits of exercise last in the enumeration of why extracurricular activities are important.

However, extracurricular activities also foster the child for a particular position in society. The activities may be part of a 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2011: 2) that aim to give the child a particular disposition that enables her/him to feel comfortable when relating to other people, (adults in particular), endowing a sense of being special and entitled, as well as helping the child to become familiar with institutionalised settings. In other words, the extracurricular activities contain hidden resources that help mould a suitable habitus. The child should become a particular person, as described in the posting below.

8:21 Of course travelling is good for children. They learn about the world, other cultures and habits, [they] understand that everything is not like home. They simply become accustomed to the world, broadminded, knowledgeable. And all of that through having fun! 😊
(TPP 2010)

Posting 8:21 focuses upon recreational activities as something that shape a person. It is an account that resonates the reproduction strategies highlighted by Vincent and Ball (2007) – because the children cannot be promised a financially secure middle class position in the future they must be crafted in a way that will enable them to achieve it through their habitus: By looking and acting like the middle class their chances of actually getting there are understood as enhanced. The proclamation and celebration of the sophisticated child who is familiar with other habits and cultures display one significant feature of the soft governing residing in the regulations of free time – it should be fun. There is no force involved in this teaching of the child, no rules or prohibitions or procedures. Instead, it is an offering, a free gift. The right kind of activities becomes a moral injection into the subject; an injection that does

not sting. This may help to explain the many anxious postings (of which 8:19 is an example) about children who do not want to participate in any activities proposed by the parent, or the proud announcements of how occupied the child's time is, (as was noted in 8:18). Activities seem to be appreciated as both a protective factor and a benign moral whip and the salutary function of keeping busy is a stable discursive moment. What remains unarticulated but potentially threatening is unregulated time. Although unregulated time is seldom described as dangerous, the very urge to make the children active has an element of force to it, as we saw in posting 8:19: *I am thinking about how much to push them to start extracurricular activities?* It may even be reasonable to exert a little pressure for the child to have fun.

Constructing the middle class

Much of the recommended technologies for shaping the child orbit around activities that cost money – guitar lessons, football training and travelling abroad. The activity of parenting, as constructed in the communities, is not neutral and not for everyone. Besides expressing a sense of urgency or an obligation to protect the child they are, I think, a rather classic way of distinction: That of constructing the middle class. I will continue this chapter by examining the way 'middle-classness' is construed by identifying and highlighting differences in relation to the less affluent.

The construction of the middle class is – apart from its material side – to a large extent also a symbolic battle (Wacquant, 2012: 108).¹⁰⁰ As argued by Kim Allen and Yvette Taylor (2012: 18), the marking of differences between classes occurs in discussions of personhood, i.e., moral character, behavioural characteristics and/or pathologies. These moral character traits form part of a *placed parenthood*. The placed parenthood surfaces in account of particular people in specific places that are described as if they hosted particular moralities. The subject is perceived as if 'self-locating'. The thrifty middle-class mother will be found in all the right moral environments – perhaps in the gym, in the playground with her children or attending parent meetings at the school. The problematic and feeble mother of the lower class will be discovered in the wrong type of places – maybe in junk food restaurants, in front of the television set or smoking on the balcony (ibid.: 1 f.). When the parental communities associate poor people with particular 'problematic' habits, such as smoking or indulging in fast food, they are put in precisely those kinds of places. They do not self-locate, they are

100 The most relevant task for a sociology of the middle class, Loïc Wacquant proposes (ibid: 108 f.), is not to refine the criteria for inclusion in- or exclusion from the class, but to engage in studies of how actors through the political work of naming can – or cannot – form a collective that resembles a middle class.

put in these places in the narration, as in the next posting that was selected because it sketches a particular place for the poor that allows for a distance to emerge.

8:22 /.../ why are poor children and adults more obese than the more affluent?

Eating a lot of junk food and sweets is obviously not cheap. Understanding that there has to be a balance between how much you eat and how much you exercise is not exactly rocket science.

Choosing what is best for your child is not related to financial conditions.

I find it hard to believe that you're a worse parent because you're not rich.
What do you think?
(VEF 2013)

These types of speculative inquiry into the life styles of the worst-off are recurrent in the parental communities and tend to orbit around leisure time, school results and food/exercise. The high frequency of debates about poor people's habits and generally problematic habitus may be comprehended as signs of a restoration of the middle class, by way of comparison. Discussing junk food and sweets is perhaps not primarily a sign of concern, but junk food and sweets become part of a kind of anecdotic evidence of why particular people are problematic. These kinds of tropes are, I think, *narrative places* convenient for placing rejected subjects so that a presumed 'we' can debate and problematise them. Simultaneously this 'we' can consolidate and justify their own position. In that sense I conceive of this positioning as a forced location. Food, as Anving (2012: 183) demonstrates, enables hierarchies; and she points to the relation between these hierarchies and the construction of class. What Anving stresses is that in the construction of class food accounts appear less harsh and uppish than for instance references to differences in income or capital. Food accounts seem somewhat more innocent and are perhaps an inoffensive way of establishing the difference necessary for the cultural production of class.

The discussion about the faulty habitus of the poor is not performed without criticism and ironic jokes and reproaches about 'middle class snobbery' are visible from time to time. This being said, even when the middle class receives critique, as in the posting to follow, the nick still confesses how the urge to produce middle class dis-

tinctions holds her in a stranglehold. The posting tells a story of another type of force – as if the nick was compelled to perform in ‘the middle class way’. It talks of *doing* middle class and demonstrates how a classed practice or experience is not something added to the particular class in retrospect, when the class is already formatted, just as Wacquant (2012: 101) points out, but that it is part of the very creation of a class. Moreover, it is a posting that appoints places laden with putative problems; places that make up a gloomy relief towards the prosperous places of the middle class.

8:23 Can you vaccinate children against problems? Some seem to think it can be done. If only you buy a co-operative flat or a house in the right neighbourhood, next to the right school, place the children in the right type of extracurricular activities – then you’ve made it!

‘Our little Karen will attend the French school. We think it can provide her with the right kind of network’

I often get worried questions about the neighbourhood I live in. Isn’t it a little bit... slummy? Worn out housing estates too close by? People seem to move to other places a lot? Discrete questions that never fully ‘speak out’ what one really means. And nobody is actually questioning the rundown centennial houses in the South?¹⁰¹

Fucking middle class. And I am a part of it.

/.../

These middle class parents – they pussyfoot the most, they are the ones always talking about equality, justice, redistributive politics and psychosocial health. They are so politically correct you wanna puke.

101 The South is a district in Stockholm (in Swedish: Söder). It was formerly known as a working class district populated by poor families with children but has today gone through a major gentrification and become a well-known middle class district with, according to a contemporary urban folk etymology, a population that is largely made up by left wing academics, copy writers, journalists and the likes.

Especially when you know that their children will indeed grow up in another type of 'hood' where the Little House on the Prairie¹⁰² is the ideal. White, blonde, tall, nice and tidy, nicely combed, free from louse, well-travelled, talent for languages, strong ego.....

(VEF 2007)

This posting is pierced with places of very different social values: the *right neighborhood*, next to the *right school*, the *French school*, worn out *housing estates*, 'hoods' and the *Little House on the Prairie*. Different types of people may be put in all of these places. This posting does something that is not usually performed in the communities: It appoints some of the problem with the way that the affluent seek shelter in particular places, as well as pointing out the way in which these places in themselves appear to promise social security. It highlights something that the middle class does to separate itself from people in other types of places. The places in which the middle class seeks shelter become *strategic* places. The posting also argues that the middle class uses a kind of social awareness as a place for formation: Having a particular opinion about a topic can also be a way to make oneself distinct from the rest. As the postings points out, the middle class position thus becomes one of hypocrisy.

Consequently, strategic places can be of different kinds. Middleclass mentality (the sophisticated, well-travelled and broadminded child we caught a glimpse of in posting 8:21) may be created precisely in the meeting with the less fortunate, and by sharing a strategic but temporary place with them. In the next posting a nick expresses her urge to place her children in a school described as 'immigrant-dense'.

8:24 Me, I think it's a problem that our village doesn't have a lot of immigrants or refugees. I would like my son to attend the most 'immigrant-dense' school in the municipality, partly because it is a good school, and partly because I believe one needs to meet people from many different groups (not only ethnic) to be as clever and well integrated as possible.

What does the creation of these strategic places mean? That which Vincent and Ball (2007:1062) label *reproduction strategies* – processes of transmission of class in middle class child-rearing practices – is a way to act out a sense of responsibility amongst middleclass parents, the responsibility to ensure that the child is made to belong to the middleclass in an era of precarious future prospects. The narrations in

¹⁰² In the original posting: Bullerbyn, a famous Swedish children's story about a rural village of concord and harmony.

the communities seemingly rest upon a particular sense of reproduction of the child and a responsibility to make that reproduction happen. The active child with a busy schedule comes across as a context specific asset that holds a particular value. This value is so strong that not even a critical nick, such as in posting 8:23, can reject it. Although disliking the places in which the middle class hides, she still has to confirm their value. Having said that, places can be strategic in more than one sense of the word. The appreciation of the importance of ethnic diversity for her child stated by the nick in posting 8:24 can only be created in a mixed school. In specific terms it means that certain children (for instance children with an immigrant background) can deliver something to the middle class child, or that the middle-class child can excavate something from the immigrant child. This treasure to be handed over is best described, I think, as *competence*, and having this competence of other countries or cultures will add to the child's habitus. It is a specific type of reproduction strategy – to make the child into an omnivore (Skeggs, 2004: 144) – sophisticated enough to embrace and understand other habits or customs. Attending a school containing immigrant children is an opportunity for certain children and, hence, people from lower social strata become an asset to be consumed.

Distinctions and misrecognitions

Middle class distinctions do not only construct the class and part of its reproduction strategies, but also seem to constitute a defence of the way that middle class parents format their children through activities. Next, this type of defence of a particular way of life will be explored.

Self-formation and distinctions are associated with questions pertaining to a potentially unequal distribution of resources that enables some to consider enrolling the child in healthy extracurricular activities, while preventing others from doing the same. Conversations about extracurricular activities thus include defending privilege, and such defenses surface in the communities on a regular basis. One way of defending privilege involves relativising what money can buy. In the next posting a nick discusses relative poverty in an apparent attempt to undermine the concept.

8:25 Can everyone afford to do just any type of sport? If that's a measure of poverty I'll freak out, honestly. Doing push-ups or running is free of charge. Playing ice hockey is not. So are all children that cannot afford to play ice hockey poor?

(TPP 2012)

Another way to defend oneself is to relativise the middle class privilege itself by pointing out the differences within this class. Just because you have money you cannot do whatever pleases you.

8:26 /.../ I'm excluded from [name of golf club] because I don't want to pay the membership fee, so actually I live in social exclusion. The gate to the yacht club is closed – same thing. I'll have to settle for the motor yacht club. My children do not play ice hockey – social exclusion. Life is what you make of it. You can see yourself as a victim or you can do the things that are within your reach and be happy about it.

(TPP 2012)

The two postings borrow the term social exclusion to discuss a harmless 'deprivation' of the affluent child. By choosing ice hockey as an illustrative example as in posting 8:26 (i.e., an expensive sport), the middle class child is portrayed as someone who also can be excluded from particular activities due to a lack of money, although the posting fails to acknowledge the fact that it really addresses differences amongst the more prosperous. The rhetorical point suggests that the conditions of the poor and the prosperous are the same – one has the choice between surrendering to a comparative discouragement and making the best of the situation. It is not a question of needing something and does not concern the distribution of resources. One consequence of relativising resources in this fashion is how it focuses on the risk of envy amongst children with access to fewer resources; the worry seems not to be that children in relative deprivation really *have* fewer resources. When formulated in this slightly more rhetorically sharp manner, the activity of class formation appears less neutral. The two postings above do not only construct the middle class family, but in addition other people and experiences. When examined more closely we can see how posting 8:26 connects elements that make a lack of assets stand out in a particular way. The nick states that she does not want to pay the membership fee for the golf club and has chosen to be socially excluded. Apart from not really doing justice to the term social exclusion, this utterance connects exclusion with choice, (you have the opportunity of doing something that you choose not to do), which is a combination that presumably appears valid in the eyes of the communities because of the preference for choice as the driving force of human activities. Choice reappears a little later when the posting connects victimhood with choice: *You can see yourself as a victim or you can do the things that are within your reach and be happy about it.* In this sense, no victimization originates in the world outside of the subject, such as

structural impediments or distributional injustices. Victimhood is generated from the inside and results from choice.

In matters of the family – the way that the family is construed as an ‘inner society’ – these preferences for choice and for assuming responsibility for one’s choices take the shape of a whole *rationality of venture*. I particularly want to emphasise how this rationality, perhaps most visible in the repertoire of *You reap what you sow*, does not function without a misrecognition similar to the one found in the work of Brantlinger et al. (1997): The dislocation of class. To make the rationality of venture function, a lack of assets is misrecognised as a *state of mind*. In the next posting a lack of education on the part of the parent is disconnected from the child’s potential study results.

8:27 Exactly – one can receive commitment and support even if the parents do not possess the knowledge to do the homework, but they can help by talking to the school if help is needed, asking and encouraging, so that the child performs well. Engage in school, talk about school and that it’s important /.../.
(TPP 2013)

In 8:27 the parents’ state of mind – their attitudes towards school – is what is deemed important. The posting does not separate material resources from attitude but states that formal knowledge is not really the key factor for the child’s success. Instead, the ideal parents of a school child in this posting are depicted as engaged. They come across as compensating for a lack of potency; delineated as lacking the criteria of schooling but instead possessing the criteria of dedication. Their powers lie in inexhaustibility, despite being portrayed as having no grades, no exams and no basic qualifications.

Arguably, the rationality of venture, such as expressed in the posting above, informs us about the particular political subjectivity necessary for advanced liberal societies to operate. When becoming a parent the liberal subject guided by ethopolitics makes investments in the child and parenting is comprehended by using models from the labour market. The object of investment, the child, is maximised and refined through self-enhancement techniques of activity and discreet transmission of values and taste. When formally sanctioned values (such as education) are absent, the parent can compensate by displaying enthusiasm. This is misrecognition in its purest form – stating that attitude would be more important than formal education (a material asset). It is a cognitive model that helps us to think (Van Dijk, 2006) in a particular way and it shapes the contours of discourse (Fineman, 1991: 289).

In other words, it is ideological, based on a dissimulation that obscures relations of domination (Thompson, 1988: 370). Instead of articulating that knowledge is more important than commitment when assisting one's child with homework, the posting equalises the two. The fact that the middle class parent in general has access to higher education and that this asset is an advantage that can be transferred to the child, is in the account of 8:27 blurred into a statement that knowledge and lack of knowledge are nearly the same.

The sense of insecurity

When compiled, the postings may give the reader the impression that there are no doubts displayed when matters of the family are discussed and that resourcefulness and ambitions amongst the nicks are endless. This is not the case. Embedded in the discourse of achievement and tough love one can catch a glimpse of the question that presumably unites many a parent. To conclude this chapter I will present by far the most common question in the community, albeit one that is rarely articulated: *Am I a good enough parent?*

The demands for the perfect moulding of the child regularly provoke the nicks. The link between the child's behaviour and the performance of the parent is seemingly not fully embraced. Because siblings within one and the same family can turn out very differently from one another, there is a degree of insecurity about how much the parent can actually guide and influence the child. Is she, when it comes down to it, really the all-resourceful manager capable of the great deeds necessary to produce future useful citizen-subjects? The next posting questions how a parent should be evaluated when her children come out differently.

8:28 But... if you 'succeed' with 2 out of 3 does it possibly prove that you're not totally hopeless as a parent? If one child is totally different (in our case it has been that way from the birth, totally different!) is that due to me being a bad parent? Yes, I feel provoked when people talk about themselves as being such good parents and that others with children that have other types of behaviour (that is not considered equally good) are bad and that these parents have gone about the whole thing in the wrong way. They haven't got a clue whether they would have succeeded with my child!

(TPP 2011)

Posting 8:28 is a good example of the protests inserted in debates about childrearing, apparently objecting to the prevailing one-size-fits-all model of parenting. It

openly questions the frequently articulated link between parental strategy and child outcome, and seems to characterise the child as an element of surprise, rather than a product of calculation and smart manoeuvres. It rescues a kind of existential free zone for the child and in so doing manages to free the parent from potential guilt. The child in 8:28 cannot be commanded and governed into a certain desired subject. It receives a mystical core, an innate essence over which the parent has no control. Consequently, accounts about essence may be used as a tool for defence.

In one sense this posting is rare in the communities. Remaining free of parental guilt is not a very common narration.¹⁰³ Instead, one of the big issues of concern is how the parenting techniques may appear in the eyes of the children. Although having performed to the best of one's ability, the children make the final decision as to the quality of one's parenthood.

8:29 On the other hand I would never say that I have been a good parent to my children, because I am not in a position to say that. It is my children who own that question. They control my parent brand¹⁰⁴.

(TPP 2014)

The nick in posting 8:29 writes of not knowing for sure that she has been a good-enough parent; she does not control the outcome herself. This particular account highlights the insecurity in the narrations about investments in the child – the insecurity of how they are embraced by the object of attention, the child itself. The child is in that sense an element of uncertainty. However, this particular posting also describes parenthood through the metaphor of 'brand'. How is this to be comprehended? Does the nick sell an image of self to her children? Are the possibilities of understanding oneself shifting to a reification so intrusive that it seems natural to refer to oneself as a commodity? Posting 8:29 strips away the layers of parental efforts that are supposed to affect the child and even the possibility of personal agency seems removed from the narration. What is left is a subject that has become a brand that a customer (the child) evaluates. When described in this way there is not much certitude left – once a brand the parent is left naked and exposed. Paradoxically, in the end the parent comes across as partly governed by the child's opinion.

Notions about family thus come in at least three configurations. First of all, it is understood as a factory in charge of the young subjects that society needs and

¹⁰³ In Chapter Eight there is one account reported; a posting that declares the nick has been a weak parent and in spite of that has a child who is a 'wonderful angel' (see posting 7:21).

¹⁰⁴ In Swedish: varumärke

where the parent is read as a kind of team leader or production manager. Secondly, its responsibilities towards society are described as exceeding society's responsibilities towards the family, such as described in Chapter Seven where the love and respect generated inside families in disadvantaged residential areas were thought of as conquering deprivation. Thirdly, 'family' has become a narrative prop to defend class privilege. In these types of narration the child receives an important status as the figurehead of the proper, non-questionable and privileged family. Still, the parent who logs into the community is left with the most vital question unanswered. It turns out that the parent is not the only subject in the family with capacities to steer, manage and create subjectivity. The parent still – despite all her attributed potency – appears to fear the verdict of the child.

Summary

If the social contract is understood as somewhat damaged by individuals exploiting the welfare institutions and the cure for this societal ill resides in the transmission of sound morals that can be carried out inside the family, it is important to grasp how these aspirations are formulated and what they result in. That has been the intention of this chapter, which mapped out community conceptions of good or non-problematic parenting, the way the child should be fostered and what type of result can be achieved from this. In the concluding analysis we have seen some of the results of these aspirations in terms of constructing and defending class separation.

Pervading the community narrations on parenthood are two conceptual metaphors through which we may catch sight of the way the content is structured. The first is the way that parenting is understood as work and the second is how children are conceptualised as investments. The choice to use *parenting* rather than *parenthood* is a deliberate one. The fact that being a parent is delineated as a type of work makes the *-ing* in parenting possible; to be a parent is described more in terms of agency and action and less in terms of experience, identity or life phase (Jensen, 2010:2). This intertwines community conceptions with advanced liberalism's transformation of social access into social *effort*. Education and social capital on the part of parents are de-emphasised in favour of commitment, dedication and interest.

This is not to say that the nicks do not differ in the way they understand childrearing. The important thing to narratively master seems to be to launch a strategy for childrearing. It can be more or less strict and warm, but ideally it is a combination of both, namely tough love. Mastering tough love indicates that a correct balance between discipline and love has been achieved. The tension in the zone between the push-and-pull factors of discipline on the one hand and love on the other seems to

squeeze out a distillate of independence in the child. Discipline and love are investments in a governable space and the child is the end profit of the investments. This feature of discourse makes the parent of a child who is too shy, too aggressive or too passive into a bad investor.

Nevertheless, the governing is mostly articulated in narrations that appear less focused on actually steering the child. That which is understood as moulding the child concerns placing it in environments and conditions that shape the child's preference: Parents should nurture rather than foster. Environments need to be carefully selected, whether the issue is the choice of a good school or placing the child in the right type of leisure activity. These person-making technologies are viewed as preventing the child from becoming infected by unhealthy spheres in society. Therewith, the technologies form part of a symbolic construction of the middle class that consists of taste displays, as well as transmission and usages of the less fortunate as a point of reference that potentially enhances one's own position.

The one element that that can apparently disrupt the narration is considering what the child thinks of the fostering. When the child is brought in as an evaluator of the parent, the tone of voice is less sharp. This indicates how the family, when narrated not solely as a producer of new subjects, is still conceived of in terms of fragility and tension; sometimes even experienced as a place of uncertainty. This tendency can be said to co-exist with another type of insecurity for the parent – the way the evaluation of the parental strategy turns out. One way of conceptualising oneself as a parent goes through the metaphor of brand, which makes parental practices into commodities. Through this metaphorical understanding we can grasp another dimension of the concerns: What if the parent comes across as a consumption good with a low value?

Family – a fantasy of societal legitimacy

This chapter has mainly focused upon the members of the narrated family and the way the subject ideals of choice and responsibility influence the community conceptions of it. This means that the analysis has been restricted to subjects located inside a family and activities emanating from children and parents: School performances, dinner table rules, leisure activities and parental engagement. It may be reasonable to say that we have investigated the Homo Eligens intending to foster new Homo Eligens. As I have demonstrated, the ideal is not to be an elite parent in every instance and the tendency is not to stipulate that one has to be affluent or well educated to manage the task, but the opposite. A pseudo-egalitarian standpoint is established: Anyone with a little ambition can be a good enough parent and socio economic

differences are in general ignored as possible explanations for parental difficulties and ‘failures’. The egalitarian outlook on parenting is in fact characterised by an ignorance or lack of interest in these types of differences. Arguably, this is enabled by the notion of workified parenthood. Such an outlook on parenthood means that the envisioned work is narrated in a context-free zone, where the precarious nature of some parents’ working conditions (less education, less prestigious contacts and less money) remains hidden. Talking about parenthood in terms of work becomes part of an ideologically connoted displacement of the differences in relative strength between parents.

The postings appear to conceive of a particular society wanting a specific parental practice. The words used in the cited postings (ambition, engagement, support and encouragement amongst others) all promote the parental character we find, for example, in how *character development* is accentuated on the home page of Demos¹⁰⁵, in Swedish parental education policies of the twenty-first century (Littmarck, 2012) or the tapestry of individuals that Margaret Thatcher envisioned in the quotation at the start of Chapter Seven. This indicates that the envisioned community ideals of families and parents are not fabricated in a vacuum, and the fact that the ideal parent is possibly conceptualised in narration more than acted-out away from keyboard does not make the demands fictitious to their nature. To narrate something *could* on the one hand mean that the desire for the responsible parent is nothing but a fiction. On the other hand, being made up also implies a process of formation, of constructing a cultural fashion prescribing a desirable way of being. Acquiring this way of being would allow a subject to feel (and to become recognised by others as) a particular type of person. If parents are narratively required to foster the child to succeed with a future employer, or gently persuade it into embracing certain aptitudes and likings, it perhaps does not matter much if the existence in the family – when away from the public eye – is characterised by a fragile intimacy or even non-productivity. If the preferred tale of the family is structured in metaphors of work and achievement this is, at least, the public face of family to which we have to relate.

First of all comes taste, Bourdieu proposes (1984/1991: 181 f.), and then the objects of the world will be chosen and organised accordingly. This potentially means two things. Cynically put, parents have to shape a child that can satisfy their existing requirements. This implies that the middle class parent has to make the child middle class – in order to recognise herself. The active, healthy and occupied child may be a context specific symbol when the middle class is to receive its narrative boundaries

¹⁰⁵ Demos is a British cross-party think tank. See: <http://www.demos.co.uk/about> for a presentation of Demo’s activities and projects. More about Demos can be found in Chapter Two.

and thus it becomes a taste display. But taste perhaps also clouds the materiality in class divisions and the way that austerity budget discipline has hit particular subjects. It points to good parenting ('tasteful' parenting) as the driving force for social mobility, instead of allowing us to ask why we have a society that is so unbearable at the bottom that we all have to leave that place. In short, taste seems to dictate how the middle class parent must behave and it clouds the material structures in which parents receive their assignment to 'parent' and, hence, taste displays makes other parents appear as bad investors. More than anything else, middle class inclination comes across as a narrative straitjacket.

9. Help yourself. On unfitness and emotional capital

So far, the analysis has focused on themes where the nicks sketch more or less ideal states of being (when relating to one another in the community, when relating to society or when inside the family) and how they delineate deviations from the ideal states. I have argued that the preferred state of mind should not be described as perfection, but rather a state of sincerity, coherence, control and self-knowledge. The subject's duty is not to feel well in every instance but to know herself well enough to trace the sources of the affliction and to work towards betterment, i.e., be prepared for well-being. The ideal is not flawlessness but *fitness*. Remaining mentally fit provides an opportunity to continue to invest in life and what is advocated is, consequently, to assume responsibility for managing life – by monitoring oneself one may achieve personal security.¹⁰⁶

The call for a prudent safeguarding of personal security is deeply interwoven with a liberal version of self-technology (Wright, 2012) and the call is most certainly accepted in the communities. Nevertheless, it regularly leads to debates and reflections on how to achieve the alleged necessary fitness. Because the communities also contain a large amount of postings about problems – personal troubles or discussions about the difficulties of others – this chapter will explore expressions concerning sensations of *unfitness*. As we now know what the ideals look like, I want to look into narrated reasons for unfitness, i.e., what causal ontology the communities assume and how they envision possible amendment techniques. Because they are repeated on a regular basis in community conversations the topics chosen revolve around three images of being unfit. The first topic is that of dealing with stress, the second touches upon techniques to combat obesity and the third concerns ways to tackle the neuropsychiatric diagnosis of ADHD. Concluding the chapter I will concentrate on how ADHD becomes a place of tension – where the afflicted subject becomes an object of discursive fight in terms of approved techniques of betterment.

¹⁰⁶ This understanding of personal security conflates with that of societal security, much the same as Rose's (2000 b: 327) description of 'the facilitating state'. Rose argues that in advanced liberalism the state is thought of as a partner more than a supplier or manager of lives and individuals, families and whole communities take upon themselves a responsibility for security. This represents the technologies of prudentialism, also conveyed by Wendy Lerner (2000). Investments in well-being can therefore be read as part of the political transformation towards responsabilisation.

Before entering into the analysis we will have a quick look at the frames within which unfitness can be conceptualised in community understanding. This is simultaneously the way in which I read unfitness as having a cultural meaning, or in other words my understanding of the particular relationship of the self to culture.

Self-help and emotional capital

One way to wrap one's head around subject positions and their requirements in a particular place and time involves exploring temporal, spatial and economic social practices to which the positioning relates (Lowe, 1995). In this chapter the subject (and the way it can be depicted as grappling with unfitness) will be analysed to some extent as a result of a mode of production and consumption, or in other words the way in which subject positions are made available through discourses resulting from modes of production and consumption. The way a society produces and consumes its goods and services requires particular subjects on the one hand, but it will also generate certain types of subjects on the other (Lowe, 1995).¹⁰⁷ The same can be said for larger societal transformations. Subjectivity changed when urbanization progressed in Europe and people began to live in close proximity to each other, similar to the way that memory and perception changed with the typographic culture or with the invention of the mechanical clock (Lowe, 1982: 35). Today, the most conspicuous example is perhaps the manner in which market forces may install a sense of insecurity in the subject, and simultaneously provide the solution for it (Hochschild, 2012: 10). There is hence, a link between subjectivity and economy, or between: 'definite individuals under definite conditions of production' (Marx & Engels, 1845/1988: 41). Presently, as Eva Illouz (2007: 1) proposes, we may have lost certain bonds to the concrete, material dimensions of life, whilst at the same time we have become more focused on the interior domains; our feelings and thoughts. Nevertheless, we need to understand what it is in the contemporary (political) economy that formats us and makes us reflect upon ourselves in a certain way.

If the contemporary and more or less global mode of production and consumption, whether we label it capitalism or perhaps late capitalism, has any type of roots that are possible to determine, description usually starts with the age of asceticism where the individual is released from traditions and devoted to a productive life of self-discipline and frugality, governed by a Protestant set of ethics (Weber,

¹⁰⁷ This does not mean that the needs or the subjectivity of, for example, the homeless and the stock broker are the same. It only means that every type of society produces a range of needs or identities, and that the ways in which we try and satisfy our needs or identify with something are seldom freely selected or invented as we want (Lowe, 1995:2).

1922/1978). The ascetic man intends to reach long-term goals by practicing self-discipline – this individual is governed from within. This ideal of discipline is also evident in the parental web communities' accounts of unfitness, where it is mainly articulated within the frame of self-help culture. The link between ascetic self-discipline and self-help culture is characterised by an egalitarian outlook on success, and the main discursive promise within self-help culture is the same as that within the early form of capitalism; everyone can obtain success and happiness through will power and self-control (Engdahl, 2013: 54). However, self-help concepts are not direct successors of Protestant asceticism. Plainly formulated, for a self-help culture to develop the asceticism needed consumer culture, and consumer culture in turn needed a suitable moral climate in order for it to thrive. T.J Jackson Lears (1983) points to a change in the way 'salvation' is understood nowadays – no longer in terms of self-denial (asceticism) but rather in terms of self-realisation, which in turn depends on a compulsive interest in psychological and corporal health. This shift, according to Philip Cushman (1990: 599), would not have been possible without the changes in the economy. The fact that the market does not profit from overly contained subjects that opt for money in the bank, but instead craves subjects that want to improve and expand by consumption, points to the 'economic constituents' of the subject: We are the way we are because the market needs us that way. Contemporary focus upon matters of health is, consequently, a reflection of the growing industries that profit from it – self-help and psychotherapy or weight watching programmes and fitness (ibid.: 604). In sum, a dialectical relation shapes the subject. On the one hand she is formatted by market forces and industries telling her she is (or ought to be) a certain way, on the other she becomes constituted the way she is because of how she takes part in the market; the way she works, generates money and consumes. This double feature is, I believe, captured in the way Marx and Engels explain what is inside us: 'The phantoms formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process' (1845/1988: 42).

However, the promise residing in asceticism and consumer culture is deceptive. In fact, as argued by Illouz (2013: 99), the therapeutic narrative is a specific capital that can deliver other types of benefit, or that contributes to stratifications. Applying the self-help discourse becomes part of a particular *emotional capital*.¹⁰⁸ However,

108 Emotional capital may be thought of as a type of symbolic capital: 'wherein certain ways of thinking and acting are legitimized and regarded as authoritative in society' (Edwards & Gilles, 2005: 7). This means that the display of emotional capital achieves the same thing as symbolic capital in the sense that it manifests the status of the particular social group to which one belongs (ibid.).

emotional capital does not necessarily generate money (although it can).¹⁰⁹ More often it produces recognition and social status. Why is this? According to Illouz (ibid.: 89), it is because particular therapeutic narratives structure speech acts into genres that we have to line up behind if we want to make ourselves appealing. These genres are created in an emotional field populated by psychologists, authors, counsellors, pharmaceutical companies, academic departments in the area of psychology or social work, insurance companies and so forth. Much the same as in any field the emotional fields are regulated by the players' abilities to latch onto artefacts in a way that signals familiarity with 'high culture' (the emotional or cognitive styles appreciated by the dominant classes or dominant genres). In the parental web communities the dominant players (the veterans) do not necessarily use the more obscure psychoanalytic terms to understand life events. Instead, a more hands-on and pragmatic approach is notable which appears to be inspired by self-help and guide books that constitute a local fashion operating in these venues. Discourse is pragmatic and seems to be employed in concrete everyday arenas, such as one's family or place of work. Particularly the workplace is the topic of conversation in many debates about a particularly tricky matter that engages many nicks; stress.

Finding the cause: On stress

The fact that most examples of stress in community conversations orbit around paid work is perhaps not surprising: The nicks need to be able to work and remain fit in order to do so. The obligation to work structures many of the suggestions on how to think and act in relation to sensations of stress, as well as comprising the reason for why stress must be combatted. So, the recurrent community attempts to understand stress at the workplace is one of the sharper expressions of the way the causal ontology of suffering is formulated. There is a sense of urgency mediated in the discussions – the problem needs to be solved. The formula for solving it is usually relatively simple: It is mainly the way the individual *comprehends* a heavy workload that determines whether or not it will cause problems. Recurrently, this is articulated in terms of choice – we choose to feel bad when we lack control over our thoughts and if we chose to regain control, stress will be reduced. Rose (2000 b: 329) describes this type of collective logic with its emphasis on self-governing and control as a general trend of responsabilisation and in the parental communities I have found this rationality interpreted as a kind of *cost accounting*. The solution is described as appearing when

¹⁰⁹ One way in which displaying the favoured type of emotional capital can generate a concrete financial gain is, for instance, understanding the rationale behind personality tests that one needs to master to be considered 'employable' for particular types of professional position.

counting the pros and cons of enduring a stressful situation and calculating the effect of a particular stress reducing technique.

In the first exemplary thread, of which the initial part will be presented, the idea that we choose stress rather than become exposed to it, is spelled out also on a concrete word-level. The thread is initiated by a nick that asks for advice on how to handle a work-group that complains about stress. We begin reading shortly after the first posting.

9:1 Thoughts are the strongest factor when we are stressed and stress is something we choose. Unfortunately. /.../ Cause I assume you're not severely understaffed?

N1 (TPP 2011)

9:2 Define severely understaffed... I could employ 10 people tomorrow and put them to work within 2 weeks if I could only find the right people.

N2 (Answers posting above)

9:3 Severely understaffed can be that the employees constantly work overtime to complete the work tasks. Is that the case at your work place?

N1 (Answers posting above)

9:4 Some do – others are better at drawing the line somewhere (and are not considered as valuable in salary reviews because of it).

N2 (Answers posting above)

9:5 You can't have it all, some can cope with stress and have the time to work more and it's only natural that this is rewarded. The person who wants to slow down a bit and handle the work load with respect for her private life obviously has to abide by the consequences of that decision.

I rather sense a problem of being clever and a situation of competition between the employees when each and every one of them really needs to abide by the consequences of their decisions.

N1 (Answers posting above)

In these opening exchanges of the thread a pattern that repeatedly returns in the communities is revealed; that of counting pros and cons. If you choose not to work

overtime you cannot receive the same salary increase as your colleagues, posting 9:5 argues, but instead you gain the possibility of having a private life. Both choices pay off, albeit in different types of currency. This is not encompassed as a problem of justice (paying different salaries to employees with the same qualifications who carry out the same tasks) but as a problem of an unarticulated rationality of choice. The employees who complain have not taken full responsibility for their own cost calculations – they almost appear unconscious or afflicted by a kind of false consciousness – and so the mere complaints can in 9:5 be reformulated into a competition between colleagues who do not acknowledge the fact that they are really competing. If every employee instead made the calculation articulately, unequal pay would cease to be a problem and become a question of knowing oneself and one's preferences. Thoughts are the strongest factor when we are stressed, posting 9:5 states, and the stressed employees in this account are portrayed as if not able to think straight.

As posting 9:5 indicates, much of the reasoning about the causal origins of stress employ narrative structures of contrast to comprehend the phenomenon – some employees are stressed, others are not; some choose to work overtime, others do not, and so forth. In the following we will examine the result of the way in which narration is structured by comparison. In the next thread individual stress-handling capacities are compared and the stress due to trauma is compared with stress emanating from the workplace. This thread focuses mainly on possible coping strategies, and we will read the opening postings.

9:6 That stress is imagined ought to be quite obvious, especially when you consider that people can't find the time to do what they should because they worry so much about it, a clear example would be people who can't sleep because they worry so much about not sleeping enough before the alarm rings. Structure and presence are crucial in combating stress. That is, knowing what one is supposed to do and being present in the here and now, not thinking about what one is supposed to do later.

N3 (TPP 2011) Threadstart

9:7 I can only totally agree!

N4 (Answers posting above)

9:8 Imagined, I don't know about that. Although you have planned you can end up in stressful situations and exude adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol. In the long run that is harmful. And gives you psychological and physical

problems. So if the stress becomes drawn-out you need to seek help. Because it can be mastered. Look at people coming from countries where there is war. Some have worse injuries than others; it's about finding the right coping strategy. Exercise, religion, faith in oneself and the likes. But many choose some type of addiction. Shopping, sex, drugs, alcohol etcetera.

N5 (Answers posting 9:6)

9:9 There can be no doubt that stress experienced by the brain gives you physical symptoms, but it is triggered by our thoughts – in other words by how we deal with life. Stress is most severe in situations where you can't affect your circumstances, such as war, and even then we experience the same circumstances in different ways, but war situations include so much more than just stress. Now we're only talking about stress in everyday life in a Swedish workplace.

N3 (Answers posting above)

9:10 A little bit of indifference is good... the attitude that 'I'll find time for only so much', I think it's beneficial for most people. But it is obviously hard to combine that with a workplace where commitment is one of the ideals for the company /.../.

N6 (Answers posting above)

9:11 You need to like your work and be committed to it and that is not contrary to setting limits. Set limits and focus your attention where it's needed, in other words the opposite of being torn apart. So it's not about being disinterested but rather about seeing reality for what it is. However, there are people who become too 'inflated' at work and overestimate both their contribution and their importance and make themselves 'indispensable'. That's a true reason for becoming grumpy.

N3 (Answers posting above)

In this thread different difficult situations are compared, as well as different coping strategies, i.e., a contrast perspective is employed. By comparing workplace stress with traumas caused by war, the former is diluted, which means that comparison can result in a judgement about *the severity* of the stressor. In addition, better and worse types of coping strategy are compared, as described in posting 9:8. In a sudden turn this focus even makes people who have survived war trauma at least partly responsible for choosing a sound coping strategy: *Some have worse injuries than others; it's*

about finding the right coping strategy. This latter comparison thus results in a judgment of *responsibility* for one's feelings.

The postings favour a calibration of the mindset that the subject is to perform to improve. As we see in posting 9:11 there is no prohibition against having feelings but rather an appeal to make two types of decision: *what* to feel and *how much*. The suitable coping strategy would be a result of a correctly performed cost calculation – what do I want to achieve and what strategy should I employ in order to get there? The absence of an element of *exterior* force in the postings is another characteristic of the discourse: The employee is described as if dealing with stress in a narrative void where there are no colleagues, no merchandise waiting to be distributed, no patients, pupils or clients expecting to receive assistance, no team leaders waiting for the co-worker to fulfil her duties or no delivery deadlines that may not be met. It is, once again, the subject set up against herself. This voluntary mental calibration is defined as a knowledge of who one is (in 9:11 people without this self-knowledge are described as *people who become too 'inflated' at work and overestimate both their contribution and their importance*), but also as maintenance work to become more robust (in 9:6 this work is performed by adding structure and presence to life). The one solution not mentioned in the thread is to transfer the problem of workplace stress to the employer. This absence is not hard to understand, because the problematic situation is considered to have arisen – and consequently best adjusted – inside the individual. The absence can also be explained by the very structure of the narration. By separating elements so that they appear not to belong to or affect one another (Thompson, 1988) the function of discourse is ideological.

The emotional genre of stress

That being said, the community accounts do not take on one unified shape when dealing with the origins and putatively fictitious nature of stress. These outer points of opinion – where stress is understood as imagined in posting 9:6 and as causing concrete physical damage in 9:8 – are recurrent when the communities discuss the way the world outside the subject may influence or harm her. Either the subject is supposed to counter and survive very harsh conditions or she is portrayed as slightly more fragile and open for intrusions. When made fragile physics, chemistry and biology appear as vital resources to protect her from potential blame, but in spite of invoking chemistry and biology, the level of responsibility decreases very little. The two outer points come across as different points of departure but the terminal station remains the same; responsibility. Either way the subject needs to address the situation. Both conceptions of the subject include control: one needs to take control

over imagination *or* use a coping strategy to reduce the levels of cortisol in the brain. As we have seen in Chapter Six, to make this illustration of control function external factors are excluded from narrations, i.e., demands over which one has little or no control, such as the work-rate.

It is, however, important to point out that not all accounts exclude representations of the world outside the subject as potentially damaging. The world is sometimes described as if it could cause problems. The following posting is symptomatic of the community tendency to name the world as a potential source of problems, but assign the solution to the individual.

9:12 Sure, now and then I also feel ‘stop the world for a second’, but then I have to re-prioritise and solve the problem so that the stress goes away. And force myself to think in a different way.
(VEF 2010)

Posting 9:12 demonstrates that feeling stressed is not comprehended as wrong – it can happen to anyone. Through what Whetherell and Potter (1987: 48 ff.) call *apparent concession* the reader with a possible experience of stress is given some acknowledgement; we can all feel stressed sometimes. The very experience is neither denied nor ridiculed: We are allowed a reasonably high level of human frailness and in the encouraging advices we learn that despite this frailty, we are still capable of action. Hence, a posting bearing much emotional capital should be organised in a particular sequence: 1. External factors may be described as stressors, but 2. You should not place the blame on these factors. This dual message, I think, can be viewed as part of a particular emotional genre and posting 9:12 can be comprehended as a classic example of an emotional disposition of the middle class. The middle class occupy a position in the labour market where they are simultaneously governed by others and self-governed (Illouz, 2013: 101), which means that a suitable narrative on professional middle class life probably will include both elements, which 9:12 does. Thus the genre is heavily influenced by an ethos of responsabilisation.

When condensed these cheerful types of message about self-sufficiency end with the buzz word ‘choice’.

9:13 I have a job where I do everything on my own, I am single, I study, I work full time, I have a disabled child etcetera etcetera and this would surely make a lot of people stressed but I have chosen not to be.
(TPP 2011)

The posting above perhaps come across as startling in its assurance of faith in choice and it can be explained in several ways. One property of the account, however, particularly stands out. Although the posting does not contain one single expression of emotion (it actually disregards emotion by stating: *this would surely make a lot of people stressed*, indicating that stress does not afflict the nick writing), it can still be considered part of the emotional genre. What it does is prescribe the entity by which emotion can be controlled. This nick has chosen to not experience the negative emotion of stress (although she could have), and so, ultimately the viewpoint of choice makes emotions into a kind of extra sprinkles on life – you choose whether or not you want them at any given instance. Emotions are not necessary. Ultimately it appears that the cause of unfitness is neither the exterior, nor having emotions pervade the inside. Unfitness is caused by a lack of control, or avoiding making a choice. The emotional genre in which accounts about stress are inserted contains incompatible elements – in one and the same narration the possibility that stress can pervade a subject is placed alongside the possibility of rejecting that very sensation.

The therapeutic laboratory and the sin of non-compliance

If unfitness arises as a consequence of not staying in control, what can be done to regain command of the situation? Are we simply different when it comes to capacities for control and must learn to live with our differing sensations of stress? Not surprisingly, the communities are full of advice and remedies when it comes to combatting stress and the chapter will continue by a survey of the ways in which unfitness should be addressed.

To master the strains of life the communities advocate different therapeutic interventions for the soul. The interventions do not need to be performed by a professional but are discussed in terms of taking an interest in oneself, being truly inquisitive about the way the mind functions, caring for one's emotions and learning to harbour one's feelings. The very intervention into one's way of thinking is mostly considered transformative; it will eventually eradicate 'non-constructive' behaviour and promote behaviour envisioned as more functional, and the intervention can comprise just about anything that the individual feels is beneficial. The simple trick seems to be to find something that delimits emotions and formats the subject: You need to 'buy into' something – a technique, a service, a guide. In his study of Swedish nanny

shows¹¹⁰ Magnus Dahlstedt (2010: 48) suggests that the linchpin of these types of self-technologically geared intervention is the conviction that every individual has the potential for 'functional' behaviour but that this potential needs to be moulded by someone or something. Dahlstedt interprets the therapeutic nanny initiative as creating a calculating subject capable of performing choices based on presumed consequences in the future. The viewpoints of behaviour modification notable in the nanny shows have a hint of 'laboratory': The individual is an entity on which to experiment and one can add certain types of behaviour or subtract other types. In community conversations about stress, this laboratory conception of the psyche is regularly manifested and there are few restrictions when it comes to possible techniques. In the following postings behaviour modification, meditation and mental training are described as possible ways of coping with demanding situations.

9:14 There are stress management coaches who are super good. You can learn to master any situation with a smile. Ask Nelson Mandela for instance.
(TPP 2010)

9:15 I would say in the morning. To start the day by having a moment to yourself does the trick. It is no coincidence that most religions practice morning prayer. 😊 Shut out everything else and start the day focused, relaxed and ready. Easier to handle everything that comes at you.
(VEF 2010)

9:16 Now there are guides to correct deep breathing with guidance through every step and also answers to thoughts, speculations and questions that may arise. Deep breathing rinses through you on the inside and massages your organs from inside the body whilst cleaning everything that it encounters.
(VEF 2010)

As we can see in the postings above, many types of healing technique are allowed. Posting 9:15 argues that giving oneself a piece of focused relaxation in the morning makes it *easier to handle everything that comes at you* and in posting 9:16 we are told that deep breathing cleanses *everything that it encounters*. That demanded of the

110 The nanny shows are televised interventions into 'problematic families' where the child/children and the parents are taught new ways to relate to each other by different types of behavioural expert (in the shows called 'nannies'). The nannies stay with the families for a week and observe behaviour as well as hand out instructions and manuals for how the family can improve its conduct. One month after having left the family the nanny returns to check the results.

subject is seemingly very little; choosing a technique or guide and then finding the time to relax. According to the logic of the therapeutic laboratory – accentuated in posting 9:14 – everyone has the opportunity to succeed and to feel good. If Nelson Mandela managed imprisonment with a smile, why should we not smile? Hence, the therapeutic regime in this particular context manifests itself as egalitarian and pragmatic – it is a mix-and-match strategy and you can select whatever suits you best. In this sense the logic of the therapeutic laboratory can be understood as a market-based cultural repertoire (Illouz, 2007: 5). If one technique fails you simply stroll a little further into the marketplace to find another, more appropriate one. Paradoxically this means that whilst taking an interest in one's interior domains, one is simultaneously estranged from oneself. The market-based repertoire enables an alienated interest in a self that is treated much the same as a broken car engine and the repertoire putatively achieves a loss of a particular dimension of life – the dimension where we experience unresolved agony, suffering and pain. Moreover, the simplicity of the techniques and the promise of alleviation of the burdens make the subject who avoids relaxation or amendment into an enigma – why not invest a little time when the effort is so small? The subjects who exhibit non-compliance with the urge to work on the self and do not enter the laboratory of the psyche are, however, not left out in community accounts – they regularly become the topic of concern. The consequence of not taking the benevolent advice to protect oneself is a subject torn apart, as the next posting suggests.

9:17 Self-control is important in life for accomplishing goals and handling pressure, meaning that you should calculate how to cope with things that are difficult and rough.

People who cannot channel their emotions are torn apart and unbalanced.

(TPP 2011)

The frail subjects in the posting above may be interpreted as the outcome of non-compliance with a healthy therapeutic regime: They have refrained from 'channelling' emotions. Once again, the advice is to make the calculations in advance, before the trouble starts, so that one can meet the problems properly prepared. Non-compliance consequently comes with the risk of an unfortunate punishment – the psyche ceases to cooperate. Hence, the accounts of stress are designed in a form of askesis, aimed at enhancing self-control; not by refusing the world but by preparing the self for it. What we see is a contemporary take on the Stoic fashion of memorising codes of conduct with the goal of a subjectivation of the truth of how to live wisely.

When one enters the community the cost calculations have seemingly already been done, resulting in a subject who manifests a kind of inner awakening (Illouz, 2003: 42). She is fully aware of herself and ready for anything. Although the influence of psychoanalysis may have affected the expressions in the postings, the seclusion inside the soul has a totally different goal in the community conversations – it seems to be useful to fit into production. To do that you need to like and be committed to your job (posting 9:11) and not choose stress (9:1). There seems to be something about work that induces these types of self-reliant account. They relate to the conditions of work and they can even be comprehended as *an answer* to the conditions at work. In that sense, ideologies do not descend from above but rise from material premises. In *The German Ideology* (1845/1988) we see that ideologies should not be treated as independent entities:

They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness (ibid.: 42).

In summary, the causal ontology in conversations about stress contains two main reasons for why this type of unfitness occurs. Either you have not chosen how to deal with external factors, or you exhibit a lack of control of yourself. Narrations are structured by comparison, which enables judgments about both the severity of the sensation and the level of responsibility for experiencing it. When debating the preferred techniques of betterment, they are not delineated as complicated in any sense of the word. One may perform cost calculations to estimate the cost of a particular investment at work or one may chose a coping strategy (such as hiring a coach, or trying deep breathing). Both techniques are considered to enable a calibration of the mindset which ultimately produces subjects who have the stamina for one thing in particular; they are able to work. The call for a proper care of the self therefore in part serves a master other than the subject – the labour market.

Doubted techniques

As the reader notes, discipline is crucial in the quest to obtain control of the self. In fact, if the chosen self-improvement techniques exhibits no form of self-discipline it will be doubted in the communities, or its long-term advantage will be questioned. The discourse of improvement that can be delineated as quite generous and that

permits several laboratory techniques does produce one limit that should not be infringed – that of wanting to improve in a way that does not include any type of work and does not require discipline. There is a particular genre of improvement to abide by, organised by the interpretative repertoire *Don't take the easy way out*. The rest of the chapter is devoted to this repertoire. To illustrate the evaluations of the techniques of improvement I have chosen two themes that manifest the repertoire quite vividly; cases of obesity and cases of ADHD. We will start by looking into the way that the communities talk of techniques to overcome obesity.

Don't take the easy way out. On obesity

Being overweight is generally not seen as reprehensible in the parental communities. In fact, the particular sensation of feeling unfit due to being overweight is relatively little problematised. Several nicks declare that they struggle with their weight and in the themes of training and exercise the conversations continue with little interruption. As long as a nick states that she is combating her overweight there are no disturbances. In these conversations about weight problems the repertoire *Don't take the easy way out* can be employed to give advice, hand out reproaches, praise a work well performed, tell a success story or assign faulty character traits to a subject. But the repertoire never emerges as clearly as in the community annoyance about people solving a problem through no effort of their own. The two postings below are examples of this and both address the topic of gastric bypass. Posting 9:18 argues that because the overweight person needs to lose weight before becoming eligible for surgery – and really does lose some – this is proof that the surgery is unnecessary.

9:18 But as I wrote, to undergo surgery the doctor normally wants you to first lose some of the weight yourself. Why do you do that to become eligible for the surgery? Why are they given an easy way out instead of fighting for it?
(VEF 2012)

Posting 9:19 revolves around the same topic and suggests that it is too easy to lose weight through surgery.

9:19 Sure as hell it's easy to lose weight when somebody literally puts a padlock around your stomach. I've lost 36 kilos under my own steam, laid the foundations for a new diet, started exercising and struggled like hell. I have fought for it, they have cruised the healthcare system. A gastric bypass feels

like 'the easy way out'
(VEF 2014)

The main problem narrated in the postings above appears to be that there is no activity of one's own invested into the project of becoming fit. This would point to the community predilection for a kind of non-elaborated capitalist logic: The investing subject should be allowed to harvest, whilst the subject who is a poor investor should not be able to reap the same rewards. In other words, the idea of the ideal way of losing weight is organised by the interpretative repertoire *You should reap what you sow*, which we saw demonstrated in Chapter Eight. This repertoire is the *normative appeal* of how to act and enables the frustration about people who are conceived of as avoiding sowing but wanting to reap immediately. If people do not respect that we need to sow before we reap the trophy both of the proclaimed weight-loss and the very personal experience behind it putatively loses value. All of a sudden there is a way out of the whole struggle of disciplining oneself and all one needs to do is to pay to receive results. The repertoire *Don't take the easy way out* becomes a *normative prohibition* to ensure that the appeal for discipline is observed.

Consequently, in community narration the best way to become slim is to go on a diet because that technique obliges the subject to invest hard work into the project, and the second best is opting for a gastric bypass. The communities tolerate the latter as a technique for losing weight, but only if dieting has been carried out first. But the absolute worst option is to choose to do nothing and to blame one's appearance on factors that the subject cannot control, such as genes or some type of disorder. The posting below is formulated as an angry remark about this alleged tendency.

9:20 Obesity is always due to laziness and the wrong food. There is no magic disease that would make you and your entire family enormously fat in spite of you eating nothing but salad – that's it. Assume personal responsibility. Grow up.
(VEF 2012)

Posting 9:20 enables a dichotomy between irresponsible acts (explaining obesity as a magic disease) and responsible acts as an adult (assuming responsibility and not making excuses). Besides descriptions of the fat person as immature, she is in 9:20 sketched as non-active. In other words, the appeal for activity encapsulated in the repertoire *Don't take the easy way out* is directed towards a particular subject; she who assumes no personal responsibility for enhancement and does not aim for self-dis-

cipline but resorts to either technical solutions such as gastric bypass, or blames external factors.

As the reader notes, the morality of improvement is not something that would affect each and every nick who writes about being overweight. It targets a particular rejected subject and is a discursive structure that organises solutions into approved and non-approved categories. According to this pattern, the ideal formulations when writing about being overweight must look like posting 9:21 below. However, this particular posting does not articulate the normative appeal perfectly and is reprimanded in the subsequent posting 9:22. Although the nick inserting 9:21 states that she has lost some weight, it appears that her resolution is interpreted as not strong enough.

9:21 I registered at WW¹¹¹ last Thursday but only started calculating according to the programme last Sunday. My weight at home on Friday last week was 80.6, my weight today was 79.2. So minus 1.4 this first week (which is not one full WW-week).

Now I need to control myself during the weekend. I will not stay off sweets altogether and I'm not sure I'll stick to the point frame totally tomorrow but I'm not going to indulge in any major excesses.

N1 (TPP 2015) Threadstart

9:22 Well done! But why not stick to the point frame? Shouldn't that be the ambition? Now it seems like you are allowing yourself not to stick to the frame.

N2 (Answers posting above)

The mild criticism in posting 9:22 indicates that losing weight is associated with perseverance. Although 9:22 praises the achievement of losing 1.4 kilos in one week, it expresses a concern that the subject will still go astray – 9:22 appears to warn the nick in 9:21 of the risks of becoming too carefree. On the other side of being carefree resides, perhaps, the risk of opting out of the game of bodily discipline, and buying oneself out of perseverance.

So, why is a tool such as the Weight Watcher point frame accepted with no complaints or doubts? Why is it not viewed as yet another seductive and obfuscating

111 Weight Watchers.

technique? The point frame, which is bought when choosing the Weight Watcher model, is a tool that operates on the subject from the outside and can be viewed as part of a calibration: What parts of the subject can be managed by the subject herself, and what parts must be handed over to an external agent? The craving for food or sweets is exteriorised to the point frame, which will take care of and regulate it. This means that part of the craving (the very desire of the subject) is handed over to another type of regime; oblivious to the feelings of the subject. Self-control is commodified in the Weight Watcher model. The reason, I think, for why the point frame is embraced is because it still makes dieting difficult and fosters discipline. Dieting, according to this logic, *must* be a struggle. That which is engendered in this struggle is not only discipline, but also subordination. The very sign of accepted desire in posting 9:21 – visible in the account that the subject will still enjoy a few sweets – is as a consequence problematic. It is a sign of faltering discipline and that the investment may fall by the wayside. The logic derived seems to stipulate that one is allowed to buy into a tool or an external agent and that this act of consumption should simultaneously mean giving up part of one's agency. External agents are accepted, if they still facilitate perseverance and adherence to the doctrine of discipline. The desired emotional capital is thus also related to manifestations of struggle – to narrate a little suffering becomes a way to distinction.

What does 'easy' mean? On ADHD

The approved techniques of betterment may appear fairly easy – stick to the repertoire of *Don't take the easy way out* and you have adhered to the call from discourse. Even so, there are cases – particular unfit subjects – that obstruct the readings of the repertoire's imperative, or blur the distinction between the subject conceived of as responsibly addressing the problem and the one described as simply avoiding it. One such unfit subject is the one diagnosed with the neuropsychiatric syndrome of ADHD. Concluding the chapter we will look at the difficulties that arise when the repertoire guides two very different viewpoints on this diagnosis. The matter at stake seems to be how 'easy' in the call from the repertoire should be interpreted. The main conflict revolves around which *side* has taken the easy way out – the proponents of the diagnosis or the opponents.

Below are two postings on the theme of how the diagnosis is used to avoid facing what 'really' might be going on inside, i.e., taking the easy way out.

9:23 / .../ But I also see some risks in it. I know of several people that got the diagnosis ADHD and then blame it for all sorts of things. That they cannot get

a job, cannot get a relationship to work out, cannot keep friends etc. And sure, for someone with ADHD it can obviously be problematic in these areas. But nothing becomes any easier just because you fail to assume your own responsibility and blame your diagnosis! 'I can't help it, because I've got ADHD!' (TPP 2012)

9:24 I also believe that a diagnosis can be (and don't get me wrong now) 'an easy way' of finding the cause when a child does not behave like one wished it to. I think there can often be other causes behind the problem – for instance stress (concerning home or school situation?...it's probably easy as a parent for instance to want to close one's eyes to the fact that one's own behaviour has affected the child in a negative way..) or depression or that the child signals that he or she isn't feeling well and this feeling may be evoked because of something very concrete. By giving the child a diagnosis the path to finding the 'real' problem is in a way closed – one accepts the diagnosis, and thinks it's because of it the child acts like he or she does. (TPP 2012)

The risk associated with taking the easy way out is displayed in several ways in the two postings. Posting 9:23 talks of the risk of taking the easy way out and blaming ADHD for everything that has gone wrong in the life of the afflicted, i.e., ignoring the possibility to examine one's psyche. In posting 9:24 the theme is spelled out - ADHD can be used as *an easy way of finding the problem* in a child who does not behave in the way one wishes. The diagnosis is described as covering other problematic contexts and as an obstacle on the road to finding the problem. The usage of the repertoire in 9:23 constructs the diagnosis as a questionable resolution to the difficulties of the subject: *But nothing becomes any easier just because you fail to assume your own responsibility and blame your diagnosis!* Here the repertoire works to reduce the impact and the reliability of the difficulties associated with ADHD. If the problems of getting a job and keeping friends were actually due to the diagnosis itself (if the diagnosis was entirely 'real'), it would presumably be difficult to assume responsibility, much like a person with dementia would find it difficult to responsively address issues of forgetfulness. In arguing that a person diagnosed with ADHD ought to assume at least some responsibilities for what she is doing, two things occur. First of all, the diagnosis is viewed as less disruptive (despite the diagnosis it is possible to shape up). Secondly, if it is possible to shape up (i.e., not take the easy way out) it would prove that the diagnosis is not entirely real – there are ways of making it non-disruptive. Posting 9:24 performs another division. To diagnose a child is delineated as

an easy way, whilst to understand the symptoms as being due to stress, problematic parental behavior or depression is defined a less easy – and by implication a more trustworthy – way of finding the problem.

The next two postings are examples of the opposite side, suggesting that diagnosing the child *is* in fact a matter of facing up to a responsibility and not an easy way out. As will be noted, in these postings that defend the diagnosis the term ‘easy’ is applied to illustrate a different viewpoint altogether.

9:25 I don't know how assessments of ADHD differ from assessments of autism but I don't know of any parents that take their children's assessments and diagnoses lightly. And, let us not forget, a diagnosis does not solve the problem. The child is just as demanding before as after a diagnosis. Adjustments that need to be made do not come for free. Help from the school definitely does not come for free. The fact is that it would be easier to ignore the assessment and just leave the problem to the school. But you don't do that because you see that your child is suffering.

(TPP 2012)

9:26 *'I think that society has created this need for diagnoses. In the right environments with the right type of treatment the difficulties aren't even noted'* Bella writes further up [in the thread] and the following posting starts off from that statement /.../.

It's true that societal demands affect the notion of what a disability is but I strongly disagree with the view that because of that it is not a handicap/disability. In the society we live in now, for instance, dyslexia is disabling regardless of the fact that dyslexics did just fine in the Stone Age. I don't see the point in not diagnosing and thereby making it easier to find tools and/or medicine that ease life for the afflicted. Sure, you should absolutely reflect upon how society is designed and has developed but not draw the conclusion that some people should have tougher conditions just because you have a romanticised image of how everyone should be allowed to be themselves and be accepted as they are. /.../ Having trouble concentrating, a bad working memory, sleep deprivation and attention deficits is not a personality but a difficulty.

No one would dream of telling a person with no legs to refrain from using a wheel chair because she is so charming when she slouches on the ground and

because it is important that we are allowed to be different.
(TPP 2012)

The two postings above apply the term 'easy' in different manners. We can already observe how problematic it is to be associated with doing things the easy way at the start of posting 9:25, which firmly states that the nick does not know of any parents who take assessment or diagnosis lightly. The posting continues by claiming that the diagnosis itself does not facilitate life and that the problems remain. Because of the assurance that the problems continue the reader is led away from the assumption that opting for the diagnosis has made things easier. In fact, the posting states, to *not* carry through with a medical investigation would have been the easy way out. This statement is a reversal of the idea of irresponsibility as delineated in postings 9:23 and 9:24. The easy way out is now depicted as pushing the problem aside or towards the school: The easy way is *avoiding* diagnosis.

The last posting (9:26) is a response to an earlier posting in the thread, which was written in a rather social constructivist note on society creating the need for diagnosis. (This argument is quoted at the beginning of the posting). The idea that society needs to accept all types of personalities and character traits is here overruled as romanticism. The posting instead advocates that aiding a person with ADHD would contribute to them actually being able to *be* themselves. In a rhetoric move of out-there-ness the nick states that ADHD is to be understood not as a personality but as a difficulty. A separation of elements is performed, where personalities are said to not include difficulties. In this part of the posting making life easier is actually defended by means of comparison. The image called forth is vivid – nobody would dream of forcing an individual without legs to get by without a wheel chair as some sort of celebration of disparity. By this comparison the reader is invited to see the situation in a category entitlement light – what is endowed to the physically disabled person (rights and privileges and a safe ontological belonging to the category of disabled) should also be granted to a person with a neuro-psychiatric diagnosis. This is an inversion of the idea of guilt by association; perhaps one might label it a *right* by association. In this context, enhancing life is not the same as taking the easy way out.

Ambiguities of the repertoire and achieving emotional capital

When comparing 9:23 and 9:24 with 9:25 and 9:26 there appears to be a behaviour management perspective residing in the first pair of postings and a disability perspective in the second two. Disciplining the ADHD body and soul, as well as prescribing remedies and strategies, differs in the two perspectives. In the first you are your own

handyman who processes the material of your subjectivity (the subject faces up to responsibility), and in the second you are the material itself, processed by someone or something else, such as expert or medication. We could perhaps talk of a do-it-yourself discourse versus a medical discourse, or an instrumental discourse. In any case the ADHD subjects are to be changed into displaying a more functional subjectivity.

Consequently, a repertoire such as *Don't take the easy way out* is much like an empty can awaiting its content. It does not regulate the postings down to their junctures. In both perspectives applying the repertoire implies that there is something easy (and consequently of less value) to avoid and something more difficult to try to obtain. In one and the same thread it is more valuable to diagnose the child, and *not* to diagnose it, and 'easy' receives opposite meanings. This, in turn, makes it difficult to define what kind of accounts generate emotional capital. Simply solving the problem of poor concentration capabilities and forgetfulness does not seem to be enough. These difficulties need to be solved within an approved setting and the debate presented above apparently cannot agree on what that setting is. Arguably, the interpretative repertoire thus fails in two respects. Firstly, it cannot ensure its user emotional capital as it contains two diverging personal experiences (i.e., fails to expel one of them) and, secondly, it cannot function as a disciplining tool simply because the matrix for approved betterment varies: You can try to assume responsibility for yourself (which may be read as exercising self-discipline) but you can also accept a diagnosis and medication (which would signal that self-discipline is impossible).

It may be that the phenomenon of ADHD is a discursive object exhibiting features other than those discovered when looking into the accounts of stress and obesity. On the one hand, the ADHD subject seemingly does not perform any cost calculations, does not plan in advance and entering the laboratory of the psyche does not help because the psyche allegedly works in a different fashion than in the case of the perceived 'regular' subject. On the other hand, this subject cannot opt for the disciplining 'dieting model' of amendment available in the debates about obesity, as the very definition of the syndrome includes a lack of self-discipline as one of its main criteria. One of the reasons for why defining ADHD has become a discursive trophy in the communities could be the fact that the two opposing sides try to define what having or displaying emotional capital should consist of, and the struggle is far from resolved.

Summary

This chapter has probed into the community outlooks upon the less active, less upright and less 'constructive' individual – the unfit subject. I have exemplified com-

munity opinion through three themes of unfitnes: stress, obesity and the diagnosis of ADHD, with the aim of determining what causal ontology of unfitnes the communities assume and how possible techniques to combat it are narrated.

Generally there is a tendency to see negative feelings, such as the experience of stress, as, to some extent, chosen. They are not actively but passively chosen through sins of non-compliance, i.e., by avoiding doing the right thing or not choosing a technique for betterment. The main causes of stress can be delineated as a lack of control, which is thought of as the result of refusing to make a choice about strategy. Stress also tends to be positioned at two opposite poles of a continuum, where on one pole it is described as imagined, a kind of phantom of the brain, and on the other as biologically situated, when dangerous levels of cortisol or adrenaline destroy the mind. To reduce these biochemically induced dangers there is always the option of choosing a coping strategy. This leaves the parental communities with two basic remedies for the unfitnes of stress: The first is cost calculations made in advance and the second is coping strategies carried out afterwards, when the damage is done. Community advice is pragmatic and functional: Everyone is free to experiment, try different solutions and explore a variety of techniques to change one's mindset. But this, again, means that the subject who does not invest in the laboratory of the soul is at risk of being comprehended as a non-complier with the therapeutic regime. In turn, this implies that emotional capital can scarcely be generated for the subject who does not want to experiment but simply wishes for the world around her to change.

Instead, the discourse of unfitnes launches a particular subject ideal of striving and hard work. It can be summarised in the interpretative repertoire *You should reap what you sow*. This chapter has, however, stayed with the repertoire *Don't take the easy way out*; a repertoire that I understand as being the result of the appeal not to reap before sowing, and the latter repertoire is applied as a normative prohibition when the subject is at risk of becoming a bad investor in herself. In the narrations about obesity *Don't take the easy way out* emerges as contempt towards people who blame their weight on factors outside their own behaviour, or concern that a gastric bypass spoils people by enabling them to expect that an external technique will modify them. In that way, the gastric bypass becomes a symbol of passiveness and irresponsibility, represented as a potential seducer of a subject who instead should have been disciplined into the right kind of body. It is, however, vital to point out that it is not the fact that gastric bypass is a technique that can be bought for money that causes the concern but instead the presumption that gastric bypass surgery *does all the work* and the subject none. The point frame in the Weight Watcher regime is approved because of precisely that – it keeps the subject alert, disciplined and hard working.

Nevertheless, the ideal of discipline still cannot unite the communities and the very content of 'improvement' or 'betterment' is still pending; a feature that particularly stands out when it comes to community debates about ADHD. Herein the moral imperative of improvement is both visible and dispersed. It is visible through the uses of the interpretative repertoire of *Don't take the easy way out*, where the proponents of opposite positions both employ it, but dispersed in the sense that one and the same repertoire seemingly fails to organise opinion. The particular subject of ADHD becomes the object of a struggle to gain access to and define emotional capital. In that sense, ADHD is a floating signifier (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 50) waiting to be conquered.

The Homo Eligens and the economy of morality

Once again choice appears on the discursive agenda – as an offering to the subject, as a promise of a better future and as a tool for improvement. You choose self-technology, you choose a coping strategy and preferably a positive attitude, you choose between dieting and exercising on the one hand or the easy way of the gastric bypass on the other, and you choose whether or not to have yourself or your child diagnosed and then explain behaviour in accordance with the diagnosis. Everything seems impregnated with choice and the conversations are saturated with the many possible ways to go. Choice seems to interpellate the subject – it is a *person-maker*. Correspondingly, the subject who does not choose is made into a different kind of person. If this reasoning has any bearing, what kind of person does choice produce? I would like to suggest it is the Homo Eligens – made by choice, developing through choice and known to us through choice. We have to choose, there is apparently no way around it. Discursive exclusion in the communities is, thus, obtained through a *ranking of choices*. By assigning certain choices more responsibility and other choices less, we know how to evaluate them. This is obviously why the interpretative repertoire of *Don't take the easy way out* is of such relevance in heated debates, such as the one of the particular unfit ADHD subject: Because beneath the textual exchanges a ranking is taking place. The activity of debating cases of stress, obesity or ADHD seems to be about getting the ranking right; determining what choice would be the best tool of distinction. It becomes a hall of mirrors, where it is not the amendment itself that is interesting but the way solving it looks from the outside.

As a suggestion, the ranking does have a particular contour. We know by now that the communities do not see weakness as a problem as long as it is combatted. There is, however, one thoroughgoing preference that organises the perceptions of unfitness. To resort to help that is not designed to operate on the soul (such as cost

calculations in advance or stress management coaches) but skips responsible investments and simply fixes the problem (such as the gastric bypass presumably would) is comprehended as passive. Surgery as a solution for obesity and medication as a remedy for ADHD implicate a violation against the norm of working with oneself. All of a sudden, responsabilisation is outrivalled. What is left is another type of self-governed activity in the service of the self: Autonomous consumption. What makes consumption dangerous in these cases is that it enables a subject who is disinterested in herself – a less alert, less keen subject who demands solutions to problems she does not acknowledge as her own. In other words, consumption potentially opens up for the unmonitored, undisciplined subject. The ideal subject who materialises in the accounts about unfitness is apparently threatened by the wrong type of consumption. It seems as if self-denial to a certain extent still holds a prominent place as a guiding beacon and Lears' (1983) suggestion of its disappearance is thus possibly a too comprehensive conclusion. It is not as simple as the instalment of a new ideal; that everyone wants to improve through acts of consumption, because it seems to be insufficient to simply consume – it is important to improve through the *right type* of consumption. Consumption may have become a sign of the morality embraced by the subject. This is why the demonstration of emotional capital is, I think, still about money; although not in the sense of having lots of it. Displaying emotional capital instead equals displaying that the money spent was invested in the right type of tools and techniques. In the communities these tools and techniques should, ideally, address personal conduct rather than the conduct of genes, brains, or employers.

10. I can do it!

As we have noted, the nick writing in the communities often presents herself in relation to the subject ideal of the Homo Eligens. She chooses who to be, how to act and respond to life events in an arena that latches on to choice as the prime mover of change and achievement. If wanting to perform these types of distinction one important identity claim is to appear to be a Homo Eligens – the subject who chooses responsibly. Another identity claim made by a vast majority of the nicks is the claim to be a woman. Hence, apart from choice and responsibility, putatively the position of woman also shapes the discourse. Accordingly, this chapter will scrutinise subject positions assigned particularly to women as distilled through the preferences for choice and responsibility. If it is that which takes place inside the family that really matters for the constitution of society, as we saw in Chapter Seven and Eight, how is the woman positioned when situated inside of the family? To what types of choices does she need to relate, and what routes to responsibility lies open to her? In other words I want to probe into what is discursively required of the woman? I consider representations of choice and responsibility a *mise-en-scène* of the same type as described by Louis Althusser (2000/2008: 34) when he suggests what ideology does: It appoints subjects and makes us expect particular things from them. In sum, this means that the chapter will scrutinise the way a female subject is generally interpellated when articulated inside a heterosexual matrix (the nuclear family) that makes her *less* of a universal and more of a particular subject – who relates to a masculine counterpart.

Because of the community preference for choice and responsibility, the themes I will probe are equality, and dependency versus independency. The themes are chosen to demonstrate the way equality and dependency function in both the social and the sexual contract. Both contracts involve dependency: In the social contract the subject accepts the rules of a society in order to gain security, meaning that the subject is dependent on society actually delivering security, and in the sexual contract the subject accepts the rules of sexual restrictions in marriage or partnership to be granted emotional and financial security. Both the social and the sexual contract share the presumption that we enter into it free of choice (Pateman, 1988:2). The contracts share yet another similarity: How they fail to consider that dependency is not evenly spread, as one party is usually less dependent, or has more to gain from making the other party dependent (Kittay, 1999). The question is how these different levels of dependency are described, and how they are understood when organised through the already established demand to choose responsibly.

Difference and dependence: On lipstick feminism

In Chapter Seven we saw how the notions of the world, the one you can make a deal with through effort and investment, are enlaced with perceptions about the intimate. Nonetheless and perhaps surprisingly, the preferred image in the communities is not that caring for others (that which Kittay labels dependency work) would cause the subject any problems but the opposite – it is *being dependent* that is the problem. Dependency will, as the reader will note, appear in several of the threads and post-ings in this chapter and can be embraced either as an innate essence of heterosexual relations, or as a defect that makes the same relation unsound. When dealing with the problematic sides of dependency *gender equality* in particular is understood as the perfect remedy. Gender equality is the basic chord of a home gown community feminism that supports independence, education and a voice for women alongside a celebration of feminine esthetics. It is a diluted and non-articulate version of third wave feminism (Scanlon, 2009) that is sometimes labelled lipstick feminism.¹¹² For the unproblematic version of dependency that is necessary for this type of feminism to function, the stipulation is that men and women are different and therefore need each other. In the communities, this ‘sound’ type of dependency is discursively tangled up with conceptions of a problematic side of dependency. Before we enter into conversations about subjects who have devolved into dangerous dependency, we will acquaint ourselves with the type of dependency that is considered normal.

As community feminism demarcates itself by a celebration of opposites, dependency can be let into the discourse. The right type of dependency is often celebrated as a case of diversity and the narrative trick for dependency to come across as normal, unproblematic and even sound is to insert *difference* into the narration. The posting below explains how men and women are different but have the same value.

10:1 One may believe that the woman should be equal to the man without signing up for all the fiddle-faddle today’s feminists are yelling about.

¹¹² The third wave feminism, also referred to as lipstick feminism, is a movement intending to embrace traditional concepts of femininity, including the sexual power of women and traditional feminine aesthetic markers such as high heels and lipstick, alongside feminist ideas. Lipstick feminism is a response to negative stereotypes, such as ‘the ugly feminist’, and it is an attempt to win back particular dimensions of femininity that have been comprehended as disempowering, for instance wearing make-up. Third wave feminism is also a response to second wave feminism’s more androgynous conception of gender and its advice to women to downplay femininity in order to access power (Scanlon, 2009: 129, 132 f.). However, I would like to point to the difference between lipstick feminism and the aesthetically and politically more pronounced statement of *femme*. Regardless of the fact that lipstick feminism shares much of the pronounced feminine aesthetics, albeit more accentuated within the domains of *femme*, the two should not be equated.

I believe that men and women are different but have the same value. Because we are that different one cannot manage without the other – neither within the family, nor in society. That women are specifically WOMEN and not weak versions of men is their surest guarantee of acquiring value in the eyes of the men...

This is what the brute feminists of today can't understand: they think we have to even out all the differences between the sexes and raise the children to be androgynous robots in order for us to become equal.

(TPP 2009)

If men and women are different, as assured in the posting, dependency does not have to be bad. The differences even make men and women need each other; differences are represented as the glue between the sexes. The type of dependency described in 10:1 is comprehended as elementary. This dependency is not equated with subordination but rather depicted as something inherent in heterosexual relations and therefore uncomplicated. The posting even contains a word of warning; if wanting to eliminate the differences, as some feminists are presumed to want, we may turn into de-humanised objects. When dependency is narrated in this fashion there is nothing much to discuss. It is only when dependency becomes situated close to exploitation that other concepts such as equality, responsibility and choice are put in. In fact, the feminism of the web communities does not deny that there are unjust differences between the sexes, such as differences on the labour market. These differences, however, can be undone through choice. The following posting is a comment on the unfair distribution of salaries between a traditionally male trade such as carpenter and the traditional female occupation of assistant nurse. A nick complains that the monthly payment differs despite the fact that the same amount of time was invested in education. The posting below inserts the concept of responsibility to counter the complaint.

10:2 Of course you as an individual have the utmost responsibility for how your life has become. Or do you consider it someone else's fault if you did not choose the right type of education or if you had children with the wrong person?

(VEF 2013)

The vital feature when narrating dependence and difference is to disregard exploitation and unjust distribution. In the posting above there is no critique of the structure in which the subject has to be fitted in, but a critique against the subject who does not fit. The problem is not conceptualised as a distributive problem or an unbalanced equity – what is apprehended as unbalanced in the posting is choices that are not made in the correct thought-tough manner and responsibilities that are not assumed. The narration apparently prefers to stress individual action rather than structures that discriminate against the individual. Given this preference, a lack of equality is considered best remedied through selecting another type of job or another type of education that would ensure better pay. So, if this is the rule of narration, how does it play out when talking specifically about the heterosexual relationship, and its particular dependencies?

Mars and Venus. Heterosexual dependence and difference

In community dealings with equality lipstick feminism does not turn dependency away from the formula of equality, as long as it can be dressed up in the glossier features of how *opposites attract*. When dependency is delineated as a relation between a subject and a societal structure or institution (such as in the case of the subject depending upon financial support) it is apprehended as wrong, as was notable in Chapter Seven. When constituting the base of heterosexual attraction it can sometimes be viewed as a good thing, if the dependency is moderate. In this section we will close in on the relation between the correct version of dependence and difference. Is difference always a good thing? Wouldn't difference also include the risk of friction and if so, how would that friction be handled? What is it that makes difference function beneficially in a relationship?

In the communities one may note several discussions about whether differences between the sexes are mainly biological or relate to matters of fostering and cultural ideals, and the opinions are highly divergent. It is quite obvious that the parental communities move with the times and gender is therefore allowed several meanings. Nevertheless, the view that there are 'real' differences between the sexes appears unthreatened, despite the fact that the debates tolerate a periodic social constructivist understanding. In the next posting a famous book on the topic is praised. The posting claims that the book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*¹¹³ could help the

113 *Men are from Mars, women are from Venus* (1993/2002) is written by the American author and counselor John Gray. In the book Gray argues that relationship problems in heterosexual relationships depend upon fundamental psychological differences between men and women and to describe these differences Gray applies the image of the sexes psychologically inhabiting different planets: men are from Mars and woman from Venus.

nick and her boyfriend understand each other better. In the following posting the book is not embraced in the same manner, but still considered useful.

10:3 I have read half of the book now and I think it's marvellous. I have got a better understanding of my partner's behaviour. Will buy it and read all of it and I hope my boyfriend wants to read it so that he can get a better understanding of my behaviour ☺

(VEF 2008)

10:4 /.../ Some things I recognise quite clearly and I have laughed many times while reading. Both laughter of recognition and because some things are a little bit corny.

What distinguishes women from men is that we want to 'spell things out', whilst men often bottle up and solve the problem on their own. That men often take our comments as criticism and us women feel abandoned when men bottle up to think.

(VEF 2013)

Postings 10:3 and 10:4 acknowledge that the conceived difference between the sexes can sometimes be a problem, because men and women fail to understand each other's positions, alleged different dispositions and diverse experiences. One of the resolutions to the problem is an acceptance of the differences instead of useless attempts to even them out. Hence, differences need to be merged in order for the heterosexual relationship to function, and this merging cannot always be free from conflict or tension. The potential conflicts should, however, take place in a situation where the difference is acknowledged and without demands for similarity. The vision appears to be that a complementary sharing between two very different human beings should take place. The beauty of this sharing is delineated in the next posting.

10:5 yeah, isn't that so... I want to share my life, and I say this with an emphasis on share* with a man who is truly that, a MAN... and I want to be the woman I am!

Pretty simple and relaxed if you don't involve a whole lot of strange values and prejudices

*like in sharing the responsibility for our lives becoming just as we want it to be (including the scrubbing of the floors)...

(TPP 2009)

In the narrations of the healthy and natural differences between the sexes, the differences are described almost in terms of a contract. The posting above even employs a clause to specify the contract on a practical level and the clarification involves gender equality – the scrubbing of floors. The contract should be simple and relaxed but still include a safeguard. This safeguard is gender equality; the factor that makes difference positive. The discursive preference for gender equality in the shape of a fair division of domestic labour is a grand one, running through several of the parental community themes. It not only makes difference appear healthy, but seems to achieve even more; it comes across as one of the main ways of living a controlled, calculated and responsible life. The next posting to be presented is representative of the preferred ways of talking about equality: It simply happens, it is the obvious, most sensible way of structuring life and normally it should not be preceded by any negotiations.

10:6 At home alone with soon-to-be three month old baby. Obviously you help each other with all the everyday chores. We help each other as best we can. Some days I can't find the time for anything else but taking care of our son. Other days I may find the time for the baby, washing and cleaning. Other days you feel like doing nothing. Just slacking and relaxing. My partner won't complain. He just says I did the right thing to relax. If I did fix a lot of stuff he says it looks nice at home and that I did well and he asks if I want to lie down for a while. Time for oneself does not exist for me and my partner right now. That's how it goes when you have children and there's nothing to it but liking it! We try and let the other get away with friends or exercise etcetera once in a while. What I am trying to say is why should the responsibility go for only one person? If you share all the chores and encourage each other instead of complaining life becomes easier and more fun!

(VEF 2012)

The point conveyed looks straightforward and simplistic and is positioned in the middle of a discursive furrow of stories about being rational, hands-on and reasonable in a relationship. The agreement to share the work load in an equal manner is described as if containing no conflicts and no unfairness. In 10:6 there appears to be a distributed dependency – the son depends upon his parents and the parents

depend on each other. In spite of this web of dependencies there are no rules of distribution to follow and no articulated laws by which to abide. Distribution comes simply through cultivating responsibility.

In sum, in lipstick feminism's view on gender men and women are different but hold the same social value. Because of the difference the sexes depend on each other and through that dependency the equilibrium of value is maintained. Insofar as difference is not only tolerated but also celebrated it holds a particular value in itself.

Equality and its unmentionable opposites

Nonetheless, difference can be narrated as a problematic feature of the heterosexual relationship. Men and women are described as not getting along – women feel exhausted from doing too much household work, some of them insert postings about being beaten by their husbands and some lecture the less fortunate about how to avoid these types of failure. Consequently, there is a faulty type of difference (and indeed faulty dependence) that is regularly addressed in conversation and we will turn to matters of *how* it is addressed. Who is to heal a faulty dependency, by what means can it be healed, and what happens if the relationship, despite the efforts to heal it, stays the same?

As a consequence of the notions of the ideal difference (exciting and rewarding) and the ideal dependence (non-harmful), stating that one lives in an unequal relationship becomes an issue of debate. Much the same as in Chapter Seven, suspected free riders are rebuffed. Spouses or partners who confess to doing little or nothing in the household are immediately dismissed, which may be noted in the posting below.

10:7 You're lucky to not be my partner, because I would have thrown you out in one split second!

(VEF 2012)

The dismissal of freeriding spouses has its counterpart in the replies to nicks writing about being exploited by their partner. The recommendation to throw the partner out, or leave him, is a recurrent piece of advice in the threads on inequality. This indicates that the conflictive side of equality is not suppressed in conversation. It is not prohibited to talk about disparate interests, or conflicting wills – if it is done in the preferred manner. As an example – when talking of conflicts, they are best articulated afterwards, when the experiences are harvested and made into advice. The next posting articulates the tension that can precede an equal division of household work and tells the reader how it was resolved.

10:8 Yes, we have experience of that kind of fuss. Experienced it just like you when the first child was born. In spite of sharing the parental leave etcetera I was left with the responsibility for the house and the child. When the child was three years old I was ready for divorce. But instead we went to family counselling and we loosened all the knots. So we got along just fine for a couple of years. Today we have three children /.../ Very tiring, very fair 😊
(TPP 2007)

Alongside the notion of equality just happening without much ado as was advocated in posting 10:6 there is, as we can see in posting 10:8 above, also a perspective of conflict, negotiation and even crisis preceding an equal division of labour. That notwithstanding, a lack of equality is not always embraced as a clear-cut case. It is often conceived of as something caused by the woman, as for instance in the first posting below where it is apprehended as the woman through her field of expertise in the area of household work hindering the husband from doing his share, or in the posting to follow, where it is narrated as best resolved if the wife left the home.

10:9 But if you are there all the time he'll never learn. Are you perhaps in his way, you being at home all the time and knowing everything? He loses confidence. A lot of women sort of take over. Mrs. General Squadron-leader, you know...
(VEF 2012)

10:10 Get domestic help?
Start working earlier?
Let your man take parental leave
Do your own errands when he comes home
(VEF 2013)

In different ways these two postings ensure that the problem of inequality remains with the woman. The husband is not entirely absent from the narration, but he is described in a fashion that is consistent in the threads about inequality – he is made less of an actor. The husband is described as someone deprived of his self-confidence or depicted as hindered by the wife's mere presence in the home. I understand explanations such as these as discursively functioning to reduce and dislocate blame. The blame is transported from the passive and non-knowledgeable party (the man) onto the active and knowledgeable one (the woman) who stands in the way. Furthermore,

the active woman can actually become the explanation itself: If the woman is too active and too able in the home the husband becomes passive, as a consequence of her frantic activity. By removing the active woman (as was suggested in posting 10:10), there is a place rescued for the husband to act. If the word of advice is to remove an overly active part, narration does something more, something that is axiomatic when gender equality is debated in the communities. As I have intimated already, it directs focus away from a possibility of exploitation. A husband who lacks confidence can by no means have something to gain from not participating in the care of the child. Accordingly, the metaphor of military command in posting 10:9 highlights one dimension of the notion of inequality and clouds another, namely a dimension of the husband taking advantage of the wife. By being narratively deprived of the possibilities of agency he simultaneously loses the possibility of calculation or planning; and he loses the possibility of enjoying the passive position. This tendency in narration exposes the same patterns as discussed by Rönnblom (2011: 36) when she analyses Swedish official gender equality discourse – the way in which conflicts are downplayed and administration techniques emphasised.

In short: that which is not equality is not given any other name or it is renamed into something that has little to do with one party enjoying the labour of another party. A deficit of equality comes across as something *unmentionable* and, arguably, the lack of definition enables the transport of blame. Diverse calls can instead be placed upon the woman to step up and change the situation. To investigate this transport of blame we will stay on the theme of task assignments placed upon the woman as a possible resolution to inequality.

Tasks in the service of equality

Conversations about more permanent troubles with equality contain a couple of ways to understand the situation that put the woman in different subject positions. The general advice is focused upon a perceived responsibility to put an end to an unfair division of labour, or at least not to have more children with such a partner. These are two, out of several other, tasks assigned to the woman who lives in an unequal relationship. The next fraction of a thread is initiated by a nick that complains of motherhood being a tiresome duty of chores that never seem to end. Her story highlights a kind of dependency work where the those depending on the work carried out have come to take her services for granted.

10:11 sometimes it feels insanely unrewarding to be a mum. (I am a mum).
You're supposed to do the laundry, clean, cook, do all the shopping, make

sure the children are sent to school and fetched from school, feed the baby... to wake up before everyone else and go to bed after everyone else... Who says thank you... it's so easy to take everything for granted... today I'm so tired and sad and feel I have the world's most unrewarding job... my husband goes off on 'errands' for hours... goes to the hairdresser for 3 hours (I've not been to the hairdresser for a year) whines that it's messy here, while I hiss 'clean it up yourself for fuck's sake...' perhaps I take on too much but WHO the fuck will do it otherwise... so... just had to get it off my chest... cause this week has been shit!!!!!!!!!!!!

N1 (VEF 2013) Threadstart

10:12 But that really has nothing to do with the role of mother? Why did you have more children with a male chauvinist?

N2 (Answers posting above)

10:13 Yes, ouch! I would never have agreed to be a slave in my own home!

N3 (Answers posting above)

10:14 It looks as if you need to sit down and discuss the situation. You do too much of the collective tasks in the household if you're feeling like this. You can for example make lists of what needs to be done and schedules for who's doing what on which days. This presupposes that he understands the problem and is willing to change his behaviour. You also need to put free time for you on the schedule, if that's not happening by itself.

If he doesn't realise how much you do you can try to take notes for a month for example, of how much laundry you do, how many minutes you tidy up after the others, throw out the rubbish, how many times you do the dishes, vacuum, cook etcetera and you give him concrete information /.../

N4 (Answers posting 10:6)

The nick who inserted posting 10:11 is not primarily perceived as exploited, but is offered advice that partly blames her for her choice of spouse and partly positions her as family manager. In the advice, different positions of responsibility are suggested. One of them (posting 10:14) assigns the woman a managerial task of household planning. The posting seems to suggest that information failure is the cause of the problems. If only the husband knew about the amount of work required

in a household, he would reconsider his own efforts. The posting implies that people are reasonable and fair, and if not one may need to collect evidence in order to prove one's point. Other postings (10:12 and 10:13) insinuate that the woman has brought the problem on herself by agreeing to have children with a male chauvinist, or slave driver. In these postings there is no blame attached to the husband at all – he is what he is and the main issue at stake appears instead to be the woman's lack of self-preservation.

In sum: At home the woman is depicted as either a problem herself (her mere presence de-activates the husband) or deciphered as someone to whom the husband can do negative things, such as enslave her. The narratively preferred woman avoids places of slavery and educates her husband, and if this does not help, she temporarily leaves the home. There are, hence, *positions of a problematic presence* and *positions of educative absence* available. These solutions are, however, handed out in the case of a crisis and the subject positions that materialise are emergency positions and thus not desirable. The fact that people depend on you is, however, not made to matter.

I can do it! Responsibility instead of oppression

Still remaining is the problem of who is to blame for the unbalanced division of labour. If the woman has already tried the pedagogic techniques of absence (letting the husband take parental leave, as posting 10:10 proposes) or calculated presence (making lists and providing information as posting 10:14 advocates) and the situation does not improve, would it then be possible to put the blame on the husband? In what follows I will demonstrate how direct blame is, still, not quite possible because of the community preference for leaving the husband outside the narration. Instead, the discussions ventilate issues of *responsibility* and *demand*.

The initial part of the thread to be presented is organised around these two categories that are apparently positioned in opposition to each other: The man is depicted as the party who has responsibilities to share the work-load and the woman as the party who needs to formulate her demands. The thread is initiated by a nick who in a previous thread that same day, described living with a man and taking care of his child from a previous marriage, as well as two toddlers, but receiving no help from him. She described being tired from the many domestic chores carried out whilst simultaneously working full time outside the home. In the thread her husband was called a 'giant baby' several times and the nick was asked how she could tolerate living with such a childlike man. The nick started yet another thread the same day, as she was not content with the answers she received in the first one.

10:15 Concerning the discussions on giant babies below. Someone wrote that the mother may see it as a criticism if one points out that her husband is a giant baby that cannot manage anything. Then several others answered that that's not the case at all, it's the man who should feel ashamed, not the woman.

But does it work that way in reality? My experience is anyhow that it is the woman (me) who is criticised and questioned if the husband sits in front of the computer all day.

I have been criticised by friends, acquaintances, my relatives, neighbours, people on the net etcetera, for doing everything myself. Has anyone ever delivered this criticism directly to him? No. It has never happened.

So then I wonder: do you really think that it is the husband who should feel ashamed if being a giant baby. Or do you deep down believe it is the woman's fault if she is forced to grind away?

N1(TPP 2011) Threadstart

10:16 He is the one that should feel ashamed, I really do believe. But I also know that shame is something that is likely to end up in the stomach of the wrong person and on the wrong person's cheek.

N2 (Answers posting 10:15)

10:17 If the two of you are content nobody has to feel ashamed? Otherwise he ought to feel ashamed and you need to make demands.

N3 (Answers posting 10:15)

10:18 And if you make demands and it is met only with a grumpy face and talk of all the 'important' stuff he does at the computer? Then what do you do?

(No, the two of us are not content, if that needed to be clarified. 😊 He is happy, though).

N1(Answers posting above)

10:19 I don't think the woman needs to feel ashamed at all. Nevertheless I want to shake these women and make them think about whether this is the way they want to live. The one thing you can change is yourself, as we all

know. You can set limits and say 'This is ok for me, but that is NOT ok for me'.

If you choose to stay although he refuses to change I do believe you have yourself to blame, yes. Nonetheless, there is no reason to feel ashamed. Who makes you feel ashamed?

N4 (Answers posting 10:14)

10:20 I don't know about shame - if the couple is happy with the division of labour others should just keep quiet. If they are not happy it's up to the discontented party to make the change and the other party to assume responsibility.

N5 (Answers posting 10:15)

10:21 So the project of 'putting the husband in order' is yet another task that the woman needs to shoulder? He has no responsibility of his own? And if he does not change it is the woman's fault? Ok, if that is the opinion of people in general I understand a little bit better why people choose to criticise the woman.

N1 (Answers posting above)

10:22 But N5 did write that it was up to the man to assume responsibility? Not only that it is up to the woman to put her foot down?

I think you're dislocating your responsibility. No, you have no responsibility for what the man does or does not do. Nevertheless you have a responsibility to express what you feel is ok and what is not, and make sure you are not treated in a way that is not ok for you. It is not as if you're forced to stay in this situation?

N4 (Answers posting above)

10:23 believe me; I do point out what is ok and what is not.

N1 (Answers posting above)

10:24 And if he does not change his ways? Then what do you do?

N4 (Answers posting above)

10:25 he usually changes his ways. For a short while, a day or so. Then it starts again.

N1 (Answers posting above)

10:26 And you tag along, when it starts all over again, time after time?...

You are still there? What is it that makes you stay?

N4 (Answers posting above)

In the opening section of this thread responsibility seems to come in two different shapes. One type resides with the party who is understood as fleeing from it (but really ought to assume it) and the other dwells within the exploited party (who instead ought to formulate her demands). The responsibility of the husband is depicted more in the way of an almost *formal, discursive* duty (to live according to the ideals of equality) and the responsibility of the wife is described as an *intra-personal* duty to look out for herself. Nonetheless, the initial posting (10:15) states that the nick has done her part in terms of making demands. This assertion does not seem to alter the content of the rest of the thread, which still focuses upon the woman making a change. Towards the end of this section of the thread a short conversation occurs between two nicks (10:22-10:26). It takes the shape of a question and answer-series, and the section appears to ventilate another issue, that of who is to blame for the situation continuing. The concluding series of short questions and answers marks a change of tone. It resembles the clear and rapid questions from a prosecutor to the prosecuted, but with a nuance of therapy involved, as in the open questions: *You are still there? What is it that makes you stay?* (posting 10:26). It appears that N4 tries to establish a reason for the fact that N1 remains with her husband. Possibly N4 offers N1 a way out of the putative blame (if there was another hidden reason for why she stays) or a way of instead nailing the blame to her (if she cannot report another reason for remaining). Again, the conversation on who is to blame leaves the husband aside and concentrates on the woman.

There might be several reasons why the issue of responsibility stays with N1, apart from the fact that her husband does not participate in the thread and cannot be addressed. Because N1 tells a story about a problem, the other nicks may read it as a question: *what should I do?* which may explain the focus upon N1 rather than her husband. Another reason why attention is concentrated on N1 could be that the communities cannot stand hopelessness. A story of a struggle in which you lose but still do not leave does perhaps not fit with the narrative preference of the people writing in the thread. This suggestion resonates with Donald Polkinghorne's (1988:14) proposition that narratives are normally designed to give coherence to shared values.

Stories hold the values of our culture in two senses – by nominating positive values and by presenting negative models best avoided. Being obfuscated by one's husband or being exploited is *not* a depiction of a shared ideal but rather a negative model to avoid. In the thread presented it is as if exploitation was selected – and could easily be de-selected, perhaps because it is something our culture dislike. I would contend that this is one of the consequences when articulating oneself in an environment strongly influenced by the preference for choice: Emancipation comes across as something the singular subject does for herself. It is a choice made in private. Instead of the solitary battle cry 'We can do it!'¹¹⁴, as would be a mainstream feminist appeal, we end up with a solitary 'I can do it!'. In community understanding, feministic striving is seemingly to be carried out in the solitude of one's home, alone with one's husband.

This being said, there appears to be one feature of narration missing in Polkinghorne's suggestion. Apart from narrations proposing positive and negative models of social action, perhaps particular narrations in addition *avoid* certain topics. The thread above debates the topics of justice, responsibility and demands but does not mention *need*. One of the reasons why a woman stays in a situation of exploitation could be the fact that in certain cases dependency is non-negotiable, especially when vulnerable people depend on the labour of the woman. A dependency relation, Kitay argues (1999: 53), has a non-voluntary nature and trying to grapple with it from a more formal rights-based morality does not work. In the thread above *the nature of the work* that N1 is carrying out has no place in the narration. The responsibility that comes with children is not made to matter – neither for the nicks participating, nor for the thread starter. This void in narration may be explained as a general inherent problem in talking about housework. Marjorie DeVault (1991: 57) has pointed out that housework often remains invisible, because planning dinner, remembering the doctor's appointment for the youngest child and adding soap to the shopping list is *thought work* to such a large extent that the nature of the work is even concealed from the person performing it. In that way the premises of the sexual contract is estranged from the very task assignments it regulates. I believe that this feature of narrative negotiation is vital to appreciate the position of the female subject: In order to be a reliable person on whom people can depend she has to be strong, non-dependent and perhaps oblivious to the nature of some of the labour she performs. This, I think, is part of the explanation for all the ambivalent responses to women who confess that they are living in unequal relationships – it is difficult to acknowledge the non-vol-

114 The slogan 'We can do it' comes from a poster that was originally designed as an American wartime propaganda poster, but it has later regularly been employed as promotion of diverse movements of feminism.

untary dimension of care work without ruining the preference for female strength and independence, and without shaking the foundation of the sexual contract. Due to the fact that the nature of the thought work putatively stays hidden it is obviously not easy to bring it into the light of conversation. So, when we try to come to terms with the accounts on housework we are possibly looking at an iceberg. Equality is made into an ideal and as such it is visible. The non-negotiable working conditions that come with taking care of infants and toddlers are never spoken of; they stay below the surface. Thus, when a nick is being counselled to leave her husband she is perhaps really being told to go on a strike. Only, she cannot strike, and what is more, she cannot articulate that there is a strike ban attached to her place of (unpaid) work. In that sense, abiding by the demands of lipstick feminism becomes a gag.

The victim

The ambivalent responses towards matters of dependency and exploitation have particular consequences. One is a hesitation to articulate the more outspoken positions of victimhood. A phenomenon such as 'victimhood' activates all the tensions that reside in the slim ideal of 'I can do it!' (What if 'I' cannot do it? What if there are limits to what a mere decision or choice can achieve, and what if the decision to stand up for oneself is blurred by circumstances outside the subject?) Due to this ambivalence the remaining part of this chapter is devoted to exploring victimhood, and the manner in which it is made more or less credible.

The position of victim is one of the more complicated ones in the communities. The label itself can at times be applied with seemingly no friction, for instance in conversations about honour-related violence. Girls and women who are threatened, abused or murdered by relatives for the sake of protecting a family reputation are viewed as innocent victims and no demands to make a choice or stand up for themselves are articulated. Offenders are relentlessly condemned and demands are directed towards institutions and governmental projects to ease the burden for women at risk of becoming targets of this type of violence. The same status is attached to nicks confessing to being physically abused by a husband or partner. But alongside the status of indisputable victimhood are other positions where negotiations appear to be unceasing. There are a couple of narrated situations that in particular reduce the level of sympathy: When the abuse is not physical or the when the nick comes forth as feeling sorry for herself. The main problem seems to be a victim who is passive in some way, a feature of discourse that echoes the annoyance about passivity that we investigated in Chapter Nine. The exemplary posting below is inserted as a response to a nick who writes about having a violent ex-husband. This nick declares that the

situation is worse because she has no job to support herself, no higher education, no unemployment benefits and no possibilities to move to a bigger city in search of a job. The ex-husband now wants to start over again and the nick writes to ventilate her doubts. The response is educative.

10:27 Of course you shouldn't move in with your ex-husband just because of economic reasons. And if you live in such a small community that there are no jobs you might want to think about moving to some place where job actually exist (that's what many of us who grew up in small places did, we have moved + went through education to sort of be able to support ourselves...) Alternatively 'accept whatever comes my way'

To stay at home full time with children and allow oneself to be supported by a man is a lousy idea for anybody. I am a bit harsh now but the fact is you made your own bed and to get out of it you must take command of your own life and not even consider that some man can solve your problems.

(TPP 2012)

Posting 10:27 evaluates the choices that have led to the current strained situation and seems to conclude that some of the blame lies with the victim. It points to the lack of activity that gave rise to a situation of being supported by a husband, i.e., a situation of dependency. Dependency is one of the key components in the ambivalence towards the position of victimhood, but this does not include all types of dependency. I have already argued that having people depend upon you is viewed as non-problematic, whilst being dependent is considered more troublesome. Nevertheless, there are another feature organising the discourse – it is only on a person believed to have a *choice* that the victim label becomes less credible. If there was even a remote possibility of avoiding victimhood through choice and this possibility was overlooked, we cannot be sure that what we see is a 'true' victim. A victim can come in the shape of an imposter: There is victimhood and there is illusory victimhood. To some extent the subject as she is rendered in 10:27 is to blame for her situation and because of this she has to deal with the problems herself; she is assigned less credibility by being narratively detached from choice. The fact that the verdict on the abused woman is related to conceptions of choice in 10:27 is visible in how the narrative elements are interconnected to devalue her credibility. In the first section of the posting three words are connected in one sentence: 'move', 'education' and 'support oneself', signifying activity on behalf of an alleged 'us' that assumed responsibility for the way

life could be planned. In the second section two words are connected: ‘stay at home’ and ‘be supported’, which indicate passivity. This passivity is said to have ‘made the bed’ in which the nick now has to lie. This particular construction of dismissal of the victim overlaps with the rest of the community ideals of the active, industrial and positive subject that were presented and discussed in Chapters Five, Six and Nine. In short, the abused woman may in certain cases display a ‘deficient character’ and when character is insufficient, victimhood is diluted, which can explain the stern formulations in posting 10:27: *To stay at home full time with children and allow oneself to be supported by a man is a lousy idea for anybody, and: the fact is you made your own bed.* The problem, as formulated in 10:27, is not only the threatening ex-husband but also the passivity of the woman, i.e., her character flaws. Because posting 10:27 is one of many postings that sees battered woman as lacking particular character traits, we will stay on the topic.

Subtypes of the victim

According to community discourse character flaws can be noted in many women who remain with violent husbands. They may be described as dreamers or portrayed as if they have an exaggerated need for affirmation, they are depicted as lacking self-esteem and failing to assume responsibility for themselves. I have called these categorisations the *subtypes* of the victim. In what follows we will focus upon the ambivalent reasoning about the subtypes.

The subtypes are described as lacking one characteristic in particular: They do not see reality for what it is. This avoidance of crass reality is delineated in several ways. One recurrent way of understanding the battered woman is that she *allows* herself to be beaten. Women in general would not accept this type of behaviour and therefore the woman subjected to violence needs to be explained. In the following posting she is delineated as someone that who lives in a fantasy world.

10:28 I am so tired of all politicians and pundits that constantly have to badmouth all the evil men that beat up their women. It is not just any man that beat and not just any woman that accepts living in such a dysfunctional relationship. Why don't we talk more often about how we can help women exposed to violence to get out of their relationships and stop living in a world of make-believe where the man all of a sudden will become nice and become the way she wants him to be?
(VEF 2013)

The contrarious posting 10:28 seems to advocate that focus needs to be moved from the problematic men who beat women to the problematic women who are beaten. The man is depicted as unduly blackened and the woman ought to receive help. The help would be designed to help her leave a world of dreams where she re-constructs the man as potentially decent. In other words, the subject who needs to be modified and changed is the woman receiving the beating. In all its contradictions the posting is typical of the transportation of agency that is recurrent in matters of victimhood. While it is very rare that the battered woman is not given any type of victim status it is common that this status is obscured by connecting the violence of the man with a presumed lack of clear-sightedness on the part of the woman, thus making her share part of the blame.

In addition, the battered woman is apprehended as suffering from an exaggerated need for affirmation, as someone who lacks sufficient self-esteem and as a subject who avoids full responsibility. Again, what these faults of character have in common is a lack of acceptance of reality; a kind of irresponsibility. Some of the general notions of what constitutes this type of irresponsibility are displayed in the first passage of an extensive thread that discusses possible reasons for a why a woman 'chooses' a violent man.

10:29 Need for confirmation rules?

I have thought about that. Women who find all kinds of excuse to live with men in spite of them being mean, jealous and all sorts of other negative things – if they get something nice to feed their need for confirmation once in a while. It outweighs the rest of the shit and makes them put up with it.

Fundamentally bad self-esteem? Is it biological or through upbringing or a combination of both or what is it that make so many of them feeble, cause yes, I consider it a distinct weakness.

N1(TPP 2012) Threadstart

10:30 Yes, partly but I also believe there is something weird that make some women attracted to so called 'bad boys'. Don't know if it's genetically conditioned to seek strong, ruthless men that once upon a time were survivors and winners but there are obviously women who seek the true bastards like criminals, members of motor cycle gangs etcetera. I consider women who live with mean, unpleasant men as related to those women who hook up with men with an inclination towards criminality. Why some women don't have that

gene – or if it depends on something else, like level of education for instance – I don't know.

N2 (Answers posting above)

10:31 Being with a tough guy is perhaps a shelter from the world. Perhaps it makes the women imagine that they too will become stronger, more invulnerable and all of that?

N1 (Answers posting above)

10:32 Heredity and environment in a combo perhaps? Except low self-esteem it can depend on accustomed patterns from the upbringing or previous relationships. I have a friend who has seen her mother being humiliated and beaten. Now she (my friend) has got a man who in my eyes is a real piece of shit. But she thinks he is amazing because he neither beats her nor drinks.... She sort of doesn't get that she is worth more than that.

N3 (Answers posting 10:29)

10:33 I also believe in a combo, but I have seen women who didn't have that crappy environment in childhood still choose lowlives over and over again. I have a friend who has had the possibilities of choosing a safe and good relationship with a man she actually likes a lot and who likes her a lot, but she turns him down all the time and chooses impossible relationships instead. As if safety scares her. I have asked her, but she does not know

N1 (Answers posting above)

10:34 partly it's about self-esteem but lately I have also seen that it's about 'getting' something they can't accomplish themselves, often it's status and wealth. If one did not make sure one is independent but instead postponed the responsibility for oneself (supporting oneself, education etcetera) it seems easier to cope with slobs.

however, I don't think the attraction to assholes has anything to do with education. Having an evolved intellect does not correlate with having sound emotions. One on the other hand if one has been raised in a destructive family I think it's difficult to imagine what a sound relationship looks like and even harder to look for one – in that case I think self-esteem plays a major part,

because one settles for just enduring.

N4 (Answers posting 10:29)

In this thread, the ways of explaining women who live with mean, jealous men are numerous. The majority of them share a point of departure that there is something wrong with the subjectivation of the woman. She, or in certain cases, her parents, did not install the right kind of values into her. The abusive man is not examined, although for a battered woman he would likely constitute a major influence. In this thread, the action of the man becomes subordinated to the thoughts, mental disposition and attitude of the woman. This is no surprise in itself, because it is not the violent man writing in the thread. It is nevertheless striking how many similar threads – discussing the nature of the battered woman – are started in the communities and how few (if any) on the nature of violent men. This could be explained by how decorum functions as an ontological prerequisite. According to Michael Leff (1999: 61), decorum orders the elements of a discourse and arranges them so that they stand out as a coherent product. When the nicks envision the nature of the battered woman the viewpoints are at first sight dispersed. The thread contains postings that claim the woman suffers from a low self-esteem (postings 10:29 and 10:34), whilst other postings (such as 10:29 and 10:30) see biology in the shape of genes as causing the forbearance. At times the explanation is a combination of heredity and upbringing (10:32), while on other occasions the woman is described as being afraid of safety (10:33). It is also claimed that education has an effect on certain women's inclination to tolerate mean men (posting 10:30), in other postings this proposition is rejected (10:34). Despite the differing opinions they have one common denominator – decorum steers the gaze towards the interior domains of the battered woman. This may be due to the aversion against placing blame on the man, it may be because of the community focus upon thoughts rather than action, or it may be because victimhood is associated with passivity: The woman has in no sense of the word taken care of herself and she has neglected the task of speaking the absolute truth about herself (Foucault, 2015: 23). If she had, she too would have understood that there is something wrong with the way she is geared on the inside. However, I would like to suggest yet another reason for the focus remaining with the woman. Perhaps the abused woman constitutes a sign that an ulterior point may exist, beyond which the subject cannot be independent and strong simply by her own free will. The battered woman is, I think, transformed into a token of all that is opposite to personal responsibility and choice; oppression, helplessness and subjugation. Is the battered woman an indication of thought never entirely overpowering action, considering her failure

to think her way out of assault? Is she a symbol that hints of a limitation in the strategies of self-government and caring for oneself? None of the preferred strategies for governing the self, such as choice, self-knowledge, control or responsibility, appear to fit her situation. Because of that, she is narratively rejected.

In that sense, this particular feminine subject position constitutes a threat to the fantasies of the Homo Eligens: Her existence is pervaded by the world surrounding her and she seems to find it hard choosing to leave that which hurts her. The perceptions of the Homo Eligens seem to come with a male bias that will not allow for a more fragile type of dependency that may be manifested in cases of abuse or violence. This would be an explanation for why in some cases the position of victim becomes the most troublesome of all – the female subject is interpellated into a *responsible dependency* that enables the reproductive arena to function and she is considered protected from exploitation through a sexual contract of a responsible difference. Men and women should want to cooperate to really make the most of the fertile difference. This contract, as I understand it, hosts the same type of weakness as the liberal social contract. It is made for an abstract individual and precisely as Carol Pateman points out (1988: 39), the assumption is that individuals are born free and equal. When women insert narrations that testify to the exact opposite, the narrative hide-and-seek begins.

Summary

In this chapter I have investigated the way the female subject is generally interpellated. I have found that she is made to stand in opposition to a male subject and that these two subjects are described as different and therefore in need of each other. Difference and a healthy kind of dependence emerge as the cornerstones of the lipstick feminism that prevails in the parental communities and orders the preferred feminine position. In this take on feminism it appears evident that an equal sharing of time and resources will take place: because of men's and women's need for each other.

Although dependency is mostly apprehended as a necessary outcome of the differences between the sexes, it can still be conceived of as less healthy in some cases – for instance when the woman has made herself dependent on a man who will not treat her fairly and will not assume his responsibilities vis-à-vis the family. In these instances the preferred remedy is gender equality. Gender equality is sometimes depicted as preceded by tension and conflict but is generally described as a more or less natural state of relations: If not actively hindered, it will develop. The main narrative difficulty occurs when the situations described are situated close to exploitation. Narrations exhibit a tendency to avoid placing the blame for failed equality with

the husband, even in cases when he is delineated as free riding upon dependency work carried out by the spouse. In those cases the blame is understood as shared with the wife, who is considered a possible solution to the problem: If she assumes the intra-psychic responsibility to stand up for herself, she can force her husband to assume his more formal discursive duty of sharing the household labour. If this does not work, she can leave the home so that her husband can learn and mature in her absence. In these types of narration the agency of the husband becomes diminished, whilst the agency of the wife is enlarged: She is envisioned as standing in the way of a husband who is made passive. In sum, when a nick states that she is overwhelmed by the household chores or disappointed in a husband who flees from his responsibilities, these complaints tend to be dealt with in a vacuum, where particular explanations are avoided.

The tendency is reinforced when the subject-matter is victimhood. Although there are cases where the victimised woman is treated as such, there are numerous situations in which victimhood in itself is looked upon with suspicion. The same type of positioning of blame is performed and the woman feeling sorry for herself, the woman conceptualised as a dreamer, or the woman narrated as less responsible and less active becomes an enigma; something to explain. It appears she manifests a kind of *irresponsible dependency* that articulates all the unsecure clauses in the sexual contract upon which the ideals of female strength and independence rest. If the tasteful difference (the right kind of distinction) is articulated in the nicks' enthusiasm for a book such as *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, the lack of taste is evident in cases where the difference consists of one party beating up the other.

Contracts

The favourable position of femininity comes across as a position of *responsible dependency*. The opposite position would be to depend upon someone who takes advantage of you; a kind of *irresponsible dependency* and this latter type of dependency is delineated as less attractive. This is, I think, one of the explanations for why a victim such as the battered wife is from time to time received with less empathy – she seems to destroy the beauty of responsible dependency. Her dependence is not moderate, it is not freely chosen and it cannot be applied to enhance heterosexual attraction. The rule of narration is thus that the heterosexual difference must not appear imposed or to be causing trouble. In the healthy and responsible dependency both the man and the woman appreciate that they are different and they do not use their respective strengths to combat each other. That which is acted out by the abusive man and the battered woman is, consequently, the wrong performance of difference. In this textu-

al work of trying out models of dependency and difference (should they be regulated through mutual responsibilities, by demands, or by attaching blame?), the victim's place appears highly uncertain but when touched upon it is viewed as problematic, or it is made less visible.

I have proposed that this highlighting of some dimensions of dependency and the concealment of others partly links the sexual contract to the social one, which makes Chapter Seven and this chapter interact. The linking of the sexual and the social contract is not new in the sense that both employment and marriage contracts share some of the features of the social contract, where freedom is exchanged for relative safety. In addition, the idea of an articulate choice preceding the contract is the same for social and sexual contracts. In this particular case, choice achieves something besides the notion of an individual entering into a regulated relationship. In the postings that respond to complaints of sharing a household with a freeriding husband, the question of choice returns over and over again. The complaining nick is asked why she chose this lazy buck passer in the first place and sometimes she is advised to leave him, i.e. to remake or undo the choice. If this highlighting of 'choice' at the expense of 'subjugation' or 'exploitation' is the outcome from the discourses of gender equality, the discourse is perhaps hiding something more than the matter of exploitation. In her thorough discussion of the political fiction that surrounds the customary comprehensions of contracts (the marriage contract, the employment contract and the prostitution contract) Pateman (1988: 129 ff.) compares the historic situation of the Victorian wife as a residential servant with the situation of heterosexual women of today and finds the situation has not altered much. The wife in the Victorian era was dependent on the kindness of her husband and could only try to acquire a nice and decent one. Yet the wife could not be entirely sure that her husband would be fair. This would be a power relation in a very basic form, still operating in our time. 'Our present social structure', Heidi Hartmann infers (1981: 368) 'rests upon an unequal division of labor by class and by gender' and as it turns out, sharing a household with a man can in some instances even increase the workload for the woman. In short, 'husbands may require more housework than they contribute' (ibid.: 383). John Stuart Mill (1859/1989: 174), who openly criticised the oppression of women in the Victorian era, remarked that it should not be understood as open, but as an oppression that socialises women into defending it. What I have defined as a mere narrative consciousness in the communities (what is possible to articulate, what is recognisable and what is considered repugnant and distasteful) allows for a mindset of voluntarism but does not allow for force, power or – when considering the more intimate relations of a family – the non-voluntary characteristics that reside in de-

pendency work. The responsible dependency seems to triumphally shout out 'I can do it!' whilst the voice of the battered woman whispers 'I cannot do it'. Because of the way the female subject is interpellated, such a whisper endangers the whole project of lipstick feminism. Furthermore, apart from threatening the cherished community feminism, the victim of sexual violence overthrows the fundament of the social contract theory upon which the sexual one is built.

This indicates that the community feminism is really not much of a feminism at all. When viewing gender equality as something that will develop if not hindered, it is as if discourse hints at the 'reasonable citizen' of Rawls (1993/2005: 217). Reasonable men and women apply gender equality so that the division of labour becomes fair and no one is exploited. Reason comes to men and women by itself, and if not it comes when a reasonable discussion has taken place. The problem is the assumption that the parties are reasonable in the first place. Why, if the negotiating parties are reasonable, is the discussion taking place at all? If Rawls's theory aspired for one party to be able to represent all the rest, why are there *two* parties in a negotiation about the division of household labour? If the postulation is that the parties are reasonable, the bruised and frightened woman truly threatens the discourse. She separates the unified discursive moment of 'man' (as in mankind) into 'men' and 'women' and the standpoints that should be dissolved instead seem to consolidate.

The corresponding feature between the contract in Chapter Seven and the one in this chapter is the way they are narrated as broken at times. In some cases the contract was obviously not signed by the same type of subjects, positioned in the same way. In Chapter Seven poor people were described as 'sitting on their arses' (posting 7:3), when the contract stipulates one should first sow, then reap, and some people were delineated as working harder than others. The main difference between the narration in chapter Seven and the one in this chapter is that the person breaking the *sexual* contract is rarely blamed. The narrative position of the absconding husband is situated very far from that of the poor mother. The contemporary oppression of women is perhaps as closeted and well socialised as in the era of Mill's writings, but its key signatures have changed. This, I argue, is due to the way the female subject is interpellated – as dependent but equal, and ultimately responsible.

11. A spectacle of subjectivity. The poor mother

At this point, we have already looked into several subject positions, preferences as well as aversions, and we have reviewed comprehensive community notions of the ideal behaviour of subjects in society. In Chapter Five I mapped out some introductory and generic ideals that are necessary to present in order to succeed in the communities, mainly touching upon the ideals of gratitude, sincerity and coherence as they unfolded as taste displays. Chapter Six revealed discursive resources that enable the subject ideals, first and foremost the concept of choice. I demonstrated how choice does not only regulate consumer ideals but in addition is understood as deciding the whole attitude of the subject, who can choose who to be and how to feel. The force that is said to reside in choice and the belief that life can be governed by choice is captured in the interpretative repertoire of *Mind over matter*. Chapter Seven moved into society, exploring the ways society is understood as a social contract where individuals contribute and receive, and how the communities host a fear of a breeder society enabled by a too generous welfare state. I found that the nicks instead advocated a *moral* contract, situated inside the individual or family and this perceived moral contract can be summarised in the interpretative repertoire of *You should reap what you sow*. Chapter Eight consisted of an analysis of the perceived remedy for a broken social contract; the contract situated inside the intimate spheres, as for instance the family. In this contract the parent is sketched as a manager of or an investor in the child and depicted in terms of agency rather than experience, identity, class position or life phase. Chapter Nine looked into some of the ways the subject may fail and the remedies comprehended as aiding the unfit subject. Negative feelings were generally seen as chosen by the subject, when instead they ought to be considered a challenge for the mindset – as something to learn from. The subject who tries to improve and rise above unfitness is free to experiment, as long as she does not resort to easy solutions; a preference captured in the interpretative repertoire *Don't take the easy way out*. Chapter Ten continued with the female subject positions; excavating in particular positions of dependency, difference and victimhood. It uncovered a lipstick feminism prevailing in the communities that makes stories of heterosexual exploitation difficult to narrate.

In all six chapters the postings analysed do not only point out desirable ways of living and being but demarcate a number of ways in which the subject can go

astray and become passive, negative, lost in futile dreams and hopes, irresponsible, non-choosing, fearful and subordinated. These pejorative attributions pierce almost every friendly advice, every cheerful suggestion for improvement and every conversation on how to solve a particular problem; whether the problem concerns stress, depression, obesity, or being beaten by one's husband. These attributions result, I think, in a compressed subject whose faults are presented as if countless. This subject hosts all of the negative stereotypes attached to the unfit subject or the victim and interconnects both the subject ideals and aversions into one figure of disgust. In that sense this compressed subject is the result of what we have discovered in the previous chapters, as well as the result of a particular formation and articulation of class in relation to the austerity discourse. In this last analytical chapter of the dissertation I will present an *affective figure* (Tyler, 2008) made out of distinctions, and encapsulating a whole affective landscape of class (Skeggs, 2004). If choice is a person-maker, as I claimed in Chapter Nine, this figure is a result of that. The subject position most narratively condensed and viewed as the most irresponsible is that of the poor mother with children. She is understood as lacking many of the central characteristics necessary for living a responsible life and in the communities she is often labelled in a particular way – she is 'White Trash'. She is the central character of this chapter.

The Chapter will be presented in two sections. The affective figure of White Trash encompasses most of the faulty character traits we have become acquainted with in the previous chapters, but to fully understand her we need to probe a little deeper into the conceptions about what demarcates the poor. This presentation will form the first part of the chapter. In the second section I will demonstrate the way these conceptions interplay in the creation of the White Trash woman.

Fostering a grown-up child

The first main conception about the poor in general and the poor mother in particular asserts that she is immature. The immaturity is said to manifest itself as irresponsibility: The poor mother has no sense of balance, taste or dignity, no child rearing skills, does not know how to prioritise, cook, or choose a partner. She is utterly helpless. The second conception is that the poverty of this subject relate very little to money. Instead, the fact that money is lacking is a result of the alleged immaturity. The two main conceptions are summarised in the first posting below. The posting is extracted from a long thread debating why/if poor people cannot afford to go to the dentist.

11:1 I don't doubt for a second that there are people who really can't afford and that's terrifying, but I am also totally convinced that several of those claiming they cannot afford sit there with the latest Smart Phone, cigarettes and booze every Friday, tattoos, piercing etc. But going to the dentist; no they can't afford it, that's not prioritised.

(VEF 2012)

Posting 11:1 represents a key model of thinking. Alongside narrations of financial irresponsibility structural conditions are moved out of the representation, and a presumed dysfunctionality of the subject is moved in. All in all, mental functionality is what is made to matter, a feature displayed in the next posting.

11:2 I despair sometimes of all the reports of how class is the reason for why some children come to harm. When the actual issue is that some parents do not function the way they should, regardless of class? (TPP 2012)

The accounts on the relation between class and parenting are ambiguous, as postings 11: 1 and 2 indicate. Class is in 11:1 relativised by a notion of poor people being irresponsible more than poor, and in 11:2 construed as if the term class was simply a prejudice against 'lower classes'. Posting 11:2 is interesting on two accounts. First of all it tells us that all parents can potentially be bad parents. As such it may be considered a statement that is not intended to place additional guilt upon the poor. But it can also be read as way to disconnect circuits of money/privilege from functionality: It de-emphasises a potential link between feeling safe and established, having profitable contacts or access to resources and the means to pass those sensations and assets on to a child. The term 'harm' seems to be defined as something a parent does to her child, rather than something coming from the outside – an exterior threat against which the parent cannot protect the child. If class is moved out of the explanation and functionality is kept inside in such a manner, it appears evident that fostering is the main suggestion of how to improve the conditions of bad parents in general, which suddenly includes the poor parent. In other words, there is a possibility that this classless outlook upon parental harm enables a context-free notion; it is not principally poverty that harms the child, but the poor parent.

Pathology and fostering: The nanny approach

In general, the poor mother is discursively situated fairly close to the position of the child and she basically needs two types of fostering: One type is connected to disci-

pline and surveillance, while the other consists of a more gentle process of empowerment. In the following, we shall probe into these techniques for shaping a better functionality and in so doing note how these techniques rest upon non-articulated but guiding norms.

Although the same type of fostering is recommended for the poor and for the child, they are described differently. If the child, as delineated in Chapter Eight, is to be gently nurtured and groomed into the right kind of subjectivity and taste, or produced through the parental strategy of tough love, the disciplining endeavour of fostering the poor is described in a more austere manner. The narrative position of child enables suggestions of supervision, discipline and control and the fostering is often described either as education or as the dressage of an animal. Poverty is transformed from the state of having too little money into psychology and (under)development. Transformations such as these form potential junctions between a discourse of poverty and ideas of worthwhile restrictions. Some of these restrictions are promoted in the following posting where education of the poor is launched as a future demand for the Social Services.

11:3 Maybe more energy should be spent on education. Perhaps long-term economic support should be combined with demands to take some course in how to deal with money, a little bit of basic knowledge about how to live sensibly, economise, shop, pay bills, contact authorities etc...

Perhaps more obligatory meetings with the Social Services where they go through the situation and make some demands, for example abstention, rehabilitation, education, training or whatever would improve the situation and help the person back to an able-bodied condition.

(TPP 2012)

Posting 11:3 does not mention one single problem of poor people's characters. Instead, what is enumerated are several solutions that keep reappearing when the nicks discuss what can be done to ease poverty. The important feature of the posting is precisely that; every recounted solution *implies* a failure. It is the poor person who has to change and through the suggested solutions we receive a hint about what kind of failure she exhibits – drug abuse (where the solution is abstention), disability (this can be solved by rehabilitation), or low skills (to be resolved by education or training). The shortcomings and deficiencies are so taken for granted that only the solutions need to be highlighted.

Ideas about fostering can also be presented in a more benevolent fashion. The postings tend to advocate education for the poor. Education is apprehended as an imprinting process whereby salutary goods can directly be passed on to the irresponsible poor subject or bypassing the subject and instead directing the aid specifically to her children. When these softer empowerment strategies are advocated, they tend to be formulated less sharply, as in the next exemplary posting that urges for an operant conditioning of the poor.

11:4 Besides that I firmly believe in operant conditioning. It's like that with all types of training. 🐶 If you praise that which is good and desirable children, dogs and horses and everyone else will do precisely that and probably even more, and less of all that other stuff and you don't need to discipline that much. It is an example of your belief in the individual and an attempt to interact in a positive manner.

(TPP 2012)

By praising the maladjusted and manifesting belief in their capacities, you do not need to correct as much, as posting 11:4 explains. Positive imprinting is in 11:4 described as a set of techniques that may be used to govern subjects. The techniques are depicted as covering a vast array of living beings; children, dogs, horses and 'everyone else'. Perhaps this lumping together of species that are equally easy to govern is performed to convince the reader of how relatively effortless this fostering would be. But what is to be produced through the fostering? According to the posting it is things that are 'good' and 'desirable'. Explanations of what 'good' and 'desirable' mean are missing, but everyone can still abide by these norms. The norms seem to consist of top-down projections of ideals where choices of particular societal groups (groups that already display the desired discipline) remain invisible. Despite the benign tone of voice in 11:4, the poor subject is equated with animals and children. The fostering of the poor thereby resembles the fostering of whole families, as laid out by Dahlstedt (2010: 48) in his analysis of Swedish nanny shows; it is behaviour modification. Everyone can improve, but the improvement has to be formatted by something. The unarticulated norms act as a nanny for the poor – the nanny as well as the norms can be strict and demanding but obeying them will eventually reward the subject.

Housekeeping, needs and contempt

We are left with no explanation as to the content of the norms. Yet these norms govern the sorting of subjects that take place in posting 11:4. Therefore, the next

main feature of the conceptions of the poor that I have chosen to present is related to norms, but instead of downgrading the adulthood of the poor, these norms generate contempt.

A regular discussion in the communities revolves around how relatively effortless it is to prepare nutritious and varied meals, with a little bit of long-term planning. The nicks seem to take great pride in displaying matron skills from the era of the housewife, especially when the skills are about saving money and still providing the family with a healthy dinner. Food and finance are narrated as interconnected, although perhaps not in the expected way. In the communities, money is seldom perceived as a problem. This is articulated in the next posting, which questions the budgetary skills of people who live on income support.

11:5 Agree with you. I can't get it into my head why people whine about the food budget being 53 SEK per day for one (!) adult. Two fruits for 4 SEK (if it's expensive), then 45 SEK remains for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Breakfast won't cost you even close to 15 SEK if you eat oatmeal porridge and home-baked bread with for instance hummus. Such a rich and filling breakfast will cost you 5 SEK but alright let's be generous and say it costs 10 SEK. Then 35 SEK remains for the two cooked meals and for that amount you can get really good food!

I have 10 SEK per adult and 5 SEK per child as my budget for the cooked meals, same for breakfast and I have budgeted 8 SEK per person and day for fruit. Works just fine! We do like you, no semi-processed products, bake myself, etc. If you eat one vegetarian meal per day you save money to buy real meat for the second meal, so you escape sausages, fish n' chips and that kind of junk. The question is obviously if those people who complain about how 53 SEK is not sufficient really make oatmeal porridge and vegetarian food.

Probably not.

(TPP 2009)

The skills of the poor are in 11:5 compared with those of a more 'skilled' subject. By setting up a budget and showing how easy it is to stick to it, the posting turns the need that makes an individual eligible for income support into incompetence. The particular subject described above appears to be not only the consuming, but the administrating subject and the posting is an example of an advisory discourse that reaffirms old ideals: It tries to instruct and give advice about the very concrete skills of cooking and budgeting, because the poor seems to lack that proficiency. Accordingly, the narration about how to balance the family budget receives a particular

structure. According to posting 11:5, it all boils down to planning and the discursive element of planning eclipses that of monthly income, i.e., resources. The two basic elements applied to achieve the narrative structure seem to be 'skill' and 'plan' and when they are combined a particular type of household economics emerges. The posting intimates that the problem with family finances, if there is a problem, is due to the lack of a manager. For some people money might not be sufficient but they *could have been*.

The norms are, however, not only applied to poor mothers but used to complain about all sorts of people. The next example of a posting talks about people living as a couple and links affordability to savings.

11:6 On the contrary... people should really be awash with funds I believe, and I am so surprised when people living as a couple and sharing all expenses say that they 'can't afford it'. I am single and can still 'afford'. Because I SAVE!!!

(TPP 2009)

Both of these postings celebrate the virtues of the responsible subject and are representative examples of the manner in which the housekeeping themes include expressions of contempt for those depicted as less responsible. People who state that they cannot afford certain things come as an element of surprise to the nick in posting 11:6. The surprise is visible in 11:6 not only by the use of the word itself, but by the insertion of capital letters and the three exclamation marks that end the posting. In this fashion, people who cannot afford something are almost unthinkable and yet – much to the nick's astonishment – they do exist.

However, what is more important is the uncomplicated celebration of that which is delineated as responsibility. The true figure of admiration is the seemingly ever-saving, robust and planning subject who rises above the material dimensions of life. There are no complaints made about the price of food and no statements that salaries are too low, thus the housekeeping themes make need, as well as its possible political dimension, disappear. As it seems, an echo from a protestant ethics puts in motion a relation between notions of administration, equity and legitimacy. To administer resourcefully leads to a situation where equity is achieved in accordance with the interpretative repertoire *You should reap what you sow*. Its logic is as simple as it is old: You should be able to obtain (only) what you have invested. Insofar as it is fair to invest in home cooked porridge, shopping according to the season and saving money it is also reasonable (and thereby legitimate) to enjoy the fruit of one's

labour. It is also a free choice to stand back from these efforts. Ergo, the system of transforming the content of the wallet into food for a month is fair, and poverty would diminish if people cultivated a little competence in the area of saving. This manner of relativizing poverty is simultaneously that which constitutes the basis of contempt. Through the same sins of non-compliance that we became acquainted with in Chapter Nine, the poor have seemingly also refrained from employing techniques of self-enhancement and responsibility. The narratively suppressed question becomes: If poverty is to some extent chosen, why do poor people complain? The answer to that question relates to a transformation of need into taste, which we will explore in the next section of the chapter.

Relativized poverty, consumption and prohibited taste

There is one concept that has gone out of fashion in terms of explaining or understanding poverty. When used in the communities the word *need* is mocked or relativized. Another concept that seems to be employed more frequently, is taste. It is applied as a fairly simple axiom – taste is forbidden for the poor. This may at first sight seem strange, given that a large part of the conversations ordinarily orbit around taste displays. However, in this case it is exercised in another fashion. Stephanie Lawler (2005: 432 f.) suggests that contempt for the poor is partly crafted by allowing taste in one setting (amongst affluent people), while prohibiting it in another (amongst non-affluent people). Lawler's comment on taste can be coupled with Karl Marx's (1844) notion of the tendency to reduce or prohibit the needs of the poor, whenever they are delineated as above survival level. This latter tendency is illustrated in the following two postings

11:7 People are dickheads. I placed an ad to donate baby stuff in a community for people with very little money, single mums and the likes. Everything was clean and nice. I'm just amazed how fucking picky people with no money allow themselves to be. The gate you put on the stairs was the wrong colour (its white!) and the baby watcher was not ok because it was only the second most recent model. Oh my god... Would have been easier to just throw it into the rubbish dump...

N1 (TPP 2011) Threadstart

11:8 Well yeah, that's when they become picky. *seen it from close by* They live just above subsistence level but can't imagine second hand, when the money is gone they shop from mail order and as a result they are in an even

worse financial ruin. Whine like hell about money but can't picture their child in a SECOND HAND overall.

N2 (Answers posting above)

The taste displays (as in having a taste and being able to define it) that were celebrated in Chapter Five are in the postings above described as a problem. Postings 11:7 and 11:8 discuss attitude, a concept that was deployed in notions of the choosing and responsible subject in Chapter Six. It now reappears in ideas of the irresponsible subject. In Chapter Six I pointed to a tendency to praise choice as a remedy for the soul: Making a choice improves the subject's attitude. In the case of the irresponsible subject, attitude serves to make need insignificant – when the poor make consumption choices they are read as signs of shallowness and depicted as indications of intemperance. In other words, this is another way of relativizing poverty, through the idea that the poor want more than they can expect. In the list of examples in the two postings we see how the poor mother will not accept the wrong colour for the baby's equipment and how she refuses to buy second hand clothes, how she chooses mail order to repress the fact that she lacks money. Accordingly, it is not need that makes her shop but her much too elaborate taste and her self-indulgence. This narration basically exposes the tendency that Marx describes – every craving for items not associated with mere survival on the part of the poor appears objectionable, and when the poor want something beyond the abstract need it will be described as craving for a luxury item. The only thing that can be approved is the most 'meagre form of life (existence) as the standard' (ibid.).¹¹⁵ By being represented as having taste and wanting to make distinctions the poor mother is moved further away from possibilities of receiving sympathy. This is no wonder, considering the ideal promoted in Chapter Five not to buy the most expensive consumer goods on the market; the ideal is to know what one is buying. It is discernment (not money) that determines social value and when money is lacking one should refrain from consumption.

What is more, the nick describing this elaborate taste is, much the same as in posting 11:6, surprised: *I'm just amazed how fucking picky people with no money allow themselves to be.* This amazement about the poor is recurrent in the communities. The sense of surprise may be a discreet way of expressing contempt towards the poor without coming across as insensitive. Stating that one is amazed (not angered) by the behaviour of the poor implies that one previously had no prejudices against them and perhaps even pitied them; one was fooled by the poor or was perhaps too kind

¹¹⁵ For the quotation, see <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/needs.htm>.

hearted before knowing better. Expressing astonishment may also be employed to point out that the rupture of the norm of consumption (to cut the coat according to the cloth) on the part of the poor is gigantic (hence the great surprise). The major element of surprise seems, nevertheless, to be the poor subjects' manifestations of taste.

Taste divides us and makes us choose differently, which is explained in the following posting that separates different types of activity into categories.

11:9 Some things that are a sign of class divisions are not so much financial but rather about having different values and habits, for example concerning extracurricular activities, music etc. Low-skilled people smoke more and are more obese and they spend more money on cigarettes and junk food. I know a guy who earns half of what I earn but spends 3000 SEK¹¹⁶ per month on cigarettes. Included in the standard of an academic are activities such as sports and outdoor life (the scouts and so forth) and that hardly costs 3000 SEK per month. Clearly, academics often earn more than low-skilled people (although that's not set in stone) but it's also about different habits and ideas about where money should be spent. 3000 SEK per month for a year is a decent trip abroad for the whole family / ... / but if you cannot afford that because you've been smoking the money, the remedy is probably not subsidies but old-fashioned ... well mass-education and a little bit of tax-raising and prohibitions too, in order to steer people's consumption.

(TPP 2012)

In posting 11:9 taste and financial status are interlinked. Taste is, quite simply, interpreted as one reason for poverty. Several displays of taste are narrated (musicianship, sports, outdoor life, cigarettes and junk food, to name but a few). The pivotal key in this story is the introduction of the smoking friend as a kind of confirmation of the argument. Smoking is tentatively not a sign (or a taste) of just any kind. Smoking is arguably a *stained sign* – the sign itself portends its value and how it is supposed to be received – smoking is bad taste. By connecting *clean signs* (instruments, sports, scouts and so forth) with the standard taste of an academic and attaching the stained signs to the less educated (smoking, overweight, cigarettes and junk food), the chain of equivalence does not have to be very rigidly performed, because the reader is prepared for what is to come. A clean and a stained sign are midway to being fixated through articulation which, according to Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2008: 105), is 'any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is

116 Approximately 300 Euro.

modified as a result of the articulatory practice'. By attaching stained signs to the narrated poor friend, the work is done. Articulation as 'any practice' is in this case clearly the practice of taste. The application of taste makes it easier to explain poverty as a *phenomenon on the surface*, i.e. by studying the very behaviour (what is visible) of the poor we come to understand the reason for the poverty – it is hidden in the performance, where taste is one obvious display. Taste and consumption becomes external tokens that segregate the deserving poor (who cut their coats according to their cloth) from the undeserving (who exhibit immoderate desires). To insert into the conversation a notion that some people lack resources appears to pervert the choice agenda, because acknowledging that all people are not endowed with the same amount of resources would point to an absence of something that goes beyond people simply wanting or craving things; it would turn poverty political (Fraser 1990: 199). It is thus possible that the exemplary consumption goods in the postings are not randomly chosen. If wanting to relativize poverty it is a wise strategy to disregard resources such as food and housing and instead highlight goods that are unnecessary for survival; baby watchers and cigarettes. Through the suggestion that poor mothers are vain and through the story about the friend who spends the money on cigarettes, the situation of the less affluent is made non-political. The application of a concept such as taste also enables a putative division between different types of poor – the deserving type that master their cravings and the undeserving that refuse baby equipment in the wrong colour.

Poverty is vague

The last comprehensive feature of the poverty discourse in the parental communities can simultaneously be viewed as a narrative rule: The more crude the description, the more unspecific the narration becomes. The most common narration technique is a *systematic vagueness* (Georgaca, 2004:16). Lawler (2005: 432) calls these types of derogatory but sweeping description a *join-the-dots-pathologization*, where the reader is supposed to fill in the picture herself, simply by linking the 'dots'. This is the case in the following posting where poor parents in deprived neighbourhoods are described.

11:10 Parents who don't spend time with their children, who let them constantly be with others or in the streets, parents who don't take the children to the dentist, parents who don't attend stuff at school, parents who drink and party, parents who fuck around, parents who fight and argue, parents who can never afford anything for the kids, parents who ... Well, you know the

routine?
(VEF 2012)

There is a resonance of danger sounding from the posting as it sketches a particular unbounded subject. The ‘dots’ are familiar images of societal ills, mirrored in what we saw propagated in the editorial pages presented in Chapter Two – parents who do not monitor their children, parents who mismanage their children’s health, parents who exhibit a lack of effort towards school and so forth. The image is one of a moral rather than economic underclass and the narration relies on distance and abstraction. Arguably the level of reliability resides in this absence of specificity: The reader is not provoked to argue against the vagueness of the statement because it is as if it represented a common but unarticulated truth. We are invited to understand, to recognise an old and familiar painting: *Well, you know the routine?* By the reassuring abstraction of *Parents who...* the posting establishes a segregated space for the deviant parental subjects – they are not like us and furthermore, the absence of specificity makes them all appear to be the same. This latter feature would be manifest through the usage of the three dots that end the last phrase of posting 11:10. The phrase *Parents who...* functions as an equivalence of bad character. Everyone in the group of parents described appear to manifest *all* of these problematic parental characteristics. Hence, *parents who can never afford anything for the kids* make poverty into one of these faulty characteristics and we are led to believe that *parents who don’t attend stuff at school*, in addition are poor.

If Chapter Eight demonstrated the nicks’ tendency to enthrone parents and families as a remedy for a broken social contract, it coincides with the further reduction of the welfare state through fiscal austerity, as pointed out by Sarah De Benedictis (2012: 6). De Benedictis also notes (ibid.: 1 f.) the simultaneous tendency to appoint some parents as especially ‘feral’. All of those parental subjects affected most profoundly by welfare state reductions are at risk of being placed in a position where they are made to take the blame for the effects of such cutbacks. They are not described as poor, unprotected or vulnerable, but as a kind of savage. Posting 11:10 is positioned in that discursive furrow.

Deserving and undeserving

However, the tendency towards unspecific narration is not only visible in harsh descriptions of feral poor people. Another way to launch poverty as a condition with vague contours is to divide the poor into large categories in which many types of poverty can be included. One of the recurrent descriptions comprises an imprecise

division of the poor into categories of deserving and undeserving (Fineman, 1991: 282).¹¹⁷ The parent who makes the wrong kind of choices or fails to grab opportunities is depicted as undeserving much the same as in the next posting.

11:11 To me it's important to separate a chosen situation from a situation one has not chosen. If one decides to have three kids instead of education and a job one has made a choice, but if one takes ill so that one can't work it's not a choice.

(TPP 2012)

The vagueness, as 11:11 illustrates, is often conveyed by constructing situations that host only one dimension. The subject described in the posting has chosen between three kids and no education on the one hand (a behaviour of the undeserving), and education and a job on the other (a behaviour of the deserving). The options are in the posting described as situated on either side of a dividing line (separated through 'instead' in the posting). It is built upon the premise that it is possible to actually separate situations one has chosen from situations one has not chosen. It seems that for vagueness to function the tropes must be extensive and in addition, the situations in which the subject is placed need to be mutually exclusive. When dividing the poor in this fashion there can be no combination of conditions. What sort of reception would, for instance, a poor mother with many children, a low-paid job and an illness receive?

Lastly, vagueness can be applied to show that society can only do so much to aid, assist or relieve the subject from poverty. The next posting tries in a humorous fashion to demonstrate that the poor are difficult to help.

11:12 But how can we vaccinate children against their parents' poor decisions and bad capacity to capitalise on possibilities? Are we supposed to remove children of parents with a certain income below X SEK?

(TPP 2012)

As noted, vagueness can be applied as a way of being extreme. The proposal in 11:12 is constructed by surprisingly destroying the popular community discourse of poverty as pathology. By the revulsion of this narrative formula, the effect of vaccination appears comic and distorted: If poverty is not a disease it cannot be transmitted

¹¹⁷ This bifurcation manifests a historical heritage of dividing the dependent subject into more and less dignified groups, which in turn receive treatment in accordance to that status.

and, hence, vaccination is a ridiculous proposal. Also, if poverty is not a disease it is not something that can be 'cured'. When encountering the comic suggestion in the posting the reader immediately sees the impossibility in doing what the posting elusively proposes; the suggestion of removing children from their malfunctioning parents makes the audience giggle or become appalled. Furthermore, the reader is led to imagine that the underlying phenomenon – the existence of poor children – is impossible to redress, which makes the posting advisory (Fischer, 1970/2009). The existence of poor children becomes less interesting and the extreme formulations make specification appear unnecessary. The concluding question of whether or not to remove the children from their parents proves by the practical impossibility that we have no reason to feel hopeful when it comes to incitements for societal change; the only proposal made is so vague and so preposterous that we must reject it. In other words, the form of the posting enables a particular view upon poverty and precludes another, which makes it ideologically significant (Eagleton, 1976/2006).

We have seen that the image of poverty is made in a particular configuration where it emerges first and foremost as *behaviour*. Poverty is portrayed as if it involved a deterioration best addressed through dressage and education in combination with discipline. We have also become acquainted with what poverty is *not*: It is not to be comprehended as a case of lacking money and we have noted that one of the main alleged problems with the poor is that they seem unable to refrain from consumption. Lastly, we have seen that poverty is described in a vague type of join-the-dots-pathologisation that makes the poor appear feral and difficult to help. All of these demarcations are active in the creation of the most popular affective figure in the parental communities; 'White Trash', which is by far the worst spectacle of subjectivity to be found in community conversation. The rest of the chapter is devoted to this particular figure.

Affective figures. The example of 'White Trash'

Descriptions of the irresponsible subject can be launched in subtle or more crude ways. When narrated in a more sweeping and harsh manner the subject stands out as a kind of affective figure – a travesty or a distortion. The affective figure is first and foremost to be appreciated as a constitutive limit for the white middle class, but in addition as a condensed contempt against a perceived underclass of defective individuals. It is a figure that manifests class struggle on a representational level and mainly works through distinctions – the figure is used to attribute impressive characteristics to groups of people that the group is discursively differentiated from (Tyler, 2008:18 ff.). The affective figures produce emotions, mainly of disgust, which helps legitimise

the fact that the figure is placed on the margins of society. To sum up, the affective figure has to be described as differing from a group looking at her from the outside, a group depicted as very different from her (ibid.: 19). This makes 'The Chav', as she is investigated by Tyler, share many features with its American sibling 'White Trash'.

This section of the chapter will map out the ways in which the undeserving poor of 'White Trash' are demarcated. I will show how these undeserving white poor are narrated as different from an implied group of 'us' and by what types of attribution this separation is performed. The section also accommodates a presentation of the way White Trash and parenthood is combined into a kind of disaster scenario with far-reaching effects. Although the descriptions peak in terms of vagueness and harshness when White Trash becomes the topic of conversation, defences are occasionally inserted. I will reveal how the general pattern in these defences is an aversion to the tone of voice of the descriptions of poor whites, rather than a refutation of the content out of which the figure is constructed.

White Trash as differences

Two features of conversation stand out when the nicks talk about White Trash. The first token of this underclass discourse that White Trash are different. They differ from other types of poor and from a narrated group of 'us' that are made to represent all the virtues that White Trash cannot be endowed with. The second token of the discourse is defining White Trash as particularly lacking refinement. In the case of White Trash, refinement is often understood as achieved through education that leads up to cultivation and broader perspectives. We will study White Trash from both the angle of difference and the perspective of refinement.

In community conversation the concept of White Trash is normally employed as a way of separating low income earners who are to blame for their situation (i.e., the undeserving poor) from those with no problematic personality traits (i.e., the deserving poor). It is also used as an explanation for why certain privileges are legitimate and should be considered fair. The discursive prop by which this legitimation is made to happen is *education*. The posting below belongs to one of the recurrent threads about definitions of White Trash and describes what happens to a person who does not proceed to higher education.

11:13 But education is also about, as I mentioned, getting in contact with opinions outside one's own narrow context, to get a wider outlook on big issues and therefore care about things such as discrimination, racism, dictatorship, environmental issues etc. The opposite is to NOT continue one's education, to

repeat the opinions that are presented in the social circles in which you live, to not embrace new ideas and influences.

(TPP 2012)

In posting 11:13 a distinction is made between people who are *open* and as a side effect of that openness *caring* and people who are *ignorant*. It is as if White Trash are not interested in any type of technologies of the self and do not want to be bothered. The alleged refinement of the middle class is represented as if disregarded by this category of poor people. The way White Trash are depicted in the communities reflect the conceptual use of White Trash as rendered by John Hartigan (2006: 324) – some people (White Trash) are ascribed prejudices and thus these prejudices are removed from other subjects (the white middle class). The separation rather bluntly places distasteful qualities in one group and it is narrated as if these traits could not reside in the group of educated people. The lack of perspectives demarcates the group, as stated in the next posting.

11:14 To me THAT [a lack of perspectives] is much more WT than a potentially weak economy. Abiding by old traditions and roles, not having an interest in matters other than what tattoo to get the next time, not having a clue that the USA has an election coming up tomorrow etc. Sure, you can have perspectives or an interest in society even if you don't have any education but as I see it, low or no education is often accompanied by limited perspectives and interest in society.

(TPP 2012)

Postings 11:13 and 11:14 are representative examples of the two narrative techniques performed in the construction of the especially hopeless type of poor labelled White Trash – the group's ascribed difference from everyone else, especially in terms of a lack of refinement. Grouping the evaluations together, we can see that White Trash as a group is understood as *old fashioned* (sticking to traditions), *narrow* (not taking an interest in matters outside of the close familiar context) and/or *superficial* (only interested in what tattoo to choose the next time). These three labels indicate personality traits and combined with the assertion in posting 11:13 that White Trash are ignorant, we see a recurrent conceptual interpretation of poor white people that once again stays with poverty as personality.

The idea that White Trash are low skilled and/or avoid education is a main discursive trait in the communities. It is also applied to produce differences between the white

poor that refrain from education and are viewed as undeserving for that reason, and poor black people in ‘developing countries’ who are narrated as if wanting education and thereby classified as deserving poor. The next exemplary posting is a response to a nick who objects to the idea that lack of education makes a person prejudiced or narrow.

11:15 All developing countries argue that *_education_* is the key to a good future. Children need to attend school and receive education so that the country can flourish and so that democracy can grow strong, so that old traditions will let go of people, so that misery and poverty will be turned around into wealth. Especially when it comes to women they [the developing countries] state they **MUST** get the possibilities of education in the same way as boys, it’s an important key to women’s value and independence.

But as soon as we talk about developed countries such as Sweden we mustn’t mention education as something in particular. On the contrary, it is condescending to highlight education as important; it is condescending towards people who choose not to enter into education despite having the chance. People who remain in narrow environments where the light of enlightenment can’t reach them.

(TPP 2012)

Posting 11:15 employs several tropes to paint a picture of the benefits of education. Less educated people live in places where the light of enlightenment cannot reach. If enlightenment is understood as a lantern with a universal power to transform people, the choice to refrain from education would metaphorically explain their situation – being White Trash is a choice. The choice to refrain from education explains inferiority and justifies the subordination of White Trash: This subordination is perceived as stemming from them, rather than from ‘us’. In 11:15 some people *cannot* and some *chose not to* educate themselves. If people in developing countries are hindered from entering into education, it would be difficult to attach any blame to them for this lack of opportunities. The poor person in a developed country is instead delineated as someone that willingly walks away from the opportunity. If summing up the standpoints, they seem ordered by an ontological decorum: It is not us, it is them.

Bad taste equals subordination

So far, the alleged problem with White Trash appears to be that they produce their own subordination. Because they are so ignorant and so narrow, the rest of us do not want to interact with them and they can therefore be said to produce their own

exclusion. According to the communities, the ignorance and narrowness are often visible in the particular taste displays of White Trash. This viewpoint is exemplified in the next short interchange, where a nick proposes that this bad taste segregates and isolates White Trash from the majority society. In this particular conversation, however, one posting (11:17) objects to the description of White Trash as being uninteresting to socialise with.

11:16 And how do you view meaningful exchanges of opinion with people who did not finish grammar school and whose main interests are shopping at Primark¹¹⁸ and going to see the latest slap-stick show¹¹⁹ ?

N1 (TPP 2012)

11:17 N1, what are you talking about? My God, I want to puke. Of course all people are interesting to talk to. And to have exchanges of opinion with? I don't get your thinking at all.

N2 (Answers N1 posting above)

11:18 Ok? So that's why segregation is so extensive? Why is it so if all people are interesting to talk to? You deliver a lot of pc opinions but open your eyes, that's not how it works in society. Isn't it better to at least have the courage to discuss it than putting on the pretty blinder and expressing a lot of pc opinions that sound nice?

N1 (Answers N2 posting above)

This exchange shows us a standard way of performing distinctions on behalf of others (as demonstrated in Chapter Five), as well as a way to protect and define the middle class. Using the example of shopping at Primark (as in 11:16) as an instance of bad taste is simultaneously marking off good taste laterally reversed, in displaying knowledge of what *not* to like. The distinction of taste achieves two things simultaneously. First of all, in posting 11:18 the presumed banality of White Trash is coupled with segregation, which establishes a conceptual bridge of 'personal characteristics' (i.e. taste) and social situation. An undesirable disposition may produce undesirable living conditions such as segregation, or in other words; White Trash did not only have exclusion coming, they brought it on themselves. Explanations such as these form an almost exact replica of the way personal responsibility is placed with the poor in dis-

118 Originally in Swedish: Ullared.

119 Originally in Swedish: Stefan och Krister.

courses of contemporary austerity regimes. If austerity makes individuals responsible for a breakdown in the financial sectors, the same type of dislocation is performed in 11:18, where it is not the housing market that explains segregation, but character flaws. Secondly, the posting protects a field specific capital (Bourdieu, 1984/1991: 132) of the middle class: It is the taste of this class that defines White Trash, not the other way around.

Two peas in a pod: We look the same

It is perhaps tempting to understand the making of this affective figure as the establishment of a solidified difference and little more. Nevertheless, there are unsettling elements in the descriptions of White Trash; elements that point to similarities between White Trash and the presumed reader. Occasionally, poor white women share the same tastes or habits as middle class women, which make distinction complicated to accomplish. We will continue by exploring this intersection between approved femininity and taste displays.

As we have already seen, in the communities it is through distinctions that one can demarcate oneself as belonging to a narrated middle class. The problem seems to be that several of the approved signs of the accepted middle class femininity are exactly the same as those displayed within the 'faulty' femininity of the White Trash woman. This needs to be explained, tucked away, or made into something else. In what follows, I will demonstrate how maintaining symbolic boundaries becomes a struggle where forms of feminine expression are the object of a discursive fight. It seems that the aesthetics of decay resides on both sides, leading to frequent community discussions that aim to unravel the differences once and for all. One example of this separation is presented in the next posting.

11:19 In another thread it appears that some in VEF believe that thongs = white trash. Is it really the thong that makes a person white trash? Can a woman hide her trashiness behind a pair of hipster panties? Hardly. Do you think that women who shop at Sabbia Rosa (73 Rue des Saints-Pères in Paris) or La Perla (24 Rue du Faubourg Saint Honore, Paris) or Yoba (11 Rue du Marche St Honore, Paris) or why not in the massive lingerie department on Gallerie Lafayette and buy thongs there could be titled... White Trash? Hardly.

What distinguish white trash women? If you ask around you usually get the following answers.

- 1) Lack of intelligence. She opens her mouth and out comes monosyllabic words and cursing. What foremost characterises a white trash woman is the total lack of refinement, aka no cultural appearance (she may be educated, like have at least managed elementary school) and a lack of codes of conduct.
- 2) Tattoos and piercings
- 3) Dyed hair – blonde
- 4) Body language – walks ugly, sits in a vulgar manner
- 5) Greasy, sagging, greyish skin covered in vulgar make-up
- 6) Sees the cigarette as the ultimate accessory
- 7) Fills her boobs and lips with silicone
- 8) Follows every cheap fashion trend like a slave, like Brazilian waxing
- 9) Consumes gossip like a nutrient
- 10) Understands clothes as an expression of IQ – the less the better

But at the same time: if you take a look at what people associate with White Trash we know that a large number of well-educated, cultivated, sophisticated and refined women may share the visible attributes of white trash women – such as clothes, make-up, plastic surgery, dyed hair, smoking, choosing tight clothes, tattoos (just look at the Queen of Denmark) and reading gossip without being accused of being a White Trash woman.

In other words White Trash comes from the inside – poorly educated, culturally illiterate and etiquette dyslectic – women who do not know how to transform consumer goods into something sophisticated and sexy.

If a woman does not want to come across as white trash she should get herself a proper education, learn the basics of civilised behaviour – not just codes of conduct – but in addition have a deeper cultural refinement. (like a classic hostess from the fifties/sixties) A woman who meets all of this is naturally self-confident and with a high self-esteem she will carry herself in such a manner – regardless of clothes – that she stands out as sexy and desirable. Such a woman can put on a pair of La Perla thongs and still you would not for a second see her as white trash.

(VEF 2010)

The main problem to be solved in posting 11:19 is the envisioned superficial similarity of the White Trash woman and the woman of a higher social standing. The latter can, according to 11:19, be dressed and made up in the same way, but still not be

mistaken for White Trash. So, if these two groups of women look the same, if they both smoke, wear thongs and read gossip magazines, how come we don't mix them up?

The posting may be understood as a discursive leakage that has less to do with poverty and lack of education, than with accepted femininity. It argues that the sensual or sexual woman uses several attributes that are generally associated with vulgarity and an accentuation of the sexually connoted parts of the body. The posting appears occupied with sorting out how this body can continue to be classified into deserving and undeserving categories, respectively. We may label the operation 'separating the deserving and undeserving whore' (as opposed to separating the deserving and undeserving poor). The posting confirms that particular culturally stained attributes are accepted on the female body, but is simultaneously acutely aware of the problems of distinction that follow. What needs to be done is to ascribe women who look the same different degrees of respectability and the additional qualification becomes that of self technology: The women may look the same but they are worlds apart on the inside. There is a greasy, smoking White Trash whore who disrespects intelligence and curses every time she opens her mouth and there is a Madonna whore with a proper education and a *savoir faire* of social codes who bought her thongs in an expensive store.

However, there is still one element of uncertainty to sort out. Why do these literate and sophisticated women chose to buy thongs in the first place, if they are associated with less dignity? Would they not know better? The posting deals with a stained but nevertheless generic ideal of femininity and the way it is constantly at risk of being read as vulgarity. Because Western feminine aesthetics partly relies on displaying the body, it risks slipping into readings of the woman as corporeality at the expense of soul, or intelligence. Feminine respectability is, so to speak, threatened by its own aesthetic codes. If this particular bodily appearance is indeed manifested by all sorts of women and if the generic ideal really is an aesthetics of the stained subject. it is important to keep groups of female subjects separated. In other words, because some of the visual appearance of feminine sensuality has borrowed attributes from our culture's stereotypical images of the 'whore' (exposed skin and accentuated make-up), it means an element of degradation should be added to make the 'sophisticated woman' attractive. This is quite a different result to the sharp distances between White Trash and the middle class extracted from Hartigan's study (2006) of the way the category is applied in an American context. The dangerous sexuality that has historically been situated with the working class woman (Skeggs, 2004) now travels between different class positions. The contraposition between the perceived

clean subject (the educated middle class woman) and the sexually more forward working class woman is undone. It is as if the sexualized body has ceased to display the cherished ethics of society and now only display its aesthetics. But even so, there has to be a difference established, and in posting 11:19 the middle class woman is said to differ as a result of her inner refinement. By maintaining this refinement she can exploit the woman labelled White Trash for her aesthetics. The trick is to look like a 'whore' without mistakenly being treated as one.

The White Trash mum. A disaster scenario

If the matrix of feminine aesthetics at times coincides, as described in posting 11:19, this cannot be said for accounts on parenthood. When parenthood is brought into the conversation about the poor white woman, all the features of the poverty discourse are set in motion: pathology, societal danger and faulty mental traits. What we see is a portrait of a disaster scenario and in this portrait there are no similarities represented, such as that of aesthetics which we saw demonstrated in posting 11:19. I will now introduce the White Trash mother and the problems she is accused of causing.

The procreation of people labelled White Trash is sometimes presented as a kind of genetic transmission. It is articulated as a case of poor people, fat people, people who smoke, people described as displaying low intelligence or neuropsychiatric diagnoses exhibiting a tendency to procreate a larger number of children than people that are delineated as 'normal'. The understanding of White Trash can be launched in an almost eugenic manner, as in the first posting below, or be more compassionate, as in the following posting.

11:20 White trash multiplies and takes over!

Children of diagnosed people often get the same type of diagnoses, ADHD and autism for example. Fat people have fat children. If both parents have the same diagnosis the probability increases that the child will get it.

It is not just genetic heritage; it's also about a social heritage where a combination of bad genes and bad habits is transmitted to the children and reinforces the effect. Unfortunately people with a similar life style and genetics meet and have children. It is rare that a fat person has a child with a normal person, who could neutralise or compensate for the negative heredity. Or that a

smoking couch potato has a child with a sporty person, which would give the children a normal upbringing.

This would be no problem if a natural selection operated in a way that made properties with worse chances of survival disappear from the gene pool after a couple of generations. Instead it is unfortunately so that these so called white trash people tend to have more babies.

People with no problems and with a sound life style often make the choice to have fewer children, to be able to give them the best possible upbringing. Quality over quantity, that is. Unfortunately this does not counteract the dominance of white trash, since it is only the number of children that will affect the gene pool. An increased dilution of problem-free genes in a gene pool where the less fortunate genetically have more babies will degenerate the population.

(VEF 2012)

11:21 I think a lot of 'WT' consists of these groups and many actually display the same IQ as a lot [of people] with Downs Syndrome. If you care about handicapped or disabled people you should avoid the expression WT. /.../
(TPP 2008)

The ideal balancing act is in posting 11:20 depicted almost as a kind of terror balance (between the healthy/unhealthy, between salutary and pathological lifestyles and between couch potatoes and sporty people). Now it seems the balance is threatened. The bad gene pools appear to be characterised by numbers (quantity), whilst the good gene pool manifests a preference for substance (quality). However, impairments such as obesity, Downs Syndrome or neuro psychiatric diagnoses are used differently in the two accounts. They may be introduced to trigger a sense of danger and irreversible decay as in posting 11:20, or be used as a paternalistic but benevolent call for mercy on the less fortunate, as in 11:21. The two positions are contemporary and simultaneously timelessly classic expressions of what Dorothy Nelkin (2001) calls 'molecular metaphors' – metaphors that ascribe moral value to a kind of eugenic fitness. In posting 11:20 the fit family leads a life that can no longer be guaranteed because of its moderate procreative ambitions, and the posting thereby expands the community readings of unfitness even further; unfitness can in this narration be understood as a threat to the societal body as a whole. Posting 11:21 appears instead to

vindicate people diagnosed with Down's Syndrome, who are represented as if at risk of being lumped together with White Trash. The act of compassion is described as separating these categories. The separation performed in 11:21 seems to rescue value for people with other types of gene by pointing out that just because they share a presumed IQ level, they are not the same.

The presumed difference of the White Trash appears to be the reason for many discursive rescue attempts. So far we have seen that White Trash needs to be kept apart from black poor, from low income earners and from disabled people. The elements inserted to perform the separation are refinement (as in taste and education) and biology.

Transmission of habits and taste

Having said that, the main issue of community concern is still not the bad genes that White Trash is said to pass down, but the bad habits transmitted to the next generation. For that reason we will stay on the topic of how the White Trash mother corrupts her children. In the next two postings to be presented there seems to be no governable space left at all – the parents are so White Trash they cannot lead a decent life and, hence, they are possibly unable to guide and govern their children.

11:22 ... well I know one who has 5 children and all of them have ADHD and that family is really wt, and then you wonder if the children really have it or just lack breeding.

(VEF 2012)

11:23 Hahaha...reminds me of at least half the people living nearby. Spend the entire summer outside a caravan at the same camping site with the same people, they booze, smoke and yell at their naked kids running around peeing all over the place. Hehehe... and they ask if me and the boyfriend want to get a caravan. 🚐

(VEF 2009)

There is, however, some confusion about what is transmitted, as the two postings above demonstrate. Posting 11:22 presents a whole family of unruly subjects and asks if it is the genetic transmittance of ADHD that explains the behaviour or if instead it is a lack of good manners that is camouflaged as ADHD? In 11:23 the answer is already there; White Trash do not know how to behave and they allow their children to misbehave as well. It seems the transfer is partly about something outside

the body and gene pools: The White Trash parent leaves a mark on the child in the shape of disinterestedness and tacky taste. In that sense, the children of White Trash are described as *subjected* to the bad taste of their mother. In the first posting below the White Trash child is considered to be deprived of culture and in the following posting it is given silly names, yet another sign of bad taste.

11:24 /.../ One thing I believe definitely distinguishes a wt is a disinterest in culture. Can almost be certain that a wt does not regularly visit the library with her children to borrow books and read to them.

(VEF 2009)

11:25 Absolutely, I know of several WT names, and at the top we find Kevin, Devin, Liam, Neo, Melissa, Cassandra, preferably spelled the wrong way, for example Cevin ,Felikz, Cazzandra etc. Yuck! To me it's actually lowbrow to spell the names so that pronunciation becomes wrong. Have a long list of names that I'm allergic to, but these are probably the worst.

(TPP 2009)

There are a couple of features in the cited postings worth mentioning. A parent who may be the object of suspicion in the communities (apart from the diagnosed, the negative or depressed, the fat, or the smoker etc.) is, as demonstrated, the poor mother with many children. In fact posting 11:22 hosts three commonly narrated traits that invite community annoyance – many children, an ADHD diagnosis and ‘White Trash behaviour’. Postings 11:23 – 11:24 are generic, but in another manner – they place people in different *settings* to provide an example. In 11:23 the White Trash family is placed in a camping site, a rather classical location when wanting to describe the recreation activities of people from the perceived riffraff. In 11:24 the White Trash mother is *removed* from another type of location – the library. In this particular location refinement can be transmitted from generation to generation and the valuable asset of taste developed and the White Trash mother refrains from this reproduction strategy (Vincent & Ball, 2007): She can be found in certain places, whilst in others she is rarely seen. Postings 11:23 and 11:24 use *place* as a way of reproducing the group. Whilst Allen and Taylor (2012: 2) apply the concept of placed parenthood as a way to portray the linking of certain places with social unrest and show how these places are condemned for weakening society as a whole, the places in postings 11:23 and 11:24 are even more local. They are, I believe, *places of taste*.

By positioning the subject in a locality that is associated with a certain taste, the presumed reader is instructed how to understand her.

The last example of a posting (11:25) focuses on yet another perceived typical characteristic of White Trash: The allegedly startling and ridiculous names they give their children. In the parental communities, this is thought of as a surface phenomenon that indicates the underlying (which in this case is bad taste). This manifests the other explanation for why the affective figure is applied; it is not utilised solely to defend the way the rejected subject is placed on the margins of society, but it is in addition employed as a cornerstone in the representations of the middle-class. In that sense I concur with Stephanie Lawler's (2005: 430) proposition that the middle class self is constructed out of repulsion for 'the low', and because middle classness cannot be produced in any other way than through distinction and contempt, the middle class identity is *made out of it*. This means that I picture the affective figure as both the prop for and the result of the contempt. It also implies that what we catch a glimpse of in the accounts of the bad taste of White Trash is the violence upon which the symbolic construction of the middle class rests.

So, if White trash is an affective figure, what type of affects does it produce? The responses to the poor white mother in the above postings are: An articulate fear of her procreative capacity (thus alluding to the poor as sexually unbounded), a merciful condescendence towards the low intelligence of White Trash, a distant frowning when looking at the badly raised children, patronizing laughter at the drunk people at the caravan siet, a disinterested lament over mothers who do not transfer refinement to their children and an outspoken disdain for the perceived mental capacities of the group, as noted in the enumeration of deficiencies in posting 11:19. Yet, it is not the form of response that makes the affective figure so crucial; it is the way that the responses are forms of social abjection (Tyler, 2009: 87).

Defending White Trash

At this point the narrated demarcation of White Trash as banal, narrow-minded, pathological people who have willingly embraced their own exclusion has been presented as if met with little or no protest. However, although defences of the perceived group are not regularly produced, they do exist in the communities. Nevertheless, the defences of people labelled White Trash are ineffective, and this inefficiency is evident in all defences of poor, 'unfit' and 'unproductive' subjects, who are considered problematic for one reason or another. Concluding this chapter we will begin a short excursion into the manner in which defenses of White Trash are carried out.

In order to probe the defence we will return to the thread about the role of education in defeating poverty (see postings 11:13 – 11:18). In these postings the perceived appreciation of education in ‘developing countries’ was compared with an attributed aversion to higher education on the part of White Trash. In community conversation this construction of irresponsibility is, notably, seldom embraced completely or received unchallenged. The next postings constitute an attempt to critique the condescending note that underlies a label such as White Trash.

11:26 Are they BT in africa? Or perhaps CT?

To me WT is just an expression of contempt, no matter how it’s explained (what you put into it, if it depends on the fact that they are poor, poorly educated, smokers, taking up sms loans, single mothers with three daddies for their children etc.) is actually not interesting, it is the contempt one shows by labelling them the same that says something about oneself.

N1 (TPP 2012)

11:27 I think what you wrote now N1 was totally spot on, Right, couldn’t help but say it. Spot on.

N2 (Answers posting above)

11:28 Thanks, and yes, I get it!

N1 (answers posting above)

11:29 I think the contempt one interprets in someone else’s argumentation says something about oneself and the preconceived views one has.

N3 (Answers posting 11:23)

11:30 /.../ But the fact is that it would never be ok here in TPP to write black trash or coloured trash about any african ethnic group. Those who you call wt share their social and economic circumstances with many of their neighbours who are not ethnic Swedes.

I hope the high horse is comfortable.

N1 (Answers posting above)

11:31 You immediately jump to the conclusion that it’s about contempt just because you call a group a certain name but that’s not necessarily true. If I speak about brats I’m sure most people know what group of people I am referring to

and it's because we have a common frame of reference that it's about young, rich, spoiled people. It's comfortable to use a terminology for a particular phenomenon that can be understood by the vast majority. That this consequently is contempt lies in the eye of the beholder.

N3 (Answers posting above)

Posting 11:26 points to a possible conceptual link between labelling poor white people White Trash and poor black people Black Trash. The overlapping interests of underprivileged groups are made clearer in posting 11:30 and an unarticulated false dichotomy of whites and blacks buried in the concept of White Trash is highlighted.

However, the heterodoxy displayed in posting 11:26 does not seem to inflict any damage to the dominant perspective. It constitutes a weak critique of the affective figure since it mainly focuses on the attributed character traits of the group, much the same as the condescending perspectives do. It does mention poverty as one feature distinguishing the group labelled White Trash, but then the posting continues by enumerating choice, taste and moral values as perceived characteristics. White Trash is delineated as: *poor, poorly educated, smokers, taking up sms loans, single mothers with three daddies for their children*. It is as if the lion's share of the dislocation is accepted, but it is rather *the scorn* that is viewed as the problem. The defence is thus based on the same conceptual metaphors as the scorn – its point of departure is taste displays, not materiality. When the defence of White Trash applies the same tropes as the one utilised in the construction of the figure, the image is strengthened rather than challenged. The fact that the criticism is directed towards the tone of voice applied in the debates about poor white people rather than how their living conditions are presented enables the defence in posting 11:31. Here, the scorn for the white poor is equated with the scorn directed towards 'brats' from the upper classes and this levelling can be done *precisely* because posting 11:26 never highlighted the misrecognition of materiality that constitutes the disgust. The only thing posting 11:31 does is refute the accusation of scorn and so, the nick has not tried to avoid talking about materiality and resources and who has them and who does not have them, because materiality and resources were never the issue in the first place. Talking about the underprivileged or the privileged in this fashion is, I think, to abide by an ontological decorum of secrecy – some things are articulated and some are not. This, I believe, is a case of misrecognition pointing to an ideologically ordered discourse. The defences of White Trash still apply the content of the affective figure – they just prefer to change the type of affect displayed. They recognise the category but reject the label. Hence, in both types of account the poor mother remains a spectacle of subjectivity.

Summary

In this chapter the rejected subject positions have been explored in greater depth, especially how they crystallise into affective figures. Initially I investigated conceptions about the poor and, subsequently, the same conceptions as they condense into notions about a particular white poor, labelled White Trash.

The recurrent viewpoint of the poor subject in general is that she is characterised by immaturity. This is thought of as entailing irresponsible acts, such as having too many babies. Apart from this, immaturity is evident in everything the poor subject does: She cannot raise her children, manage a household or repress her cravings for consumption. Resources such as money, or a lack of money, are excluded from the possible explanation for why she is poor and her functionality is placed at the center. Because she is made so dysfunctional, the main remedies for poverty are described as supervision, discipline and control on the one hand, and education and a kind of gentle modelling on the other. Norms guide this dressage, and although they are never fully articulated, they seem to relate to middle class values. In the reaffirmation of the traditional housekeeping ideal planning is stressed over resources in such a manner that money is perceived as if elastic – money can be made to last longer by the right kind of manager. These ideals make a lack of material resources diminish into a question of thriftiness. In addition, descriptions of poverty tend to be vague and unspecific. Narrations use familiar and schematic understandings with few details and, hence, do not invite objections. The extreme tropes provoke few protests, putatively due to lack of specificity. This distillate of the vague but inflammatory descriptions can be noted in the idea of the particularly problematic white poor – White Trash. This narrated category is demarcated by two features: It is *different* (from other types of poor people as well as from ‘us’) and lacks refinement, so White Trash is conceptualised on the level of personality. Poor white people are narrated as ignorant, narrow-minded, out-dated and superficial and these personality defects simultaneously explain their social exclusion and their subordinate position in society.

Despite the fact that White Trash constitutes a fairly stable discursive moment, this particular image of poor people stills hosts ambiguities. Although the trope of White Trash is employed as a constitutive outside of the middle class, the communities seem from time to time to have problems separating White Trash women from middle class women. Apparently femininity is an arena where mix-ups can still take place and the problem is the shared aesthetics – the fact that heterosexual ideals of female sexuality borrow so many attributes from the perceived taste of White Trash. The struggle to maintain the symbolic boundaries between the middle class and ‘the low’ is never as flagrant as when the nicks attempt to sort women into the two

appointed categories, where both ‘types’ of women are allowed to display the body, but only one is defined as vulgar. The threat coming from White Trash is, hence, that people delineated as such would resemble the middle class too much. Yet another threat is described as White Trash diluting the very same middle class by unrestricted procreation. Genes can apparently be a source of salvation (when the middle class procreate) and a means of destruction (when unruly, obese and poor people do the same). The children resulting from problematic genes are portrayed as robbed of opportunities by their tasteless parents, or appreciated as sharing the defects from the start (such as in the trope of ADHD).

The extensive tropes are employed not only to scorn White Trash but in addition to defend them. The shared tropes result in a small assortment of metaphors to describe poor white people delineated as White Trash. The tropes restrict particular descriptions, such as white poor people being precisely that – poor. In that way a misrecognition is ensured; the notion that the problem with the white poor is not that they are poor but that they, because of their many character flaws, probably deserve to be.

Case closed? On suspended resistance and interpellated words

There is little resistance towards the notion of the irresponsible subject as condensed in the figure of White Trash. When resistance is inserted, such as in postings 11:26 – 11:31, it takes as a point of departure the same descriptions as applied by the dominant discourse, thereby launching the opposition from a subordinate position. The reason for this is, I believe, that these descriptions are a result of an ideologically ordered discourse.

According to Martha L. Fineman (1991: 292 f.), ideology is functional. It is a selection machine that gives coherence and structure to political discourses. When an ideology is dominant it will not be overtly challenged. It is stable, but more importantly it is a whole system or cluster of symbols and beliefs and because of that it will be referenced in highly separate discourses. Fineman envisions ideology as a series of synapses that form various combinations for different appeals. The key concept of ideology is one and the same: ‘its core images define the discourses produced by both the proponent of the status quo and its critic’ (ibid: 293). This means that in order to become trustworthy, oppositional positions need to apply shared aspects of the ideology in question. Thus, ideology can be comprehended as a bank account from which one may withdraw the same type of currency, regardless of the errand. When accused, White Trash are described as single, smoking mothers taking up sms loans, and when defended the description is the same. Certain words, images and

metaphors – entire repertoires – are made to belong to ideology. In other words, there are hardly any rhetorical models at hand by which to state that poor people are competent, stable and responsible, with the ability to manage the family finances very well given the scarce resources at their disposal, or that poverty is a matter of how resources or profits are distributed. Irrespective of whether you want to celebrate or reject the morals of a community, you need to adjust or relate to ‘the chances of material and symbolic profit which the laws of price formation characteristic of a given market objectively offer to the holders of a given linguistic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1991/2012: 51). What Bourdieu envisages here is how particular accents (for instance rural working class accents or inner city bourgeoisie accents) are capital that is given an objective value, which can be exchanged for other types of capital. My understanding of linguistic capital in a web community is instead the meaning and status given to words by the members of the community and what is invested into these words. If seeing linguistic capital this way it becomes, I believe, objective (i.e., cannot be changed due to the will of an individual), much the same as coins and bank notes are objective.

In order to participate in a rhetoric game of a particular field you need to articulate yourself in a legitimate way. Arguably, this leads to thought becoming socialised by the ways of language: the *mâitre a parler* transforms into the *mâitre a penser* (ibid: 48 f.). This explains the weak defences of White Trash. Apparently, both the scorn and the refutation ‘ignore the individual and world conditions which are the source of the ideas’ (Marx & Engels, 1845/1988: 68). Within this type of ideological interpretative repertoires we can seemingly do little but underline the very content in the images used for the scorning, regardless of our intentions.

12. Results and discussion

In this dissertation I have explored the way that the perceived division of labour between the parent and the welfare state is expressed and negotiated in Sweden's two biggest parental web communities where peers willingly interact. By so doing, the intention was to map out and explain subject positions of a more encompassing nature – ideals that are formulated as if general and universal, and what underpins them. In order to fulfil the aim, postings from the public domains of two Swedish commercial parental communities were collected. The research questions have been answered by a discourse analysis, which was conducted by deconstructing the manner in which accounts are made to appear convincing through the interlinking or separation of elements that are constructed as meaningful, or less meaningful. The investigation also included analyses of ideology, comprehended as the fashion in which versions of reality are made to assume particular contours, as for instance when certain discursive elements are concealed, construed as irrelevant or portrayed as the outcome of unquestionable characteristics, and understood as manifesting when several discourses offer the same point of view.

In this concluding chapter I intend to summarise the results from the seven analytical chapters and discuss their meaning. The first section of the chapter consists of a presentation of the main results, after which I reflect on the relation of the study to the discipline of social work and to previous research. The final section contains a discussion about some of the implications of the result.

Summary and results

The research questions formulated in the introduction of the dissertation have been answered and discussed in the seven analytical chapters. Initially, some of the preferred subject positions in the two communities were analysed and in Chapter Five I demonstrated that self presentation is a strategic investment that comes with its own prescriptions. Some of these prescriptions revolve around manifestations of mental stability, sincerity and gratitude, and the analysis revealed how abiding by these rules of narration constitutes one of the main strategies for controlling the image of self. Another royal road to achieving status is discussing other subjects, preferably those who are presented as if they embody a defective character that can be contrasted with that of the nick writing. One may also choose to narrate stories about subjects who allegedly praise the nick, for example the nick's own child. Both of these strategies

can be read as subjectivation-by-proxy-strategies that pull people into the narration and make them highlight the narrator's personality traits.

Chapter Six was devoted to an investigation of the discursive foundation, or the common denominator of self presentation – the possibility, preference and obligation to make choices. The concept of choice was deconstructed into its conceptual components of 'control', 'self-knowledge' and 'responsibility'. I found that choice was handled as an ideal of quite an etheric character in the sense that it is not associated with any tangible effects. It is not expected that choice necessarily accomplishes change; choice is instead apprehended as performing its work inside of the subject, where it becomes manifest as a reformed attitude. In fact, the very activity of making a choice is viewed as the body of evidence that proves that the work on the self was properly realised: Making a choice is in that sense an end in itself. The etheric shape of the concept can be summarised in the interpretative repertoire of *Mind over matter*, which organises much of the content in the parental communities and is used in various ways. It may be applied to discursively diminish the presumed impact of external resources or assets on the way that the subject is made to feel, thereby stressing the importance of inner capacities. In addition the repertoire forms the basis of a subject paragon that I labelled the Homo Eligens, a kind of narrative personification of the preference for choice that receives its content from the tenets of positive thinking and self-help discourse.

Because of this tendency to disregard assets in the material sense (money, education or entitlements etc.) and instead focus on the inner essence of the subject, Chapter Seven concentrated on The Homo Eligens in cooperation with other subjects, especially interactions mediated through institutions of the welfare state. On the basis of the findings that the Homo Eligens was delineated as free from many societal alignments, in this chapter I posed the question: If the Homo Eligens is so independent, how can societal organisation take place and how *should* it, ideally, take place? I found an operative discursive component of *contracts* that structures much of the content around societal organisation. In the communities the contract between the individual and society seemed to be rooted in a layman version of liberal contract theory, irrespective of whether the contract was applied to depict a contemporary morality on decline, or to represent an image of a less compassionate society that is no longer interested in providing for its weakest members. The former viewpoint was found to belong to a dominant discourse. This discourse enables representations of some subjects – especially those who use particular (economic) resources provided by the welfare state – as morally inferior and freeriding on resources that do not justifiably belong to them. Instead, what is promoted is a contractual design that

permits *individual morality* to be made more important than formally sanctioned institutional rules. This preference has its own logic that stipulates that when sound morals are installed in the subject the rest will follow; one will become hard-working and industrious and rely less upon the support systems of the welfare state. The preference was summarised in an interpretative repertoire: *Morality comes first*.

In community conversation the most important contract is the *intimate contract* situated inside the family, where sound or unsound ideals are conveyed from an early age, either preventing the subject from becoming a burden to society in the future, or making her into precisely that burden. The strong preference for this intimate contract constituted the reason for Chapter Eight to address the situation inside the family. If the most important contracting party is a member of a family, and if the most effective transportation of norms and ideals is assumed to take place inside it, Chapter Eight laid bare some of its components. In this chapter I detected that the way the family (and especially the activities of parents) is metaphorically structured in terms of work and achievement. Because parenthood is outlined in such a fashion, it makes the communities conceive of it as yet another technology of the self – it is realised through commitment, dedication and interest, and the parent who sets her mind to it will succeed in inoculating the child with prosperity. In short, social *effort* seems to supersede social *access*. This rule of narration gives the notion of social class a particular appearance – instead of allowing unequal access to resources and acquisitions to explain why parents seemingly parent with different results, a meritocratic principle has the upper hand – if you invest in your child you shall harvest a good result. This finding was condensed in an interpretative repertoire summarised as: *You should reap what you sow*. It is probably this repertoire that explains why the communities are so focused on evaluations of different investments in the child, in particular ways of fostering it as well as in techniques to shape its preference. However, the frantic parental activity to guide the child is narrated with a nuance of desperation and the debates in which the nicks confront each other for not being strict enough, or not loving enough, host an element of the precarious position of the parent. Because parenting is considered work – something you *do* rather than something that you *are* – and because children are conceptualised as results of that work, failure can only be due to parental deficiency.

Nevertheless, when studying the parental communities the notions of investment come across as multifaceted. The way that the subject should allow herself to be governed by a set of moral principles, the way in which she should invest in her own wellbeing and the way that she ought to transmit these values to the next generation apparently does not work in each and every situation. In the communities there are

regular discussions about how to address failures or cases of ‘unfitness’. Chapter Nine therefore investigated explanations for and strategies to combat cases of unfitness. To exemplify community conceptions of unfitness I chose three recurrent topics of conversation: Workplace-related stress, obesity and the neuropsychiatric syndrome of ADHD. I found that the theme of stress is especially demarcated by reluctance towards explanations that allow the account to be influenced by external factors, such as the actual workload. Stress is mostly apprehended as emanating from the wrong type of choice; the subject who should have anticipated stress and made preparations accordingly failed to do so. When dealing with obesity blame is, perhaps surprisingly, less articulated. Instead, the topic of concern seems to be evaluating appropriate solutions. The preferred strategy for weight loss is diet and exercise, and resorting to a more technical solution such as the gastric bypass is only tolerated if the first solution did not work. The preference is expressed in the interpretative repertoire *Don't take the easy way out*. The same aversion towards shortcuts, albeit less clear cut, is seen in debates about remedies for ADHD. Although one may note both critique of the diagnosis as a way of taking the easy way out and proposals that the diagnosis is not a sign of having chosen the easy way out, it is striking that the proponents of the former perspective attack the proponents of the latter, not the other way around. This tendency may be explained as a thoroughgoing community concern with *instrumental improvement* (in the case of ADHD this improvement would be medication) that putatively brackets the rule of working on oneself. The tension may also be explained as a result of the necessity to display emotional capital – to signal a familiarity with ‘high culture’ (in this case dominant emotional or cognitive ways of understanding the psyche) – only in the case of ADHD, the issue of what *is* the proper emotional capital is not fully resolved.

Apart from the necessity of displaying inclinations towards choice and a particular emotional capital, the communities appear to also relate to a kind of gendered capital, meaning that the ideals of choice and responsibility are applied to the particular position of woman. Accordingly, Chapter Ten inquired into subject positions assigned specifically to women, where the research question was: What is discursively required of the heterosexual woman? The analysis pointed to ‘difference’ and ‘dependence’ as two recurrent discursive nodes of narration. Because the context is thoroughly heteronormative difference is assumed to mean the difference between a man and a woman, where dependency is comprehended as the result of that difference. Dependency is represented in two main ways. Firstly, it is comprehended as unproblematic to have people depend upon you (especially if ‘people’ means children), whereas you should not be overly dependent upon people (especially if

‘people’ means a husband or partner). Secondly and paradoxically, dependency is simultaneously seen as the glue in a heterosexual relationship. Dependency between the man and the woman is, hence, viewed as both good and bad. Lingering through the narration is an unarticulated presumption of a sexual contract in which two responsible subjects are to cooperate and make the most of *productive* and *fertile* differences. When discursive elements such as subordination and exploitation threatens the presumed fertility of difference, the narration assumes another character – the agency of the man is diminished, whilst the agency of the woman becomes enlarged, or victimhood is diluted in various ways. This particular guilt-imposing rationality of victimhood crystallises as concealing the unsecure clauses of the sexual contract, where the woman cannot control that the relation will be of an equal character, only hope for it.

Throughout the analytic chapters the analyses of desirable and less desirable subject positions were intertwined. The rationalities of choice, responsibility, work and investments that support the accounts provide prescriptions for the good life and explanations for why it is lacking in certain circumstances. The rationality is, as revealed in Chapters Seven and Eight, visible in the ideal of the Homo Eligens, the choosing and responsible subject. But the Homo Eligens has a constitutive outside where elements are placed that cannot be associated with the figure if it is to keep its heroic character traits. In the final analytical chapter, Chapter Eleven, I demonstrated the ways in which the most common *affective figure* in the communities, the poor woman with children, becomes that constitutive outside.

The summation of this affective figure is relatively uncomplicated – she is everything that the Homo Eligens is not; she is non-choosing, irresponsible, tasteless, unruly, spoilt, and lazy. The analysis demonstrated that poor people are most often reproduced in manners that are simultaneously vague and inflammatory. Through narrative techniques of a *systematic vagueness* where derogatory images can be launched without having to be proved or legitimised, and of a *join-the-dots-pathologisation* that guides the reader’s eye from one anecdotic piece of evidence to another, the poor mother is depicted as especially feral, which becomes yet another support for interventions directed against her. The chapter concluded by an analysis of this affective manner of presenting poverty. Whilst the postings analysed in Chapter Seven and Eight celebrated the Homo Eligens, in Chapter Eleven its contrasting counterpart is the affective figure of ‘White Trash’. This figure is a relatively stable discursive moment that reiterates the unrefined character traits that are favoured in the communities when discussing poor people. The most pressing issue concerning poverty, as described in the parental communities, is poor people procreating. As the

analysis in Chapter Eight revealed, the middle class mother is delineated as investing into the child's formation. The White Trash mother is sketched as if she neglects this task – if she does not ruin the child by transmitting bad genes, it is damaged by a lack of cultural transmission. This indicates, once again, the strong metaphorical structuration of parenthood as *work*. The main problem with the White Trash mother seems to be precisely that: She does not consider motherhood work. In Chapter Eleven I suggested that the cogent metaphorical structuration of parenthood on the one hand and poverty on the other explains the limited tropes available to articulate poor white mothers as something other than weak, passive, parasitic or dangerous. This feature gives the few defences of White Trash visible in the communities a particular contour. Defence fortifies the disparaging descriptions instead of refuting them, and the issue of concern becomes the tone of voice in the descriptions of poor mothers, rather than the content of the description.

These are the overall results of the analysis. In what follows the results will be related to the specific research questions and further discussed.

The contract and the parent

As I have pointed out, one pervading metaphor guiding representation seems to be parenthood conceptualised as work. Although research question number one (How is the parent narrated and supported?) appears to have several answers, it should be understood as guided by this core metaphor. Work is implied in the narration of the parent as a manager of the life chances and future habitus of the child, as well as alluded to in the imposed additional demands, for instance to compensate for structurally conditioned inequalities and maldistribution of resources. The way to support these expectations is through a linking of parental activities with a solidary responsibility to deliver functioning citizens to 'society'. Parental activities are, hence, not only linked to a private or personal morality but to a kind of civil one. It is a civic duty to provide society with well-behaved and competent human raw material. In that sense, being a good parent equals being a good citizen.

If parents have a duty to deliver human raw material some type of relationship seems to exist between parents and the welfare state. However, the answer to research question number two (How is the division of responsibility between the family and society constructed?) appears to be multi-faceted: The division is simultaneously narrated as quite simple and complicated. It is simple because the family is represented as the entity that holds the irrefutable responsibility. The representations of 'society' are more complex. Society is represented as both a benevolent assistant providing resources and as a foreman requiring a certain type of subject to be manufactured. It

is as if a contract had been signed – the subjects have received equal possibilities of refining themselves and now have the responsibility of transforming the possibilities into a good life. This is perhaps seen most clearly in the interpretative repertoires of the communities. The repertoires are versions of the world and, I would like to add, they are prescriptions for how the world idealistically ought to function. So, I understand them as contract clauses or rules of conduct guiding the subject's *constitution*, *expectations* and *work ethics*. *Morality comes first* regulates the preferred constitution of the subject; (once the subject is morally firm on the inside, she will be able to take part in society without exploiting it). *You should reap what you sow* revolves around expectations; (the subject should expect returns that relate precisely to the amount of time or work that she invested in a particular venture, or she should expect even less sometimes, since performing a responsible choice does not always pay off in a robust change). *Don't take the easy way out* governs the work ethic; (when working on one's refinement and betterment and when wanting to achieve something one cannot allow oneself any type of short-cuts). In the empiric material no repertoires are found that regulate society's tasks or responsibilities. The contract party seems to be situated on one side of the table. Municipalities, political parties, boards and committees, law enforcement or taxes – all of which are the result of subjects joined together – are absent as perceived prime movers of a subject.

Nevertheless, although society is made to shoulder almost none of the responsibility, features from the outside world are reflected in the community accounts. The answer to research question number five (How do these various ways to construct subject ideals, parents and parenthood relate to broader societal contexts?) is perhaps best grasped by focusing on two tendencies. The first is the community assertion that it is interior qualifications that enable a good life for a citizen-subject or good prospects for a child – the focus upon essence rather than assets. This thoroughgoing notion has its counterpart in the calls from the political and mass media domains: For parents and children to assume responsibility in matters of school performance, in the way that editorial pages suggest that rebellious teenagers are the product of inadequate parents, or the fashion in which character building activities are presumed to foster a nation's subjects. To the reader it is perhaps striking that specifically immateriality and responsibility manifest as subject ideals in community conversation, parallel to the startling rise in the disparity in the distribution of household incomes in OECD countries, Sweden included (Cingano, 2014: 8), and the reduction of incomes in the segment of the Swedish population that retired early, is unemployed or afflicted by long-term illness (Lundberg, 2007: 10). As the presumption of this study is that the outside world influences community conversation, one would per-

haps imagine the opposite scenario and expect to see conversation revolving around issues of justice or equality. Instead, the situation appears to be reversed – the more the structural conditions for citizen-subjects harden, the more frequently the hope and/or the demands on the individual subject surface. It seems as if not everything situated outside the parental communities influences them, but rather *what is said about the outside world*.

The second tendency worth mentioning is that of making societal injustices into persons or figures. The unemployed or those who retired early are in the parental web communities not described as such, but usually depicted as possessing a set of poorly developed character skills and the metaphor most often applied is that of White Trash. This narrative disposition also has its match outside the communities. The simpleminded, poor and chain-smoking Morran in the Swedish TV series *Morran och Tobias*, a character based on a mix of ‘hillbilly’ and White Trash stereotypes, and her British counterpart in the famous chav Vicky Pollard from the BBC comedy series *Little Britain*, resemble almost down to the smallest details the way that the poor white mother is described in the parental communities – feckless, immature and abject. Social media, Imogen Tyler argues (2013: 165) are ‘a critical part of this process in that they enable publics to shape and craft the chav as a knowable figure /.../ The chav as national abject is brought to life and vitalized with negative qualities through interaction’. That is, first the figure is launched as a fictional character and later, in the domain of public interaction, made real. Poor white mothers are thus not known to us as such, but as something else – in the communities a character named White Trash becomes a ‘perceptual reality’ (ibid.: 165). However, it is not only fictional characters that inspire conversation in the communities. When debating the poor it seems as if a kind of folk etymology is operating. This result in stereotypes nurtured by other media representations, for example by the poverty porn that Tracey Jensen (2014) unveils. The community accounts of people taking out loans to buy furniture or the latest smart phone, or the suggestions that in addition to being poor, poor parents have failed to provide their children with the necessary balance between discipline and warmth, resemble the dramaturgy of TV shows, editorials and political proposals. In sum, we see that political calls, as well as mass media interpretation of these calls, are found within the community setting.

Ideals

The generic ideals of immateriality and responsibility appear in the communities as more hands-on ideals of how to behave, who to be and how to think. Research question number three (What generic subject ideals emerge in the discussions about

parenthood? How are these ideals to be achieved? How are failures explained?) is perhaps best answered by returning to the subject paragon of the Homo Eligens. The subject is to stay in control and have sufficient self-knowledge to choose responsibly and assume liability for the way that her life turns out. Perceived failures are explained as the result of neglecting the work on inner refinement (the opposite of a suitable self-technology). But failures are not only conceived as passivity; failures can be represented as the result of the wrong type of activity. The preferred activity is prudent and calculating, whilst the rejected type is understood as cunningly exploiting the system, i.e., the activity is described in terms of a violation of rules.

It seems as if the ideal of the Homo Eligens is an ideal of inner freedom. The question is what this ideal enables, and what it precludes? To achieve the Homo Eligens there are some basic rules to abide by. The subject needs to control her reactions to the world and ensure that she stays fit to live in it, she should not make demands on society in terms of delivery but such demands should be directed inwards, and she cannot use exterior conditions (society, money, class or materiality) as excuses for a problematic situation. As we can see, the Homo Eligens is achieved through a highly constrained self-definition. Why is that? I propose it is because it serves some other function besides self-definition – less tangible but still useful. It may potentially be a mannequin that markets something. Much the same as the mannequin is a body different from most concrete human bodies and much the same as window-shoppers know this, the Homo Eligens cannot be questioned too severely, scrutinised too intrusively, or condemned for not looking like the subject ‘in reality’. This, I think, is the reason why the world outside the subject needs to be sketched in such a limited way. If delineated with all its multifarious characteristics and if believed to have the capacity to inflict damage on the subject, the ideal of self-sufficiency would rupture. But the rationale behind the image of the Homo Eligens may be even crueler. This subject ideal may well be a consequence of an ideology of austerity, telling us that being precarious does not (or should not) hurt: We can and must cope with it. However, much the same as when trying on the trousers that seemed perfect on the mannequin, subjects-in-the-flesh will lose out from the ideals. If the solution to fitting into the trousers is to go on a diet, the question is what the subject needs to do to fit into the Homo Eligens?

Women

Despite being a venue mainly populated by women, it is the life experiences of women that, oddly enough, most frequently disturb the ideals embraced in the parental communities. Accounts from the life of the heterosexual woman are perhaps the

narration that most clearly articulates the uncertainties residing in the ideals of the Homo Eligens and the notions of contract regulating human interaction. In community conversation the monogamous relationship of the nuclear family seems to be endorsed and yet survival kits are handed out, aimed at reducing the damage that may be inflicted in the very same relationship. Research question number four (How is the female subject positioned in discussions about family, parenthood, dependency and intimacy?) has been answered by looking into accounts on gender equality and what may happen if it is not achieved. The accounts on these issues in the communities acknowledge that the sexual contract comes with unsecure clauses, that it may produce situations of tension and most accounts advocate a rights perspective to even out potential inequalities. Nevertheless, the conversations about gender equality contain discursive limitations. One is the reluctance to allow the feature of exploitation into explanatory accounts and the other is talking about dependence in a way that makes it stand in the way of liberation. Discourse apparently cannot accommodate the duties that come with having more fragile subjects such as children depending on your labour; a feature that is perhaps surprising in communities that use 'parental' in their title. This characteristic of conversation makes the woman invisible (or abstract) in two senses. The social contract seemingly fails to consider her in her 'female predicament' as mother in a patriarchal society and the sexual contract in which she is simultaneously situated cannot make her predicament as a dependency worker visible. This would imply she is regarded neither as a gendered, nor as a generic subject, which gives the gender equality discourse a peculiarly negating contour, notable in the way that the nicks dissociate themselves from the notion of subjugation. In short, they seem not to want to belong to the side of the oppressed party. Instead, they often treat stories of being exploited or subordinated as an unreality or a misconception; something is considered lacking, or something needs to be explained by additional information residing outside of the account. This is possibly the most indigestible result of the analysis – the nicks do not want to associate themselves with subjugated women and so, they write as if this position is dubious.

How to go on from here? Social work and research

This study is a contribution to research on parenthood in our era and its related subject ideals, and although not leaving hands-on suggestions to the professional domain of social work, it indicates a context to which, I believe, this field needs to relate. Next, I will link the result of the study to potential challenges for contemporary social work and to questions of where to place the analytical findings in relation to previous and on-going research on the topic.

Through the analysis of the postings inserted in the two parental communities I hope to have presented some of the ways that norms operate in a contemporary setting that engages so many people. I also wished to reveal the manner in which norms negotiated in a local arena resonate with those outside it, as well as the way subjects can become the target of our benevolence or our loathing, with the very same norms prescribing who to embrace and who to reject. Social identities move with the times and for social work it is therefore imperative to understand the way in which subjects are 'made to happen'. I hope to have presented the fashion in which negotiation about the welfare state and its subjects has become imbued with notions that undermine its mandate to redistribute resources and alleviate suffering. In my study the subjects of the welfare state seems not entirely sure they need it, or rather; they are not entirely sure that the welfare state should be as encompassing as it is currently crafted (although forcefully cropped during the last two decades). My results indicate that social work has a potential problem of credibility, or has to compete with a kind of 'logic of intimacy' i.e., a way of transmitting the logic of the small community (here: the family or the individual) onto a larger community. This way of reasoning is classic liberalism, represented amongst others by Milton Friedman, who considered the family to be the essential operative entity in society (1962: 33). If the communities view the family as the most accomplished unit of societal organisation we can understand why it is simultaneously considered the most problematic one. The reason is because all that is vital for a subject to function is presumed to take place there. Viewpoints such as these are not new. The family has historically been positioned 'outside and above economic structuring, market forces and financial, legal, technological and political change, as a pillar of supposed stability' (Silva & Smart, 1999/2004: 2). Instead, these images seem to have gained renewed authority. If the discursive tendencies detected in this study – the more structural inequalities are laid bare, the more hope is directed at the detached single individual to provide the solution – is really what has happened, social work is surrounded by discourses threatening the view of human organisation upon which it rests. This, in turn, implies that social work will need to position itself in relation to such discourses. It must consider external agents that influence its legitimacy, such as politicians promoting the necessity of character building or newspapers analysing suburban riots and describing the cause as parental negligence. This overlap of opinion conjures an ideal of immateriality that could potentially serve a retreating welfare state. Social work is, after all, maintained by institutional practices that rest upon particular discourses, making them affect people who use the services provided (Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2005: 97).

The study was conducted in a particular Swedish context. Simultaneously, it was carried out in a political situation that prevails throughout Europe – that of austerity. Although specifically Swedish, the study is simultaneously situated at a cross-country junction of societal retreat and service dismantling on the one hand and upgrading of families as a potential factory of ‘good morality’ on the other (see Jensen, 2012). The dissertation shows how subjects try to understand the way they are supposed to govern themselves when politics disengage and lays bare the possible consequences – the way in which the nicks have begun sorting people into groups that are assigned different values and alleged different access to aid and support. It is an investigation into the transfer of a societal crisis embodied in austerity programmes to a sense of uneasiness amongst the middle class, who imagines society falling apart, not because of neoliberal austerity programmes but because of the people depending on them. If social work is not to be turned into to a policing of the social order it needs to consider ‘the fabrication of citizen-subjects and [of] their relation to the social order’ (Cruikshank, 1993: 335). Social work addresses need and dependency. If need and dependency gradually become even more stigmatized it may affect public approval of the taxes underpinning social work. If that is the case, the welfare state is undergoing transformation, possibly away from a consensus that it is something that everyone is dependent on and to which most of us are compelled to contribute (Theborn, 1991).

Previous and further research

This particular study is a continuation of the (mainly British and American) work to capture the way that demands and aspirations on the level of family politics appear amongst parents. My point of departure is the examination of a Swedish setting where both the discursive and material contexts are quite different – the officially promoted gender equality discourses, the long tenure of the Social Democratic Party, the (partly abandoned) political tradition of a more encompassing redistribution and the generally more positive attitude towards welfare institutions. My contribution to this branch of research is, apart from wanting to study the phenomenon through a Swedish lens, the way in which the analysis has probed a venue where subjects can express themselves when a little less restricted by conventional etiquette, and when partly protected by pseudonymity. The parental community is a venue where in-delicate statements are presumably easier to submit, as well as statements of a more intimate and delicate nature. The arena is one that intertwines honesty and rhetoric, which makes it stand out in relation to previous research on parents’ self-concep-

tions.¹²⁰ It is, I believe, a prolific venue for investigating the subject when both visible to others but still maintaining a high level of agency to decide on what to write and what opinions to express.

The research field of contemporary parenthood – and thus of a more generic subjectivity – is broad and this study has investigated merely a fraction of it. Consequently, in a Swedish research setting there are several routes of inquiry that would be productive in order to elucidate the conditions under which subjects at the present time can articulate the experience of being a citizen or a parent, voice the simplicity or the predicament involved in responding to and/or fulfilling the calls from the political domains, live up to the institutional requirements or ask for help or assistance in a situation of strain. The transformation of macroeconomics from the industrially incised 1970s to the neoliberally constituted present has entailed grave inequalities, not least when it comes to the growing economic disparities (Tyler, 2013: 5). Although the UK or the U.S should not be thoughtlessly equated with Sweden, my result is situated not far from the intense parenting strategies investigated by Glenda Wall (2010), Carol Vincent's and Stephen J. Ball's (2007) finding of the reproduction strategies steering middle class mothers, Bridget Byrne's (2006) investigation of middle class mothers' ways to perform distinctions and Val Gillies' (2005 b) study exposing the notion of a presumed linkage between 'proper' parenting and increased social mobility. I understand these research contributions as attempts to analyse the way that transformations in the areas of economics, welfare policies and political aims have become discourse, (often guided by an ideologically infused ideal of assuming personal responsibility for oneself and one's family), and as ways of exploring how this discourse is personified in parent's strategies and investments. In several Northern European countries, including Denmark, Sweden and Finland, sporadic studies have begun to deliver a deepened understanding of the manner in which calls for responsibilisation have been embraced in this part of the world. It is vital to continue this approach, so that Anglo-Saxon results are not uncritically adopted in the analysis of the Nordic context, where welfare institutions have traditionally been given another type of standing and class politics has historically been stressed (Svallfors, 2004: 130).

One valuable track would be to carry on with in depth studies into the relation between discursive prescriptions and everyday concrete action – a question not

120 The study also differs from studies carried out within the empiric field itself; the parental web communities (see for instance Pedersen & Smithson, 2013; Taddicken, 2014 and Hargittai, 2007). In this research field interest has mainly been directed towards user experience or user patterns, whilst this study explores the actual content of conversation.

addressed by this study. How, for example, does the intention to choose the right environment, the right type of acquaintances or the right type of schools for one's children unfold in everyday practice? Such an ambition is notable in Karlsson et al. (2013) which comprises an explorative investigation into the way performing choices becomes an identity claim amongst Swedish parents of preschool children. The sensation of choosing *for* the child, as a representative of the child and the very moral obligation to choose may indicate how advanced the policing of the parental soul has become, which calls for more research. The sorting that seems to take place, where non-choosing parents are viewed as morally inferior, may be a sign of the very same result that I found in the material from the parental web communities – the manner in which performing a choice has become equated with displaying good taste and thus dislocates matters of access and privilege. Moreover, such a result points towards questions of parental reliance on the welfare state. The allegedly strong pressure to choose could perhaps be a sign of a rupture in the visions of the social contract: If the welfare state is thought of as incapable of providing for my family, alternative strategies are developed.

The analysis of the material from the parental communities indicates that becoming a parent does not mean entering into a fellowship of joint interest. This could perhaps be labelled an almost generic result when studying parenting, bearing in mind the historic divides between different types of parents. To put it simply, bond servants and barons have in all times entered into parenthood with different opportunities and possibly with no illusions of the opposite. What has changed since then is, perhaps, primarily discourse. This is big enough. The pseudo egalitarian stances in the parental communities could be described as a kind of fool's gold promising equal opportunities when in reality there are none. We would therefore need to begin an inquest into matters of 'discursive damage', i.e., the way that the alleged similarity of opportunity impacts on subjects positioned differently in relation to privilege.¹²¹ In the arena of social work, that may imply continued studies of the interaction in parental or prenatal classes as Wissö (2012) begun in her dissertation, as well as studies on the way that the social workers, nurses and therapists leading these classes perceive parents from different social strata. Moreover, an essential part of research would need to direct its attention towards matters of both the manner in which institutional discourses of responsibility are launched and resisted. Lastly, studies on ideology need to be further developed, especially on austere ideology, which would make research leave the domain of parenthood and direct attention to matters of the

¹²¹ Studies with these aims have, as I have presented, been carried out outside of Sweden, but would need to also be pursued further here.

generic citizen-subject. In this study, she happens to be a parent, but she could just as well have been a senior citizen, an immigrant or a tax payer told that some subjects freeride on her contribution to the welfare state. In other words, we need to consider the subject positions of parent, tax payer and generic citizen as interrelated.

Austere ideology

This study has investigated the sorting of elements in order to comprehend the structure of discourse, i.e., its ideological functions. The viewpoint of ideology (although I have employed the concept of misrecognition to highlight a particular dimension of ideology) has been materialistic in the sense of viewing ideology as primarily decided by material conditions (Marx & Engels, 1845/1988: 30). I have labelled the ideology organising much of community discourse an ideology of austerity. The chapter will conclude by a discussion about this ideology and will address subject positions as they are made to look in times of austerity.

The main relation between the political economy and subject positions found in the analysis goes, I think, through the link austerity-precarity. Political economy ordains a diminishing welfare state; the subjects in this dissertation talk as if they did not need the welfare state. The political economy prescribes a reduced public spending; the subjects in the communities talk of the manner in which poor people exploit the welfare state. The political economy commends personal responsibility; the nicks in the parental communities accept it. This relation between the subject and society is, I believe, bolstered by four concepts in particular – choice, self-interest, convertibility and meritocracy.

As we have seen, the concept of choice is highly instructive. The way the concept is used indicates an ideological structuring, because it so strongly highlights one version of reality at the expense of another. The discourse of choice makes us abide by a postulate – do not focus upon that which surrounds you, do not wait for effects of choice and do not expect results from your efforts; focus only on your mental processes. This take on choice means that factors of the surrounding world become less important as explanatory factors. If choice functions this way it *needs* a subject who takes a great interest in her own mental processes; a subject who is ready to put the blame on her own insufficient capabilities. I believe it is precisely this link between choice and self-technologies that achieves the separation in the demands for responsibility, so that the demand becomes directed at the subject but not at society.

The next link is that between choice/self-interest and convertibility/meritocracy. If we are all free to choose and take an interest in ourselves, we are in one sense of the word *all the same*. We all have the same opportunities of achieving a good life.

The notion of convertibility does in fact that which I have underlined as my main interest when studying misrecognition – it conceals particular aspects of the world and highlights other. The idea that we are convertible is visible in postings that advise poor people to go berry-picking, where convertibility operates quite openly: The nick writing says she has alleviated poverty by picking berries and now urges others to do the same, because if she was capable of doing it so are everybody else. Accordingly, if we are all the same, the societal organisation with its administrative systems functions in the same manner for all of us. All services, possibilities and different types of investment are open for everyone. This would not be false according to the logic – if we are convertible, meritocratic principles would by any standard be the most reasonable organisation of human competition for resources. We may therefore change the sequence between convertibility and meritocracy – meritocracy is also the perfect organisation for the promotion of convertible subjects. To look upon the matter in the opposite way would make meritocracy fall short: If resources are not available to everyone it would mean they are available only for *some*. If the poor white people that the communities call White Trash were described as pushed away from investment, the notion of meritocracy would emerge as primarily protecting class interests. All in all, the two main subject types found in the empiric material, the Homo Eligens and White Trash, achieve one thing in particular: System legitimacy. By the dislocation of opportunity the legitimacy of meritocracy does not become a feature of the discussion.

Fool's gold

In summary; the generic subject position in the parental communities seems to be made out of separations. First, economic inequalities have been disentangled from social class and, secondly, economic inequalities have become disentangled from the economy. What is left is a conception of social class that lacks both the element of inequality and the dimension of money. We are left with a conception of class as culture: A discursive moment has been created. Investments into a meritocratic system are described as solving the potential problems of social class but this solution is a kind of fool's gold – something that looks like gold but really is just a piece of rock. It is this fool's gold that produces the eradication of need and enables the derogatory accounts on dependency. It enables a division between dependency and freedom, where the former rules out the latter.

Still, why call the ideals fool's gold? For something to be labelled gold it has to shine or glitter, does it not? In this case the meritocratic principle and the urgings to invest in one's refinement seem to produce not much more than contempt for the

working class and a prohibition to talk about the material dimensions of existence. To understand the glitter one has to see the promise residing in the abstract subject. We are instructed that we are convertible – if the world cannot change *we* can. When our salary is too low we are told that the solution lies in finding another job, opting for more education, selling spice, working as supply teachers or seeing a therapist to at least improve our attitude. When struggling to aid our child with homework although we have never studied algebra, we are comforted that as long as we stay dedicated, the child has every chance of success. When stressed from our work load we are instructed to apply techniques of deep breathing, figure out a coping strategy or hire a coach. When weary, distressed or angry we are told that we will be rewarded if we keep up the good work, if we cultivate sound moral principles and if we assume responsibility for ourselves. To reap we must first sow, we must never rely on resources outside of ourselves and mind should conquer matter.

If that is not misrecognition, nothing is.

Sammanfattning på svenska

Föräldrar, makt, fattigdom

Om val och ansvar på två föräldraforum

Föreställningen om det dugliga föräldraskapet och dess inverkan på barn är en idé med många decennier på nacken. Den har varit del av skiftande politiska ambitioner, även om själva idealet om duglighet skiftat med tiden. Även föreställningen om det goda samhället har varit sammanflätad med föräldraideal och föräldraskap har därmed inte bara artikulerats som en personlig erfarenhet eller som en särskild kategori av människor, utan ramarna och villkoren för föräldraskap har varit avhängigt tid, plats och maktstrukturer. Familjen är en plats för styrning och man kan därmed tala om en föräldraskapets politik (Gillies, 2008 a). Samtidigt betyder samhällets intresse för familjen ett intresse för hur den ideala samhällsgemenskapen bör utformas: Föreställningar om familj betyder också föreställningar om den ideala dispositionen hos den enskilde samhällsmedborgaren (Bergman et al., 2011). En betydande förskjutning i det senaste århundradets bild av familjen kan sägas ligga i en kontraktsidé – idag finns ett förbund mellan familj och välfärdsstat där den senare tänks stå för offentligt finansierad välfärd såsom hälsovård, förskola och skola medan den förra står för omsorg och närhet. Det betyder i förlängningen att barnet uppfostras och socialiseras på två arenor; en offentlig och en privat. Kontraktet implicerar en arbetsdelning mellan välfärdsstat och familj. Frågan är när de ena arenan ska sägas vara ansvarig för barnet och när den andra?

En av de senaste decenniernas kanske tydligaste trender är en från institutionellt håll förändrad bild av föräldern. Sammanfattat kan man säga att föräldrarnas roll kommit att uppvärderas och ses som avgörande för hur barnet kommer att utvecklas. Om föräldern tidigare under nittonhundratalet artikulerats mestadels i termer av möjlig risk kan man idag se en glidning mot att förstå henne som en potentiell expert på sitt eget barn; förutsatt att hon ges de professionella verktyg som är nödvändiga för att kunna bemöta barnet på rätt sätt (Littmarck, 2012). Den här förändringen i synsätt syns exempelvis i de många föräldrautbildningar som idag erbjuds föräldrar inom både barnhälsovård och på kommunal nivå men kan också skönjas i ett marknadsutbud av nannyshower på TV, pedagogiska leksaker, kurser i babymassage etcetera.

Skiftet rör den kulturella förståelsen av föräldraskapet (och allra främst moderskapet). Diskurser kring familjen har blivit barntillvända och föräldraskapet har blivit intensifierat (Wall, 2010). Det faktum att föräldrarnas roll har uppgraderats och kommersialiserats kan förklara den trend som etablerats i västvärlden sedan åtminstone tio år tillbaka – den till synes stora lusten att diskutera och debattera föräldraskap med andra, vilket i sin tur lett till svar från marknadskrafterna såsom interaktiva virtuella föräldraforum där man anonymt kan logga in för att diskutera barn, barnuppfodringsfrågor och familjeliv tjugofyra timmar om dygnet. Föräldraskapet tycks bli till i en korsväg av institutionella krav på en slags beprövad vetenskaplighet, välfärdsstatligt utbud och omsorg och kommersiella svar på behovet av att prata om sitt föräldraskap

Nittonhundratalet har kallats för barnets århundrade och i många stycken kan det sägas stämma, om man betänker barnets förbättrade legala status och sociala rättigheter (Lundqvist, 2015: 87). Barnet har kommit att ses som både kompetent och utsatt på en och samma gång och i dessa disparata bilder kan en föreställning om två typer av barn skönjas – det trygga barn som har tillgång till en kompetent och stöttande förälder och det barn som saknar en sådan förälder. Parallellt med sådana bilder lanseras alltså välfärdstjänster som tänks vara kompetenshöjande för föräldern: Vetenskapligt beprövade tekniker och de senaste forskningsfynden ska forma föräldraskapets praktiker. Föräldern görs kunnig – och därigenom ansvarig. Här ryms paralleller till en mer generell politikutveckling, som Nikolas Rose (2000 a) beskrivit i termer av en responsabilisering av medborgare. Det bärande elementet i responsabiliseringsideal är tanken om att när samhället ger förutsättningar för det goda livet är det medborgarens skyldighet att söka omsätta och realisera dessa. Härur kommer exempelvis idealet om den aktive samhällsmedborgaren som tar ett eget ansvar för sitt välmående (Dahlsetdt, 2009 a). Det senaste årtiondet har accentuerat denna trend än mer, vilket kanske tydligast manifesterats efter den globala recession som svepte över stora delar av västvärlden 2008: Medan välfärdsstaten bantats ned har idén om individuell ansvarighet ökat. Relationen mellan välfärdsstaten och dess subjekt har förändrats (Jensen, 2012). Avhandlingen har undersökt denna relation, eller detta nya kontrakt mellan välfärdsstaten och ett av dess subjekt; föräldern.

Syfte, forskningsfrågor och empirisk arena

Studiens syfte har varit att undersöka sättet som arbetsdelningen mellan välfärdsstat och förälder beskrivs och förhandlas på två av Sveriges största virtuella föräldraforum där föräldrar och andra intresserade loggar in och samtalar med varandra. Det övergripande målet har varit att kartlägga och dekonstruera spänningar mellan

krav förlagda till föräldern eller individen och krav förlagda till välfärdsstaten och att blottlägga ideal som kopplas till dessa krav.

I en diskursanalys av inlägg publicerade på de publika sidorna på två av Sveriges största virtuella föräldraforum frågar jag följande:

1. Hur beskrivs föräldern och av vilka diskursiva tekniker stöds dessa beskrivningar?
2. Hur konstrueras ansvarsfördelningen och arbetsdelningen mellan familjen och välfärdsstaten?
3. Vilka generella subjektsideal kan skönjas i diskussionerna om föräldraskap? Hur tänks idealen kunna uppnås? Hur förklaras misslyckanden att nå idealen?
4. Hur är det kvinnliga subjektet positionerat i diskussioner om familj, föräldraskap, beroende och intimitet?
5. Hur relaterar dessa sätt att konstruera subjektsideal, föräldern och föräldraskapet till bredare samhällliga kontexter?

De två föräldraforum som utgjort de empiriska arenorna i avhandlingen har jag kallat TPP och VEF.¹²² Det empiriska materialet har samlats in mellan hösten 2010 och våren 2015 men inkluderar material skrivet så långt tillbaka som 2006. Diskursanalysen har genomförts med hjälp av en dekonstruktion av konversationernas bärande element och hur de förmåtts att förbindas med varandra, eller separeras.

Teoretiska utgångspunkter och analytiska verktyg

Avhandlingen har graviterat runt relationen språk – diskurs – ideologi och dess intention har varit att avtäcka hur ideologi som formar diskurser sätter gränser för hur vi kan tala om den vardagsfarenhet som föräldraskap eller relationer innebär, och på vilket vis dessa gränser kan förstås som politiska. För analysarbetets räkning har det betytt att jag bortsett från eventuella personliga intentioner eller relationer bakom uttalandena på föräldraforumen och istället fokuserat på vilka element som gjorts betydelsebärande och vilka som till synes förlorat i relevans. Jag har alltså riktat intresset mot textens innehåll och struktur och inte undersökt producenten av innehållet: Skribenten.

¹²² TPP är en förkortning för The Parent Place och VEF är en förkortning av Virtually Extended Family. Forumen genererar tillsammans cirka 1,1 miljon besökare varje vecka (KIA-index, 2014) och når cirka 50 % av svenska föräldrar med barn mellan 0 och 6 år (Alstam, Plantin and Daneback, 2016: 137).

De huvudsakliga teoretiska begrepp som använts under analysen har varit diskurs, makt och distinktioner. Diskursbegreppet har behandlats både i sin mer lokala användning, som tolkningsrepertoarer (*interpretative repertoires*), och som uttryck för ideologi. Makt har förståtts främst i diskursiv mening – hur tillgängliga diskurser disciplinerar och strukturerar det som blir möjligt att säga men också dess resultat: Hur en världsbild etableras och vidmakthålls. Distinktioner har förståtts som en ekonomisk-politisk uttrycksform, vilket betyder att jag har närmat mig de smakyttringar som görs på forumen som ett misserkännande/ett vilseledande (*misrecognition*) i representationen av människors livserfarenheter men också som ett politiskt kamouflage av den ekonomi som positionerar människor på olika platser och upprätthåller hierarkier.

Det empiriska materialet har bearbetats och analyserats genom en dekonstruktion av texter insamlade på föräldraforumen. Texterna har analyserats med hjälp av diskursteori (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2008) och för att förstå hur föräldraforumen lokalt använder diskurs har ett diskurspsykologiskt perspektiv använts (Potter, 1996/2012). Det diskursteoretiska perspektivet har inneburit att jag studerat texterna för deras mer övergripande struktur – hur diskursiva element förbinds eller separeras så att utsagorna ges vissa former. Jag har förstått förbindelser och separationer som diskursens försök att etablera ett moment; ett ögonblick då den ligger stilla och där hot mot dess enhet har minimerats. Jag har också studerat hur tecken förbinds med varandra, (till exempel tecken som "fattigdom", "förälder", och "ansvarslöshet"), för att denna stängning av diskursen ska äga rum. När jag närläst uttalanden har jag begagnat mig av diskurspsykologiska begrepp. Jag har bland annat tittat på forumens inlägg som faktakonstruktioner (*fact constructions*) (ibid.: 158), det vill säga hur inläggen kan byggas upp för att argumentera för sin sak och hur de konstrueras för att förefalla sanna eller tillförlitliga. Det senare kan åstadkommas via två tekniker: Kategorirätt (*category entitlement*) (Potter et al., 1993) – att beskriva sig själv som särskilt kunnig i ett ämne eftersom man själv upplevt just detta eller står nära någon som har upplevelsen (till exempel upplevelsen av att ha varit fattig) – och via en särskild sorts förment neutralitet (*out-there-ness*) (ibid.: 393) där upplevelser och erfarenheter beskrivs med distans, nästan som om det inte var skribenten som tyckte det hon skrev; källan är inte skribenten utan en tillförlitlig agent någon annanstans (denna källa kan vara vetenskap, massmedia, biologiska och medicinska rön och liknande).

Skälet till att avhandlingen dekonstruerat diskurser har varit för att utforska dess ideologiska underlag. De tre huvudsakliga analytiska ingångarna vad gäller ideologi-analysen har varit att söka efter utspridningseffekter (*dissimulation*), fragmentering

(*fragmentation*) och naturalisering (*naturalisation*) i texterna (Thompson, 1988). Utspredning äger rum när vissa dimensioner av en erfarenhet, en händelse eller process beskrivs på bekostnad av andra dimensioner, fragmentering är fallet då grupper av människor eller erfarenheter beskrivs som i opposition eller intressekonflikt med varandra och naturalisering är vid handen då processer, erfarenheter eller händelser beskrivs i termer som får dem att framstå som eviga, naturliga eller svåra att ifrågasätta.

Resultat

Avhandlingens övergripande resultat är att föräldraskapets praktiker – så som de omtalas på de två föräldraforumen – härbärgerar ett ideal om den prekära människan som individuellt genom självteknologier och samhälleligt genom meritokrati tänks kunna säkerställa resurser till sig själv och sitt barn. Den prekära situationen beskrivs alltså inte i första hand som problematisk utan som en drivkraft mot förbättring och kvalificering av den enskildes förmågor. Mellan individen och samhället verkar ett kontrakt vara skrivet: Om samhället erbjuder likvärdiga och nödvändiga förutsättningar, är det upp till individen att omsätta dessa till ett gott liv. Föreställningen verkar inte rymma idéer om motsättning, skillnad eller förtryck, som potentiellt kunde förhindra somliga från att omsätta samhällets erbjudanden.

Analyskapiteln närmar sig föräldraforumen från delvis olika vinklar. I kapitel fem och sex introduceras sättet som interaktion och diskurs är formade. I kapitel fem, som särskilt tittar på interaktionsregler och hur man skaffar sig gillande på formen, visar analysen hur självpresentationen är en strategisk investering som handlar om att manifesteras stabilitet, uppriktighet och tacksamhet. Ett sätt att porträttera sig själv är att tala om andra subjekt, antingen subjekt som presterar sämre än en själv i något avseende, eller om subjekt som framställs som om de prisar eller uppskattar skribenten. Ett subjekt som regelbundet används som statusmarkör är det egna, vällyckade och trygga barnet. Interaktionsreglerna förefaller gälla mer för skribenter som presenterar sig själva som kvinnor, vilket betyder att reprimander och klander i högre grad drabbar nick registrerade som kvinnor, medan nick registrerade som män tycks kunna bryta mot netiketten utan större uppmärksamhet. Kapitlet visar också hur umgängesreglerna verkar ha stelnat till något som vissa skribenter uppfattar som konformitet, men pekar också mot att medlemmarna verkar ha något att vinna på att acceptera denna konformitet – det finns så att säga vinster att göra av underordningen, som exempelvis social status och gillande.

Kapitel sex undersöker de diskursiva grunderna för forumsamtalen och särskilt analyseras föreställningen om det fria valet. Analysen pekar på den eteriska karaktären hos idén om friheten/tvånget att välja – forumskribenterna verkar inte associera

valet med någon form av märkbar effekt och man avkräver det inte heller kapaciteten att förändra situationen. Allra vanligast är att hantera det fria valet som något man antingen bör träna sig till (och på det viset reformera sin attityd till att bli mer ansvarstagande och ansvarig), eller i fallet den individ som redan är kapabel att välja; som ett bevis på ett välfungerande psyke. Det eteriska konceptet syns på många vis och summerades i kapitlet i tolkningsrepertoaren *Mind over matter*. Mind over matter är en föreställning om hur relativt lite materiella resurser eller andra typer av konkreta tillgångar betyder/bör betyda för subjektets välmående och repertoaren trycker istället på odlandet av ett ansvarigt själv som lösning på många konkreta problem, såsom drogmissbruk, fattigdom eller arbetslöshet. Mind over matter organiserar ett helt subjektideal, som jag kallat Homo Eligens, inspirerad av Zygmunt Baumans "the man choosing" (2005: 33). Som Bauman påpekar (ibid.) ska detta subjektideal inte förstås som människan som gjort ett val (i meningen nöjer sig med det valet), utan som den ständigt väljande människan. Bauman liknar denna situation vid cyklistens, som måste trampa regelbundet för att cykeln inte ska välta, och han argumenterar för att det är så vi också bör förstå identitetsarbetet hos den senmoderna människan: Identiteten förhandlas i varje givet ögonblick och därtill skulle arbetet inte kunna fortgå om det inte understöddes av marknadskrafter (ibid.: 18). Vi kan här knyta tillbaka till kapitel fem, som också frilade symbiosen mellan just detta identitetsarbete och marknadskrafterna: Nicken tycks 'bli till' genom sina konsumtionsval.

Kapitel sju ägnas åt relationen mellan subjektet och välfärdsstaten och kapitlet tittar närmare på hur forumen skriver om relationen mellan välfärdsstatliga resurser och individens behov. I kapitlet demonstreras hur en diskursiv komponent av *kontrakt* strukturerar innehållet. Kontraktet mellan individen och samhället verkar i föräldraforumen vara rotat i ett slags lekmannaversion av det liberala sociala kontraktet där en förmodad konsensus om samhällets organisation ligger i botten. Denna föreställning verkar ligga till grund för den förvånade avsky forumen uttrycker gentemot subjekt som använder ekonomiska resurser distribuerade från välfärdsstaten. Denna avsky gäller dock inte alla typer av välfärdsberoende subjekt: Att behöva äldreomsorg, barnomsorg eller sjukvård omtalas inte som problematiskt, medan alla typer av direkta finansiella transaktioner såsom arbetslöshetsunderstöd eller försörjningsstöd betraktas med misstro. Samtalen kring välfärdsstatligt beroende verkar därmed ideologiskt fragmenterande, framförallt i beskrivningarna av medelklassen, som tecknas som en klass utan likheter med arbetarklassen och som en klass som inte är lika ekonomiskt beroende. Även arbetarklassen som sådan delas diskursivt upp i två delar – en fattig men solidarisk del som tänks arbeta och betala skatt, och en

ekonomiskt beräknande men skrupellös del som beskrivs planera att utnyttja dessa medel för egen vinning. I analysen visas också hur den förmodade generella lösningen av ansvarsfrågan i forumsamtalen tänks vara odlandet och uppvärderandet av en mer puritansk moral. Kapitlet fångade upp denna individens ideala disposition i en tolkningsrepertoar: *Morality comes first*. Det kontrakt som förordas är helt och hållet moraliskt – samhället bör utformas så att individuell moral stärks och stärkandet av denna moral bör föregå samhälleliga rättigheter.

I forumsamtalen föreställs alltså det allra viktigaste kontraktet vara det moraliska; det kontrakt subjektet ingår med sig själv om att vara hårt arbetande, rättuppstående och självständigt, före det begär assistans från den kollektiva samhällskroppen. Förmågan till denna självständighet och moraliska kompass förmedlas allra främst, argumenterar föräldraforumen, inom familjens hägn. Den viktigaste kontraktsparten är, kort och gott, en familjemedlem av något slag. Av den anledningen ägnade sig kapitel åtta åt hur forumen förstår familjen och familjens samhällsroll, samt föreställningarna om hur man uppfostrar barn och vad denna uppfostran tänks syfta till. Kapitlet frilade en nyckelmetafor för att förstå hur föräldraskapet visualiseras: Det är ett *arbete*. Föräldraskapet skrivs fram i termer av engagemang, dedikation, disciplin och egenintresse – med andra ord läses föräldraskapet också som en fråga om självteknologi. Eftersom föräldraskapet tänks bestå av en uppsättning inre kvalitéer betonas ansträngningen och viljan framför mer formella resurser eller tillgångar. Det betyder i sin tur att samtalen om det goda respektive dåliga föräldraskapet betraktar familjen som en enhet som delvis står utanför samhällets organisation eller hierarkier: Föräldern utan utbildning, den arbetslösa föräldern, eller föräldern som är boende i en förfördelad förort tänks i princip ha samma chanser att ingjuta framgång i sitt barn som den väletablerade och högutbildade föräldern. Föreställningen leder till ett intensivt skuldbeläggande av föräldrar som inte ”lyckas” med sina barn, eller föräldrar som ”skyller ifrån sig” om barnet inte betar sig acceptabelt. Med andra ord får fenomenet social klass en speciell kontur i föräldraskapsdiskurserna: Om alla har samma chanser att producera framgångsrika barn som klarar sig på arbetsmarknaden framstår den förälder som av någon anledning inte klarar det som än mer främmande och klandervärd. Idén som ligger i botten vid sådant klander är att investering och resultat har en relation; den förälder som investerar och arbetar hårt med sitt barn kommer att skörda frukterna. Tanken kan skönjas i en tolkningsrepertoar som inte bara återfinns i diskurser om det goda föräldraskapet, utan i samtal om hushållsbudget, träning eller jämställdhet: *You should reap what you sow*. Repertoaren organiserar en medelklassens diskurs om socialt kapital som måste påföras barnet, en slags reproduktionsstrategi (Vincent & Ball, 2007) för att säkerställa klasstillhörighet men som

kan tyckas alltmer ansträngd när barnets minsta rörelse ska koreograferas, i allt från skolval till fritidsaktivitet. Då föräldraskapet formuleras med hjälp av arbetets metaforer, som något du gör snarare än något du är, kan ett misslyckande från föräldrarnas sida bara begripas som en brist hos den enskilde.

Kapitel nio ägnas åt olika former av ohälsa, eller åt subjekt som inte klarar de uppställda idealen; de som blir stressade eller på annat vis inte lyckas välja och ta ansvar för sina liv. Vid sidan av analyser av föreställningar om varför man inte lever upp till idealen, studerar kapitlet också forumens idéer om hur man kan förmå sig själv att må bättre. De två huvudsakliga element som förbinds eller separeras i hälsodiskurserna är ”ansvar” och ”kontroll”. Särskilt manifesteras detta i samtalen om varför arbetsplatsrelaterad stress uppstår: Ansvaret för stressen behålls hos individen och lösningen stavas ökad kontroll över självet. Genomgående i diskurser runt individuell hälsa återfinns alltså en tveksamhet och ett motstånd inför förklaringsmodeller som förlägger orsakssambanden utanför individen. Hälsodiskursen framträder som starkt individualiserad och i en mening som lutheransk i dess aversion mot tekniker som betraktas som genvägar, vilket som exempel kan skönjas i forumdebatter om magsäcksoperationer som lösning på fetma. Magsäcksoperationer betraktas som en instrumentell lösning som inte förmår öka den disciplin och egenkontroll som man tänker sig är nödvändig; kontroll och disciplin förläggs med denna teknik istället utanför subjektet. Hur skuldbördan för ohälsa ska fördelas är emellertid inte entydigt i forumdiskussionerna, utan det tycks bero på vilket empiriskt fall som diskuteras. När man exempelvis debatterar orsaker till arbetsplatsrelaterad stress tycks skulden för denna huvudsakligen hamna på den enskilde arbetstagaren som inte förekommit stressen med någon typ av teknik, (yoga, andningstekniker, stresshanteringscoacher etc). När man däremot talar om fetma är själva skuldfrågan inte fullt lika utstavad, utan fokus ligger snarare på tänkbara och lämpliga sätt att gå ned i vikt. Under samtalen om diagnosen ADHD är ambivalensen i skuldfrågan än mer accentuerad. Här utvecklar sig långa meningsutbyten där en tolkningsrepertoar tycks organisera innehållet. I kapitlet kallas den *Don't take the easy way out* och om än som allra synligast i dessa diskussioner, återfinns den i alla samtal om förbättring och ansvars-tagande för den egna hälsan. I polemiken kring ADHD blir det dock tydligt hur en ideologisk strukturering av diskurs inte reglerar dess användare ned till varje enskild åsikt. I ordväxlingarna kring diagnosen förhåller sig båda sidor, såväl förespråkare för som motståndare till diagnosen som sådan, till repertoaren och söker manifestera att deras ställningstagande regleras av den. Trots detta är ståndpunkterna i frågan om diagnosen är reell eller inte och åsikterna om möjliga vägar till förbättring eller coping helt disparata. I kapitlet diskuteras tolkningsrepertoarerna och förhandling-

arna kring lämpliga sätt att uppnå förbättrad hälsa som en del i uppvisandet av ett emotionellt kapital. Det skulle i det här sammanhanget betyda att signalera familjaritet med ”högkulturen”; dominanta diskurser kring kropp och psyke. På forumen är dessa dominanta diskurser starkt influerade av en slags gör-det-självt-kultur och av självhjälpsfilosofi. Men, som argumenteras för i *The German Ideology* (1845/1988: 42), bör ideologier förstås som avhängiga materialitet och produktion och högkulturen (det tal som måste uppvisas om man vill bli bemött med gillande) i detta fall kan sägas sammanfalla med den prekariatitet som redan beskrivits för föräldrarnas vidkommande – individen måste vara framåtlutad, dedikerat redo att välja och välja om, att investera i och ta ansvar för sin utveckling, vilket i sin tur kan förstås som ett *nöd-vändigt* subjektideal i tider av åtstramningar (austeritet) och osäkra framtidsutsikter.

Tveksamheterna och motståndet mot att förlägga skuld utanför individen gör sig också gällande i forumsamtal som berör kvinnans roll i familjen och frågor om hemmets arbetsdelning och jämställdhet. Idealen om ansvarighet och val som formar subjektsidealet Homo Eligens förefaller gälla också när subjektet omtalas som specifikt kvinna och kapitel tio ägnas därför åt den heterosexuella samlevande kvinnans subjektpositioner. Här pekar analysen mot två andra element – ”skillnad” och ”beroende” – som förbinds och separeras. Framförallt förstås de båda elementen som relaterande specifikt till den heterosexuella relationen; eftersom det är ”skillnad” på män och kvinnor blir de ”beroende” av varandra och kittet i deras relation beskrivs ofta i dessa termer. Det element kring vilket det råder mest ambivalens förefaller vara ”beroende”. Beroende skisseras i en mening som oproblematiskt, av två skäl. Först och främst föreställer man sig att skillnaden mellan parterna är fruktbar (man tillför så att säga sin egen, omistliga del i relationen) och därmed blir beroendet närmast eftersträvansvärt. För det andra naturliggörs andra beroende subjekt, såsom barnen (och ibland mannen), som kvinnan ansvarar för. Diskursen avvisar dock också kvinnans beroende i vissa fall, och beroende som sådant delas i två typer – ett fruktbart och ett skadligt. Det första beroendet är det som uppstår genom den föreställda heterosexuella skillnaden, medan det andra uppstår i situationer där mannen drar fördel av kvinnan, till exempel av hennes obetalda hushållsarbete. Att kvinnan gjorts beroende av en sådan man kan, argumenterar forumen, lösas med hjälp av jämställdhetsambitioner. Här uppstår samtalsituationer där diskursen slår knut på sig själv: När ett nick skriver på forumet att hennes partner inte agerar på ett jämställt vis tenderar de andra skribenterna att ordinera ett internt jämställdhetsarbete, där parterna ska sätta sig ned och diskutera sig fram till en situation där ingen utnyttjas. En situation som betecknas som inte önskvärd tänks alltså kunna lösas genom att helt enkelt göras önskvärd. I kapitlet analyseras denna diskursens undanmanöver

som en slags tystnadens kultur, där vissa delar av ett sexuellt kontrakt aldrig artikuleras, nämligen att det inte ingåtts mellan två jämlika parter till att börja med och att kvinnors underordning försämrar deras förhandlingsläge (Pateman, 1988). Kapitlet inventerar ett särskilt fall av denna tystnadskultur: Samtal om och med kvinnor som blir misshandlade. Här synliggörs ett mönster av skuldförflyttning där mannens agens förminskas och kvinnans förstoras och där statusen av offer späs ut. Det förefaller vara så att fall som särskilt iögonfallande manifesterar exploatering och underordning också i samma utsträckning förminskas till något annat. Om den part som föreställs utnyttja det *sociala* kontraktet (individen som uppbär försörjningsstöd som det tydligaste exemplet) generellt ses som behäftad med skuld, gäller samma regel inte för den part som tänks utnyttja det sexuella kontraktet (mannen som inte tar sin del av det obetalda hemarbetet eller som misshandlar sin kvinna).

Det avslutande analyskapitlet fogar samman bilderna av valfrihetsdiskurser, familj, välfärdsstat och femininitet med föreställningar om somliga subjekts bristande förmåga att välja och bete sig ansvarsfullt och i kapitel elva granskas hur sådana föreställningar förbinds till en affektiv figur (Tyler, 2008) gentemot vilken forumskribenterna uttrycker sitt löje och sitt förakt: Den fattiga kvinnan med barn. Denna avskydda figur uppenbarar sig allra främst i forumsamtal om en särskild fattig kvinna som går under epitetet "White Trash" – som i kapitlet förstås som en konstitutiv ut-sida av Homo Eligens. Följaktligen framställs denna affektiva figur som allt det som Homo Eligens inte är: Hon är ansvarslös, bortskämd, lat, odisciplinerad, och hon skyller sina tillkortakommanden på andra. Hon tecknas som en särskild sorts fattig, den ovärdiga (Fineman, 1991). Via systematiskt vaga narrativa tekniker (Georgaca, 2004) kan förklenande omdömen om denna figur lanseras utan att möta motstånd och White Trash-figuren kan därmed sägas vara relativt diskursivt stabil. Det element som potentiellt kunde hota stabiliteten är den feminina estetik som framställs som möjlig att dela mellan medelklasskvinnan och White Trash-kvinnan. Hotet om likhet avvärjs dock med hjälp av föreställningar om skillnader i självteknologier; även om de båda "kvinnotyperna" ser likadana ut på utsidan är de väsensskilda vad gäller inre förfining, argumenterar forumen.

När den fattiga kvinnans barn diskuteras konsolideras föreställningarna än mer och vi kan till och med tala om en alarmism i bilderna av hur hon både genetiskt och socialt för dåliga anlag vidare. Kapitlet visar hur det åter är den grundläggande metaforen för att förstå föräldraskapet, att det är ett *arbete*, som strukturerar logiken bakom avisandet av den fattiga kvinna med barn som beskrivs som White Trash. Om kapitel åtta visade hur medelklasskvinnan beskrivs som en investerare i barnets habitus, skildras White Trash-mamman som om hon negligerade denna uppgift. Ef-

tersom både föräldraskap och fattigdom struktureras på bestämda vis, genom metaforer och ideal som de flesta på föräldraforumen generellt skriver under på, blir det svårt att artikulera den fattiga mamman som något bortanför passiv, lat, parasiterande och ansvarslös. Det betyder i sin tur att de fåtaliga försvar av fattiga föräldrar som då och då manifesteras på forumen får en specifik kontur. Försvaret tenderar snarast att förstärka eller bekräfta de nedsättande bilderna istället för att avvisa dem, och lejonparten av försvarstalen för fattiga föräldrar riktar in sig på att avvärja föraktet gentemot dem, snarare än att söka bestrida *innehållet* i beskrivningarna.

Sammanfattning

Om forskningsfrågorna kondenserat besvaras kan man vad gäller beskrivningar av föräldern se hur föräldraskapet förstås som ett arbete där investeringar tänks betala sig i form av framtida framgångar och säkerhet för barnet. Arbetet är i någon mån prekärt – trots att föräldraskapet i viss mån tänks vara något man gör mer eller mindre skickligt tycks det vara svårt att säkert garantera utkomsten. Ansvarsfördelningen mellan familj och välfärdsstat verkar falla ut gynnsamt för den sistnämnda parten. Familj och individ har det huvudsakliga ansvaret för att samhällskontraktet fullföljs och så länge välfärdsstaten finns som en slags sista utpost gäller det för individen att disciplinera sig själv till att inte behöva den i alltför stor utsträckning, och framförallt tillse att behovet inte inbegriper konkreta, individuella ekonomiska transaktioner. Familjen har också ansvaret för att fostra fram individer som omfattar samma slags moral. Idealen för föräldraskapet omfattar även ett större medborgarideal: Människan bör hålla sig så självständig och oberoende som möjligt gentemot välfärdsinstitutioner. Beskrivningarna av det ideala oberoendet gentemot välfärdsstatliga insatser och skuldbeläggandet av ”välfärdsberoende” individer verkar parantessätta grundläggande beroende av vård, skola och infrastruktur och istället accentuera sådana insatser som innefattar direkta ekonomiska transfereringar. Den beroende människan (hon som misslyckats med att leva upp till idealen om oberoende) förklaras i termer av ett negligerat inre arbete, det vill säga att hon beskrivs som mindre mogen och därmed mer som ett barn än en vuxen. Betoningen av det barnlika hos den beroende människan blir sedermera det som motiverar de ingripande och uppfostrande insatser som föräldraforumen förordar gentemot fattiga föräldrar. Det kvinnliga subjektet och hennes position i familjen hanteras inom vad som kan kallas en tystnadens kultur, där hennes underordnade situation bemöts med tvekan eller rationaliseras bort som något annat, exempelvis förstås som agens. I samtalen om kvinnans position i familjen blir elementet ”beroende” särskilt vanskligt att diskursivt balansera – när den heterosexuella kvinnan omtalas kan beroende både förstås som något gott och

uppbyggligt å ena sidan och som något skadligt och nedbrytande å den andra. Beror som beror av en strukturellt underordnad position avvisas dock, precis som i föreställningarna om den fattiga föräldern. Dessa subjektpositioner – förälderns, medborgarens, den fattiges och kvinnans – har i avhandlingen analyserats som formade av en liberal version av samhällskontraktet där strukturella villkor nedtonas till förmån för visioner av individens styrka och möjligheter. Särskilt pekar analysen mot hur liberala rättviseidéer om meritokrati förvandlar ojämlikhet i tillgången till resurser och privilegier till en olikhet i mentalitet och kultur.

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APPENDIX

Glossary

Avatar: A picture one may attach to the nick name in order for the nick to become easy to recognise.

Chat room: A way of communicating by sending text messages to people in the same chat-room in real-time.

Flamer/Flaming: A flamer is a nick producing inflammatory texts on the Internet, containing rude or provocative content with the aim of starting a quarrel.

Lurking: A member of an online community who observes, but does not actively participate. Lurkers make up a large proportion of all users in online communities. Lurking allows users to learn the conventions of an online community before they actively participate, but lurkers are sometimes criticised for being too withdrawn or timorous by more active users.

Netiquette: The rules of etiquette that guide virtual interaction. The netiquette is often a combination of rules put up by the owner of the site and the members of the community.

Nick: A pseudonym name used for protection of identity on virtual communities or chat rooms

Posting: Texts produced in interaction in a virtual community.

Pseudonym: The nick name. There are no limits to the imagination displayed in the creation of a nick name. In the parental web communities some nicks settle for a combination of the names and gender of her children, whilst others allude on famous movies, books or songs.

Thread: The entire sum of postings produced in one conversation about a delimited topic.

Thread start: The very first posting made in a discussion about a delimited topic.

Troller/Trolling: A troll is a nick producing texts of dubious character, wanting for other nicks to react upon it. A troll can produce inflammatory postings much like the flamer, but the troll can also insert odd or transboundary postings (that are not rude or insulting) simply to follow the subsequent reactions.