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Perspectives on womanhood in rural America

A qualitative exploration of female identity within a Christian and republican context

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Bachelor's thesis: SOCK07, 15 hp

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Abstract

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Equality between men and women in American society has been an ongoing struggle and debate for centuries. In some ways, the societal position of women has improved, e.g., in terms of gaining access to the labor market. Yet, despite significant changes regarding gender roles and norms, along with an increased necessity of double-income households, old ideals of gender roles and family structures still linger, particularly amongst more conservative parts of the population. The purpose of this investigation was to explore how conceptions of gender roles, both traditional and modern, are produced and negotiated by women, and to examine the connection between notions of femininity and womanhood, and the economic, sociopolitical, and religious context of the women's geographical locations. For this, a qualitative method has been used, in which five semi-structured interviews were conducted with Caucasian, American women in the ages 46-63 who resided in predominantly republican areas which have a high concentration of white, Christian identity. The results demonstrate a rather traditional view of womanhood, with value being placed on the woman's role as a mother, in conjunction with the perspective that men and women enjoy equal opportunities in today's society. Furthermore, the results pointed to an overlap between egalitarian and conservative values amongst the participants and displays of conflict between reality and ideals were in some cases found.

Keywords: gender roles, womanhood, motherhood, feminism, conservatism, religion, modern and traditional women.

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Purpose and research questions	2
1.2 Delimitations	2
1.3 Disposition.....	3
2. Previous research	3
2.1 Gender roles and feminist movements.....	3
2.2 The origin of gender roles.....	5
2.3 The nuclear family, conservatism, and religion	6
3. Theoretical framework	8
3.1 The origin of the family	8
3.2 Respectability	9
3.3 Positioning regarding theoretical framework	10
4. Method	11
4.1 Participants	11
4.2 Procedure	13
4.3 Analytical method.....	14
4.4 Ethical considerations.....	15
5. Analysis	16
5.1 What does it mean to be a woman?	16
5.2 An egalitarian attitude.....	19
5.3 Modern and traditional women.....	21
5.4 The role of religion	23
5.5 Reality and ideals in conflict	25
6. Conclusion and discussion	27
6.1 Suggestions for future research	29
7. References	30
Appendix: questionnaire.....	34

1. Introduction

A hundred years ago, the equal rights amendment (ERA) was introduced to American congress, and its purpose was to guarantee equal rights for women and men and prohibited the denial or abridgment of those rights on grounds of sex (Suk, 2017-2018). In the hundred years since then, the debate surrounding women's rights and equality in America has been ongoing. While great strides toward gender equality have been made, such as women gaining access to the workforce at higher rates, and in turn receiving economic independence, there are still existing disparities between men and women today. For instance, the gender wage gap still remains a fact, and women are oftentimes being expected to take on the role of main caregiver even in cases where she works the same hours as her male partner (Suk, 2017-2018; Bianchi et al., 2007).

Despite significant progressions in terms of gender equality, there is additionally an existing concern surrounding the traditional American nuclear family and its supposed decline. The nuclear family unit, a heterosexual marriage, in which the man is the primary breadwinner, and the woman takes on the role as housewife, had its rise and peak during the mid-century (Popenoe, 1993), and by many, it is highly regarded as the optimal family structure. A simple search online provides a multitude of articles concerned with its disruption and decline in American society. Such an ideal appears to be more consistent with religious and conservative beliefs, and hence more prevalent in areas where such ideologies remain dominant (Whitehead & Perry, 2019). However, a contradiction may be proposed to arise here, in which traditional ideals of gender clash with a material and social reality in which the notion of a singular income household is unattainable for many, and where ideals surrounding gender are continuously challenged and changed. It is a phenomenon which becomes interesting to study due to its ongoing negation, where individuals may be required to internally negotiate personally held ideals in accordance to how they fit with their lived realities.

The idea for this exploration emerged during my latest visit to the United States, where I could not help but take note of how conversations regarding the roles of men and women were conducted in a way where tradition and religion were held in high regard, while at the same time displaying acknowledgement to the way the institutions of American society has changed. Furthermore, it became clear that the material conditions of people's realities oftentimes did not fully allow for more traditional ideals of gender to be realized. It sparked a curiosity to examine more deeply how individuals, and more specifically women from this area reflect on their own identities in relation to the world they are inhabiting.

1.1 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this essay is to explore how conceptions of gender roles, both traditional and modern, are produced and negotiated by Caucasian, American women, aged 45-65. Additionally, to examine the connection between notions of femininity and womanhood, and the economic, sociopolitical, and religious context of the women's geographical locations. As such, participants were sampled from more rural parts of Ohio (Morgan County), and West Virginia (Pleasants County, and Jackson County), where conservatism and religion prevail as the dominant ideals. In all three counties, Donald Trump won the popular vote in the 2020 U.S. by 73.6-78.5% (Data USA, n.d), and the concentration of white, Christian identity in the counties ranges between 69-74%¹ (PRRI, 2022).

The goal is to acquire a deeper perspective on how old and new ideologies of gender may or may not coexist on the personal level, in relation to material conditions, and prevailing societal structures and institutions. My research questions are as following:

What notions of womanhood and femininity are held by Caucasian, American women?

How do the women position themselves with regards to traditional and modern ideals of female identity?

To what extent do their ideals regarding gender roles align with their realities?

1.2 Delimitations

Due to the limited space of this essay, it is necessary to limit its scope, hence why I have focused on participants who fall under similar demographics. It would have been of great interest to examine and compare both men and women, or to look at the differences between women from different areas in the United States. Similarly, a larger range of ethnicities and backgrounds would have been an effective way to provide a more intersectional perspective, and it is something which serves as a valuable proposition for future research.

¹ As of 2020, white Christians make up 44% of the total U.S population (PRRI, 2022).

1.3 Disposition

Chapter 2 will present previous research relevant to the topic, and in chapter 3, I will go through the theoretical framework which was deemed appropriate for the chosen topic. Chapter 4 will present the method used for the exploration, along with sample, data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations. In chapter 5, results will be discussed in accordance with previous research and theoretical framework, and finally, in chapter 6, a conclusion and discussion will be provided along with suggestions for future research.

2. Previous research

In this section, previous research which was deemed relevant to the purpose of the essay will be presented. Gender roles remain a multifaceted area of research, and it was necessary to limit which aspects of it to include in this paper. This chapter has been divided into the three following sections with the purpose of providing a general overview of the topic: Gender roles and feminist movements, The origin of gender roles, and The nuclear family, conservatism and religion.

The following databases were used for this section: Google scholar, Lubsearch, and databases A-Z.

2.1 Gender roles and feminist movements

The concept of gender roles may be explained as social roles where certain attitudes and behaviors are seen as appropriate or desirable for individuals based on their biological sex or perceived gender (Alters & Schiff, 2009). It is furthermore necessary to understand the concept of gender in order to fully understand gender roles. Gender refers to the meanings, values, and characteristics ascribed to individuals based on the more biological nature of a person's sex (Blackstone, 2003). Oftentimes, gender roles are related to stereotypes and generalizations about gender, e.g., what it means to be a “real” man or woman (Wood, 2018), and concepts of masculinity and femininity may then be explained as social constructs, or traits and characteristics that historically and culturally have been ascribed differently to men and women (Zinn, 2020).

In the case of female gender roles, according to a traditional gender ideology, a woman fulfills her role through activities of nurturing, homemaker and parenting activities, whereas a more egalitarian gender ideology will rather endorse the shared and equal family

and breadwinning roles in a family (Kroska, 2007). However, research has suggested that gender ideology is unrelated to self-meaning and that the majority of people are primarily influenced by overarching societal socializations, meaning that both liberal and conservative women generally have similar self-meanings as women, mothers, and wives (Kroska, 2002). This is in line with the notion of the “bourgeois morality”, in which all proletarian women are encouraged by superstructural institutions of capital to self-identify as mothers and wives, rather than as workers, even when they are actively partaking in the labor force. The purpose of this is to maintain the nuclear family structure, along with its exploitation and subjugation of women within it, as it fills the function of producing and reproducing labor power. It further produces the conviction that a woman’s subservience and obedience is simply God’s law or nature’s intent, and consequently leads to low class consciousness and resistance to political development (Dixon, 1977).

Gender roles remain an integral part of society, and generally, individuals feel the need to behave consistently with their own gender roles to ensure acceptable social interactions. If an individual deviates from social norms and expectations regarding gender, it may result in personal consequences on both a social level, as well as internal conflict (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Woodhill & Samuels, 2004). This discrepancy between societal changes and more traditional ideas of gender roles is coined by O’Neil (2015) as the gender role conflict², and it may impact the well-being of an individual and lead to mental health issues, e.g., anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.

Feminism as a social movement has been central to the advocacy and fight for women’s rights, and in turn, the dissolution of traditional gender roles, throughout the 20th and 21st century. It encompasses a wide spectrum of theories and beliefs, and due to its changing focus throughout the decades, the term “waves” of feminism is used to distinguish between different periods in time, where the movement of feminism corresponded to more specific power struggles. For instance, the first wave of feminism was concluded with women’s right to vote, whereas the second wave concerned itself more with the dissolution of traditional gender roles and was concurrent with many women’s entry into the workforce, and hence their gained economic independence. Along with the introduction of the internet, the rise of third wave feminism occurred, in which notions of female independence were central, along with a broader inclusion of intersectional narratives. Fourth wave feminism, in turn, is characterized

² Despite the concept being developed primarily for the gender role conflict in men, it can be argued that its core concept remains applicable to both men and women.

by the use of social media in the fight against women's harassment, and discrimination amongst other things, and where a greater focus on representation within media and politics remain central (Malinowska,2020).

Simultaneous to the rise of third wave feminism, however, was the rise of post-feminism, a perspective in which it was assumed that equality between the sexes had been achieved, and that the continued fight for equal rights was superfluous. It is argued that post-feminism is a component which serves on behalf of a neoliberalist agenda, and that it allows for effective arguing against government support and social services, and rather places an increased emphasis on the role of the individual in their own success. An effect of such an ideology is the notion amongst women that they have achieved equal status to that of men, even when they experience instances of sexism in their lived realities, and moreover that the refusal of admitting victimhood serves as a prevention for any collective mobilization for social change (Pomerantz et al., 2013).

2.2 The origin of gender roles

The question regarding where the gender roles we experience today stem from has been hypothesized and researched by many. A leading theory within the field of gender roles is social role theory, which was developed and modified by Eagly & Wood (1987; 2012). Social role theory provides an explanation for the origin of gender roles as a result of the division of labor in early societies, where the biological attributes of men and women along with the societal structure at the time played a decisive part in the roles they were given. For instance, women's capacity of giving birth rendered them a primary caregiver, which meant that men would take on other roles such as physical laborers. Consequently, it was then assumed that men and women possessed attributes, intrinsic in nature, which equipped them for sex-specific roles. The arisen gender roles would then be reinforced through socialization over generations and in turn maintain said division of labor. Through continuous reenactment of gender specific roles, it appears that such attributes are natural and inescapable, and that gender roles are intrinsic and stable attributes of men and women (Redlick, 2018). Gender essentialists use such an assumption to argue that men and women should adopt more traditional gender roles in their partnerships. Further, it is argued that because there is an existing fundamental difference between men and women, any social and material inequalities between the sexes are merely a natural consequence of such differences (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005).

However, social role theory goes on to explain that gender roles are socially constructed in the way that they are responsive to cultural and environmental circumstances, meaning that different societies may have gender roles which differentiate from one another. Hence, a social role may become aged or illegitimate as a society change over time. For instance, while gender differences remain, where women for instance often perform more domestic work than men, one of the effects of industrialization was the weakening of the sex-based division of labor and gender hierarchy (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Wood & Eagly, 2002).

2.3 The nuclear family, conservatism, and religion

The nuclear family is concretely defined as “a family group that consists of only parents and children” (merriam webster, n.d). The definition is extended by Popenoe (1993) to encompass a family which consists of a heterosexual, monogamous marriage, where the division of labor is clear cut and the male serves as a primary breadwinner, while the female takes on the role of the housewife. Popenoe goes on to argue that the nuclear family had its prime in the 1950s and has since then been on decline, stating that families “for whatever reasons, are not as successfully meeting the needs of society as they once were”. He problematizes this decline yet does not appear to fully grasp why it is occurring, other than claiming that it is due to adults prioritizing their own self-fulfillment over that of their children. Such notions regarding the importance of the traditional nuclear family for the health of children may be questioned in terms of their relevance in a society where family structures come in many different shapes and forms. In an analysis carried out by Biblarz and Stacey (2010), it was found that two-parent households have advantages over single-parent households, and that this was the case *regardless* of gender, marital status, sexual orientation, or biogenetic status of the parents. From this, it may then be argued that the concern regarding the dissolution of the nuclear family unit is rather a case of ideological conviction, than a genuine concern about children’s development.

Changes in American family structure may be hypothesized to result from a mixture of economic, social, and cultural factors which are continuously undergoing change. As such, it is an analysis which deserves an exploration of its own. However, in terms of the role of the mother, it may be argued that women's increased participation in the labor force is one of the most significant changes. Simultaneous with the women's movement during the era of second wave feminism, the increase of women in the labor force consequently led them to gain economic independence, and in turn allowed them to pursue higher education and careers of

their own (Bianchi et al., 2007). Furthermore, for most working-class Americans today, wages have remained stagnant for the past three decades (Mishel et al., 2015), and from that, it may be inferred that there is additionally an increased necessity for family households to rely on more than one income, meaning that a more traditional, patriarchal, family structure becomes unattainable for most.

Despite major strides made regarding the equal rights of women in all spheres of society, along with the arguably increased economic need for both men and women to work for wages, there still appears to exist a large section of American society who hold on to traditional ideas of gender and gender roles. It is suggested that this is the result of a national shift to the right in the 80s as a consequence of backlash toward the civil rights and social movements of the 60s, where anxieties regarding challenges to sexual norms and racial hierarchies were capitalized upon by political activists. The conservative movement which has dominated American society since the Reagan era of the 80s, has been observed to contain elements which appear to be in opposition with one another. More specifically, it embraces the libertarian notion of a free market, in which both taxes and government interventions remain low, while at the same time maintaining the close connection between church and state, along with a strict commitment to traditional sexual norms (Philips-Fein, 2011).

Furthermore, in a study carried out by Whitehead and Perry (2019), it was found that the strongest predictor for traditionalist gender ideologies was Christian nationalism. They identify three potential mechanisms for this connection. The first mechanism is the protection of symbolic boundaries, meaning for instance, considering only certain families as legitimate, mainly the traditional nuclear family. The second mechanism is the mutual reinforcement of social institutions, where, as a result of the internalization of Christian nationalism and traditional gender ideologies, they are reinforced through more mundane everyday interactions. The third and final mechanism is described as the gendered narrative of American civic participation, which refers to how there is oftentimes a focus on portraying societal feats as being intrinsically masculine and patriarchal. Finally, they point out the significant overlap between religion and politics amongst Americans, both on the individual and societal level. For instance, there is a connection to be found in the era of Donald Trump, where he partook in “identitarian Christianity”, using conservative rhetoric in various cultural debates, including the one regarding gender. As Philips-Fein (2011) notes, cultural and economic politics cannot be separated, but rather, one must keep in mind the connections between sexual politics and conservative economic ideas.

3. Theoretical framework

The purpose of the following chapter is to present concepts and theories which provide an overview of the overarching perspectives of the exploration, and which were deemed relevant for the analysis of the gathered data. The first section deals with Friedrich Engels's *The origin of the family, private property and the state* (1884, 2020) and the second section discusses Beverly Skeggs's (1997) concept of respectability. The final section will provide a positioning regarding the theoretical framework.

3.1 The origin of the family

In his book “*The origin of the family, private property and the state*” (1884, 2020), Engels argues that the monogamous family structure as we know it today has not always existed in this form, but rather has passed through various stages of development, dependent on the economic mode of production. In contrast to Eagly and Wood's social role theory, the development of certain social roles is explained as a result of the dialectical relationship between biological differences of men and women on one hand, and changes in the mode of production on the other. Based on anthropological research, Engels notes that the oppression of women in society has not always existed. Instead, he argues that it emerged along with the development of class society, which in turn evolved as a consequence of the neolithic revolution, where the production of a surplus became possible for the first time in human history. The surplus, and thus, the power, came into the hands of men due to the biological division of labor, in which the men were responsible for the production giving rise to the surplus (p. 35-36).

A monogamous, patriarchal family structure was developed out of the need to secure the father's right of inheritance to his children, whereas in earlier societies there had primarily existed a “mother right”. As fatherhood could not be determined at this time in the same way as motherhood, it became necessary to confine the wife to the household and strictly enforce her fidelity (p. 36-39). It is then upon this to be inferred that this makes up the roots of how the roles of men and women are viewed in society today, and that the existing norms and ideals regarding gender are in a constant dialectic relationship with the existing material reality, which in turn is derived from the mode of production.

Engels' notes that with the introduction of the large-scale production of industrial capitalism, the wife was taken out of the home and onto the labor market; and with this, progresses are made regarding equal rights, at least on a technical level, such as the woman's

right to divorce her husband, however, true social equality has yet to be achieved. Furthermore, a dilemma arises here, as it leads to the proletarian woman having to make the choice between carrying out her duties in the private service of her family or taking part in public production and guaranteeing her own economic independence. In the cases where the husband remains the breadwinner of the family, he acquires a position of supremacy, in which he becomes the bourgeois and his wife the proletariat within the family (p. 52-54).

The conclusion of this standpoint then, is that the inclusion of women in public production is of a progressive character and remains the first condition for the liberation of women, but in order to achieve true equality there is still a necessity to abolish the characteristic of the monogamous family as the economic unit of society (p. 54-55). This is because the monogamous, patriarchal family structure inherently leans on the domestic labor of the woman for the propagation of the children, and as such, despite technical, equal rights on the juridical level, it also becomes necessary to give household management a more public character.

3.2 Respectability

According to Beverly Skeggs (1997), respectability is equivalent to high social value, and in turn, provides access to cultural and material assets; hence, it is something which most individuals are likely to strive toward. Skeggs defines respectability as “the most ubiquitous signifier of class” and explains how it is closely linked to appraisals of race, gender and class and how these all come together to form a person's social position in a society. She argues that it was originally the white, British, ruling class that set the bar for respectability, and did so against the masses of the British working class, and furthermore, that many white, working class women were attempted to be rescued from a state of non-respectability through religion (p. 1-5). The role of religion is also argued by Engels (1880, 2017, p. 19-20) as a tool utilized by the ruling class with the purpose of subduing and controlling the working class to prevent them from seizing power.

In her book “Formations of class and gender” Skeggs (1997) identifies several processes that individuals consciously and subconsciously apply to position themselves as more respectable in society. These include identification, differentiation, recognition, disidentification, dissimulation, and subjective construction. It is through the identification and recognition of what is deemed respectable that individuals construct their identities, and position themselves in a given society. This in turn leads to the disidentification, and dissimulation from traits that may be connected to one's own gender, class, or ethnicity and that

are oftentimes represented negatively (p. 76). An example of this may be the notion that women are oftentimes represented and stereotyped as more emotional than men, which may lead some women to distance themselves and hence, disidentify with such aspects of their personalities. Furthermore, the category of woman Skeggs explains, is produced as a model of an ideal bourgeois femininity which may only be achieved under the right economic and cultural conditions, and it continues to exert power as only a small group of women are able to live up to such an ideal, and are therefore able to acquire cultural approval, moral superiority and distinctions from others (p. 20-21).

More subtly, the process of differentiation occurs as a way in which an individual asserts their own personality and way of being, as something inherent to their person, rather than as a result of institutional differentiation (p. 60). Recognizing one's own social position is central to individuals' subjective constructions, and it is through the constant categorizations made by oneself and others that the subjective construction is navigated and evaluated (p. 4). Skeggs additionally puts emphasis on how subjective constructions are impacted by the restrictions to access, meaning that for instance the access to economic and institutional positions is not equally available for everyone, and therefore movement through social positions becomes more or less limited for certain parts of the population (p. 12).

3.3 Positioning regarding theoretical framework

The chosen theories for this study are of a complementary nature. The inclusion of Engel's Origin of the family provides the theoretical backdrop and foundation on which I have constructed the investigation, as it serves to give a materialist, historical explanation for the way family structures look like today, and the gender roles which have arisen from them. It emphasizes the role of the economic mode of production as a decisive force for the division of labor and presents a clear macrosocial theory of society. Using the concept of respectability on the other hand allows for complementary explanations of the processes that occur on an individual level, where a person's identity is construed within the confines of a given society. It provides a more detailed exploration into how identities are navigated and negotiated based on several aspects such as the economic and cultural context. The theories provide a helpful way in terms of analyzing the gathered data and will serve the purpose of contextualizing and anchoring the material.

4. Method

The purpose of this exploration was to investigate how conceptions of gender roles are navigated and negotiated by Caucasian, American women in the ages 45-65, and how the construction of their identities as women relates to aspects of personal values, religion, and societal change. To achieve this, a qualitative investigation has been conducted, in which semi-structured interviews were used to acquire a deeper understanding of the topic at hand. A deductive approach was applied to the analysis, in which relevant literature served as a template for the coding of the gathered data (Willig, 2013). The following sections under this chapter are presented as follows: participants, procedure, analytical method and ethical considerations.

4.1 Participants

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, along with the formulation of its purpose, a targeted selection of participants was applied (Bryman 2011, s. 434). More specifically, the aim was to find women between the ages of 45-65. The reason for choosing this age span lies primarily in the desire to conduct interviews with individuals who are of an age where they can reflect on any personal, and societal changes of the past three to six decades, while also ensuring that they have reached an age where they are not yet, alternatively just recently retired. This was necessary as some of the questions asked are related to work and family balance. Additionally, keeping the age span relatively wide potentially allows for a wider range of perspectives in relation to the posed questions.

The participants were primarily acquired through convenience sampling, where I utilized a close contact as a gatekeeper, which in turn allowed me to reach out to participants to whom I did not have strong connections. I could then apply snowball sampling, meaning that they were in turn asked to send requests to acquaintances of their own. The intention was to acquire participants who varied in terms of lifestyle and personal identity. The benefits of snowball sampling lie in its flexibility, while at the same time running a higher risk of sampling bias (Parker et al, 2019). Additionally, the disadvantage remains that the participants may have a preexisting perception of me, which in turn may affect the way they choose to answer certain questions. This was combated by displaying complete neutrality throughout each interview, especially in the cases where the interviewee had prior knowledge of me.

In the end, five interviews were conducted with participants in the ages 46-63, who all resided in small towns of three different counties (Morgan, OH, Jackson, WV, and Pleasants, WV) located in southeast Ohio and northwest West Virginia. All participants had children of

their own and were currently in heterosexual relationships. The participants varied quite broadly in terms of their current occupation and highest level of completed education. Moreover, all participants reported having religious beliefs. A brief presentation of each participant will now be given.

Linda: 46 years old, working as a healthcare provider, and has resided in St Mary's (Pleasants County, WV) all her life. She is married with four children, and her highest completed level of education is 12th grade in high school³. Considers herself non-religious, but still believes in the power of prayer.

Mary: 61 years old, working as a nurse, and has lived in Cottageville (Jackson County, WV) for the past 20 years. She is married and has three children, and her highest completed level of education is an associate degree⁴. She is part of a Southern Baptist church and values being a good person.

Elizabeth: 61 years old who lives in Malta (Morgan County, OH) and works as a banker. She is married and has one child, and has a high school degree, and some college with no degrees. She holds Christian values and describes herself as very involved with her church. She is not part of any particular branch of Christianity.

Judy: 63 years old, and has lived in Stockport (Morgan County, OH) for the past 35 years. She currently works as a board of election member and studied until sophomore year in college. She is married with two children and is a non-denominational Christian. She explains her values as living strictly by the bible and views religion as the most central part of her life.

Cheryl: 53 years old and has lived in McConnelsville (Morgan County, OH) all her life. She holds a position as an executive director and has a master's degree. She is not married, but lives together with a partner, and she has one child. She is a Christian and is a member of Church of Christ. She values family the most, and says it always comes first.

As the participants were relatively similar in terms of ethnicity, residence, marital status and religious beliefs, it may be argued that the sample is relatively homogenous and as such, they may express similar notions and values. While knowledge of the attitudes of a more specific group may be generated from the exploration, one must keep in mind that its qualitative nature does not allow for any generalizations to a larger population to be made (Willig, 2013, p. 491).

³ 12th grade of American high school is equivalent to the final year of Swedish upper secondary school.

⁴ An associate degree is usually validated as an "yrkeshögskoleexamen" in the Swedish school system.

4.2 Procedure

As the study was concerned with the personal values and experiences of participants, semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate approach to find answers to the posed research questions. Semi-structured interviews entail the use of a prepared questionnaire (Appendix) for all interviews, while still allowing for any additional follow-up questions to be asked (Willig, 2013, p. 106-109). This grants a certain degree of flexibility to the procedure, while keeping it anchored to the topic at hand.

The questionnaire was designed with my research questions in mind, and I have chosen to divide it into four categories spanning identity, society/culture, family/work, and religion. In the first section, questions such as “what does it mean to you to be a woman?” and “Can you think of any values that you feel are central to your identity?” are asked to map out more individual reflections of womanhood and whether it might align with more or less traditional ideals and values. In the second section, questions such as “If you think about the norms for women today vs when you grew up, would you say they’ve changed? If so, in what way?” are asked with the intention of getting the person to reflect more outward with regards to societal change regarding gender norms and how they relate their own identity with it. In the third section, questions about family structure and work life are asked with the purpose of investigating whether their personal values align with the material reality they’re living in, along with how this reality is navigated. Finally, the fourth section contains a few questions regarding religion and the extent to which it is a central part of their identities, and whether it influences the way they view the roles of women. The purpose of this section is to examine whether they align themselves with the religious ideals that are dominant in the areas they reside in.

Participants received some background regarding the topic of the study, however, the full purpose was not revealed to them, as I did not want them to think in more definite terms of e.g., conservative, and liberal, but rather fully explore their own multifaceted unique perspectives. The interviews had a planned length of about 45-60 minutes and ended up taking between 30-60 minutes, and they were all conducted online using the video chat function on the platform of Facebook messenger. It would have been preferred to conduct the interviews physically, as online interviews run the risk of technical difficulties such as disturbances in the network, along with potentially causing an environment which feels less personal for the interviewee (Svensson & Ahrne, 2022). However, this was not a viable option neither economically, nor for the timeframe of this study. Additionally, the benefits of conducting

interviews online are that they are more time efficient and allow for more flexibility as the interviewee can do it from the comfort of their own home. Each interview was recorded after acquiring informed consent and was then transcribed and analyzed.

4.3 Analytical method

For the analysis of the gathered material, a thematic analysis has been applied, in which the purpose is to find any similarities, differences, patterns and themes with reference to the purpose and research questions. As Willig (2013, p. 179-180) explains, a thematic analysis is not tied to any specific theoretical approach but is rather flexible in that it may be applied to a wide range of qualitative research. It is therefore necessary to conduct it based on the research questions of the study. A deductive approach to the analysis has been used, where the emerging themes of the data are derived from relevant literature.

After the collection of the data, the first step in the analytical process was the coding, where I initially read through the accounts several times to familiarize myself with the material. Some notes of especially interesting things were made in this stage. Next, I would go through each account, and sort it into various codes which were anchored in my research questions. The next step was to allow the various codes to be sorted into larger themes, which in turn could be connected back to the relevant literature. For instance, codes such as “important values/ideals” and “descriptions of material reality” would eventually come together to form the theme of

“Ideals and reality in conflict”, where the codes could be contrasted with one another to allow a theme to emerge which emphasized the sometimes-contradictory nature of the participants. While thematic analysis is considered a relatively easy-to-use method of analysis, it is vital that the researcher is conscious of the theoretical and epistemological direction of their analysis, as they otherwise run the risk of finding themes which do not hold any real representation (Willig, 2013, p. 199). Using a deductive approach in which literature has served as an anchor for my analysis, I have been able to take the gathered material to a deeper level, rather than merely demonstrating the topics which were covered through my interview questions. However, as Willig (2013, p. 199) additionally points out, one must also be mindful with this approach to not let the focus on existing theory and literature steer the analysis away from any potential new insights which may emerge from the data. This was achieved both by allowing the interviews to go beyond my initial questions and by conducting the initial coding of the material separately before putting it in connection with existing theory.

4.4 Ethical considerations

As with all research, it is necessary to meet the requirements for ethical considerations guidelines (Willig, 2013, p. 96-97). All participants were asked to provide their informed consent to the participation and recording of their interviews in the study. Further, they were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any point during the process. The complete anonymity of each participant was additionally emphasized. Before the beginning of an interview, participants were informed of the topic of the study, and were provided with a general overview of the different sections that the interview was going to cover. Moreover, they were informed that any information which they did not want to be included in the transcript would be removed, and that all questions would be completely voluntary to answer with the possibility of skipping any question which felt uncomfortable. The transcription was carried out the day after each recorded interview, and the recordings were in turn deleted to prevent the material from being shared with anyone unauthorized.

It is of importance to address the role of the researcher in a study such as this one, and as Willig (2013, p. 95-96, 504) points out, it is impossible for a qualitative researcher to remain completely objective, and one way to ensure a greater degree of credibility in this type of research is through reflexivity, where one acknowledges the ways in which the researchers perspective may affect data collection and analysis. For instance, my own personal beliefs, and the context of my upbringing was quite differentiated from that of the participants, which may run the risk of imposing subconscious judgements upon their narratives. However, similarities in e.g., ethnicity and gender may have instead led me to identify with them to an extent. While relating to participants is not always necessarily an issue, it may however cause certain questions to not be asked due to being seen as irrelevant or obvious. To counteract this, I have continuously attempted to not take any information given for granted, but rather attempted to get clarifications for a lot of questions asked, to not impose my own perception onto the information being given. Furthermore, to ensure an analysis free of my own personal associations, I have been working in a thorough, systematic manner with the gathered material, in which critical reflection has been continuously applied.

5. Analysis

In this chapter, the results of my investigation will be discussed in relation to the previous research and theoretical framework. The purpose of this section is to provide an attempt at answering my research questions regarding the notions of womanhood and femininity the women hold, how they position themselves with regards to traditional and modern ideals of female identity, and to what extent their ideals regarding gender roles align with their lived reality. It is of relevance to keep in mind that the topic of investigation is one of vast range, and my analysis will only be able to provide partial insights to greatly nuanced questions. No definite conclusions from this analysis may be made, however, it does generate knowledge worthy of further investigation. As such, the exploration may still provide a degree of value to the multifaceted topic that is gender and gender roles.

Section 5.1 will discuss how the women view notions of womanhood and femininity, followed by section 5.2, which dives deeper into their attitudes regarding gender equality and feminism. Section 5.3 deals with concepts of modern and traditional women and section 5.4 explores the role of religion and traditional values in the women's perceptions of gender roles. Finally, section 5.5 examines how some of the women's ideals appear to come into conflict with their lived realities.

5.1 What does it mean to be a woman?

My very first question to each participant was "What does it mean to be a woman in your opinion?", and each time, it appeared to cause some uncertainty, as the question had no simple way of being answered. Some of the participants explained that they had never really thought too much about it, and my first interviewee, Linda, gave the brief answer that being a woman is "busy and demanding", and Mary simply stated:

Well, a female is all I've been all my life, so I don't, I guess it just means I was born a female, and that was what I was supposed to be.

The other three women however, emphasized the role of being a mother as one of the most central aspects of womanhood, and when asked whether the role as a mother was central to her identity, Linda also affirmed that it definitely was. Mary on the other hand stated that work currently is a larger part of her identity, but then quickly followed up by saying that her role as a grandmother was her favorite thing. The biological function of giving birth is arguably one

of the more significant differences between men and women, and identifying strongly with the role of “mother”, especially as it is something which not all women have the biological capacity for, may provide a way for an individual to assume a higher degree of both respectability (Skeggs, 1997), and purpose, as it pertains to a most essential function in industrial society, namely, the propagation of children (Engels, 1884, 2020).

All the participants had children of their own, however, they were grown up, and no longer living at home. One could argue that this makes the role of “mother” less relevant for the women, but may be connected to the research suggesting that most people will be influenced by overarching societal institutions, hence leading most women to have similar self-meanings as for instance mothers (Kroska, 2002), along with the bourgeois morality where this is the case even when they are actively partaking in the labor force (Dixon, 1977).

Furthermore, upon reflecting about traits that differentiate men and women from one another, the biological attribute of strength was often brought up. Other qualities relating more to individual interests were also brought up to emphasize and argue the importance of heterosexual relations in the rearing of children.

I think men tend to, you know, they're physically the stronger sex, so that does lend to them having those types of roles a lot. I think as a general, and of course there's exceptions to every role, but I think as a general rule they are not as nurturing as females, which, you know, kind of puts us in those roles more.

- Cheryl

I mean, the best scenario is for each child to have a mom and dad to learn from, because I feel like males and females naturally bring things to a child that maybe two women raising a child may not be able to do just naturally. But in some instances, that's not possible. But I feel like, you know, there is a guy around that could, you know, take the little guy and help, go fishing with him or something like that, that boys kind of like to do more, or you know, work on a vehicle, or learn how to put a chain on a bike, that may not come as easily to a woman.

- Elizabeth

Cheryl’s reflection about how men are supposedly less nurturing than women, and Elizabeth’s thoughts on the complementary qualities of men and women remain in contradiction to the research conducted by Biblarz & Stacy (2010) which suggests that in the case of childrearing, the gender of the parents is not a significant factor, but rather that of greater

importance is having two parents who are compatible with each other. However, as Cheryl points out, there may be a tendency for women to be placed in nurturing roles more often than men. This is in line with Eagly & Wood's (1987; 2012) social role theory, which suggests that women are assumed to be more caring in nature simply due to their capacity of giving birth and are therefore placed in such roles more often. Elizabeth adheres to this perspective by assuming that certain interests, such as fishing, naturally come more easily to men than women, rather than as a result of lifelong socialization (Redlick, 2018).

In line with Popenoe's (1993) arguments regarding the ability of the nuclear family to properly meet the needs of children, several of the women stress the importance of a heterosexual relationship as important for a child due to the complementary qualities of men and women. The women's opinions in this regard demonstrate a quite clear connection to a gender essentialist perspective (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005) It may be hypothesized that this line of thought is a consequence of a more conservative, religious upbringing, and a connection can be made to the protection of symbolic boundaries in which only certain families are deemed as legitimate (Whitehead & Perry, 2019). However, Mary distinguished herself from the others in this regard by verbalizing a degree of ambivalence toward the notion of homosexuality being viewed as sinful in the bible.

I mean just like, with maybe gay marriages in the eyes of the lord it's a sin but in my heart, I truly think that if that's who you love that's who you love type thing. I don't have to agree with it, but I don't place my judgement on anyone that may be in a gay marriage or whatever, I mean, I don't judge that.

- Mary

Furthermore, all the women were asked whether they believed there is such a thing as an unwomanly woman, and the answers varied quite a lot, with Linda answering that no, there is no such thing, to Elizabeth and Cheryl reflecting on the fact that there are women who simply look more manly or do more typically male things. Mary and Judy both stated that they considered "men trying to be women" as unwomanly, making a reference to trans women, and in both cases, they explicitly stated that this was something they did not agree with.

Unwomanly woman... Well, I think that would be a man trying to be a woman, that changes their gender up. Yeah, I don't believe in that, it's just my view.

- Mary

Despite several of the women following their statements up with an explanation that it is okay for someone to dress and act any way they want, their answers infer that they still hold a relatively rigid perception of gender roles and norms. A person who behaves inconsistently with gendered expectations still yields the social consequence of being viewed as “unwomanly” (Alters & Schiff, 2009). The women’s statements lend to an interpretation that even though stereotypes of gender remain with them, the transgression of such roles and norms appear to be more neutrally perceived.

Contrastingly, in the case of trans women, there seemed to be less understanding and acceptance of someone wanting to change their gender. Rather, it was something which came across as being perceived as quite outlandish and fraudulent. It may be speculated that this is partially due to the fixation on certain traits as being inherent to men and women respectively rather than socially constructed, along with the emphasis on childbirth as a central function of womanhood. Such a perspective will not allow much room for validating trans women's identities but will instead view them as biological men pretending to be women, rather than a sum of biological, cognitive and sociocultural factors. As Skeggs (1997) argues, the category of woman is produced as a model of an ideal bourgeois femininity and may only be achieved under the right economic and cultural conditions. As such, only a small group of women can live up to it, and trans women's inability to fit into such a narrow definition may lead to their identities being deemed immoral, or at the very least unnatural.

5.2 An egalitarian attitude

I'm all about being an equal. I mean, I don't expect my spouse to do something that I myself wouldn't do.

- Linda

Throughout her interview, Linda was adamantly pointing to the fact that she considered herself an equal, and that her relationship with her husband was a collaborative effort, where all tasks could be carried out by either partner. This notion was echoed by all the other women, and they all held the belief that men and women today are much more equal as opposed to when they grew up. It may be argued that the increase in gender equality is partially a result of the power struggles central to the various feminist movements of the 20th century (Malinowska,

2020). However, when I asked the women whether they identified as feminist, none of them agreed, but rather seemed to hold a more negative view of feminism or demonstrated a degree of uncertainty of what being a feminist entail.

I think in today's society with all the stuff that's going on, I think women are able and capable of doing just as well as a man. [...] The way it is now, women have just as much opportunities as men. I don't see that we're held back any.

- Mary

What I see on TV is feminism is kind of ugly, you know? I guess I'm not into manbashing and that kind of thing and, you know, I feel like we can hold those jobs as long as it's not physical, or that a man can't. I don't feel like I identify as a feminist. Maybe equal opportunity.

- Elizabeth

What Mary and Elizabeth are stating about the equal opportunities of men and women, and the association of feminism with “man-bashing” may be paralleled with arguments regarding how the rise of post-feminism in the 90s brought with it attitudes about the superfluousness of feminism as a movement, and rather suggesting that equality has been achieved. Elizabeth's statement that the feminism she sees on TV is ugly may additionally be suggested to demonstrate how media may function as a tool for a neoliberalist agenda which attempts to undermine the collective movement of feminism, and rather propagate individual responsibility (Pomerantz et al, 2013). In line with this, Linda goes on to explain how she grew up with very little and so in order to get the things she wanted; it was necessary to put forth the effort to get them herself. Notions of independence, and the emphasis on the individual in creating their own success are sentiments additionally inherent to both third wave feminism and the concurrent rise of post-feminism. (Pomerantz et al, 2013). Cheryl explains in a similar fashion how she associates feminism with a more radical ideology, along with the explanation that she does not feel particularly suppressed or empowered on the basis of being a woman. The refusal of admitting victimhood is, according to Pomerantz et al (2013) an additional way in which the ideology of post-feminism functions to prevent collective mobilization for social change.

All the women expressed that men and women enjoy equal opportunities, particularly in the labor market. and as such the possibility of equal success. Yet none of them appeared to

reflect on the fact that equal opportunity does not necessarily lead to equal outcome due to inequalities inherent to the system. As explained by Engels (1884, 2020), an inevitable consequence of the industrial capitalist mode of production was the inclusion of women in the labor force, and as such, progress has been made in terms of the equal rights of women, at least on a technical level. In this regard, the women are arguably correct when they talk about improved equality as opposed to what they saw when they were younger where most women in their surroundings did not work. However, the very character of the monogamous family unit remains in opposition to a truly equal society, as it inherently leans on the domestic labor of women (Engels, 1884, 2020; Bianchi et al, 2007).

A parallel may additionally be made to Dixon's (1977) bourgeois morality and its connection to the effects of superstructural institutions of capital; the women's displays of negligent attitudes toward existing structural inequalities inherent to the capitalist system, along with arguments of the necessity of heterosexual family structures, and the tendency to primarily self-identify as mothers, may be argued to demonstrate resistance to political development and point to a low level of class consciousness.

5.3 Modern and traditional women

When asked to explain the differences between a modern and a traditional woman, all the women described a traditional woman as someone who stayed home and took care of the house and kids, and the modern woman as someone who pursued a career of her own.

Traditional basically is what I would have been where I stayed at home and took care of the kids, you know, cooked, cleaned, did all that and everything, to where the modern woman, a lot of times they have to work. Society has made it to where always two people have to work.

- Judy

As Judy points out, societal changes have played a decisive role in women's increased participation in the labor force, and as such have given them the opportunity of acquiring financial independence (Bianchi et al., 2007; Malinowska, 2020). Through her statement that two people *have* to work, Judy further implies the economic necessity of a double income household (Mishel et al., 2015). This is echoed by three of the others, and in particular Linda, who continuously throughout her interview stated that it is no longer viable to rely on only one income, but rather a household must have two people working.

It may then be argued that when one talks about a modern and a traditional woman respectively, it is this aspect of economic independence which lies at the core of distinguishing between the two. As all the women were currently working, one could assume that they themselves would identify as modern women, but this was oftentimes not the case. Instead, most of them identified themselves as more traditional, or at the very least as a mix between the two. Only Cheryl described herself as modern due to her education level, but she added that she still holds traditional viewpoints on some things. Elizabeth initially claimed to be in between modern and traditional due to having worked, but then changed her mind and claimed to be more traditional as she had not “went out and conquered anything”.

For some of the women, it was their enjoyment of doing work in the home which they claimed made them more traditional, yet four of them reported household chores as being a collaborative effort, rather than the responsibility of one partner. Mary was the only one who explained that she had hired a housekeeper due to her husband’s unwillingness to help out in the house. A hypothesis could be made in this regard; based on research suggesting that women oftentimes carry out a larger portion of the domestic labor (Bianchi et al., 2007; Engels, 1884, 2020) along with some women expressing enjoyment in carrying out domestic tasks, they may have an unequal division of domestic labor, while still perceiving it as equally shared, and fair.

It appeared to be quite difficult for the women to pinpoint exactly why they considered themselves traditional, indicating that the question is of a rather complex nature. If one were to examine the question further, it may be of interest to explore the connections between religious values, and perspectives of gender and sexuality in whether someone considers themselves more traditional. As the women reside in predominantly white, Christian and republican areas (Data USA, n.d; PRRI, 2022), one could for instance examine the potential connections and alignments between a traditional identity, and the “identitarian Christianity” of the Trump era (Whitehead & Perry, 2019).

These findings indicate that there is more to the distinction between modern and traditional women, than the economic position they hold in society. The opposition between the women describing themselves as more traditional, while at the same time holding a quite egalitarian standpoint on the roles and opportunities of men and women may be said to demonstrate the overlap between libertarian economics and conservative values which have dominated American politics for the last four decades (Philips-Fein, 2011).

5.4 The role of religion

Four out of the five women reported being religious, and more specifically they subscribed to various branches of Christianity. Linda was the only one who described herself as not being particularly religious, and she did not subscribe to any religion; however, she claimed to believe in God and the power of prayer. All the women were asked how central religion was to them and the way they live, and to most of them religion appeared to play a very important role, both as a form of moral guidance, and to feel supported and grateful.

It's number one, I mean it's always at the top, as far as in the things I do even. I mean, like I said, the way I was raised and everything, I've been in the church since I was two weeks old, but it's always played a big role in my life.

- Judy

Very important. Like I said, I feel blessed with what I had the opportunity in my life of, so when I complain about anything, I just think back it could have been a lot different and I believe that you know, God only gives us what we can handle or however that little saying goes. But yes, religion and believing has helped, been a big part of my life.

- Mary

Judy's statements about religion being top priority in everything she does may be paralleled to the mutual reinforcement of social institutions. By making religion a central part of one's life, which almost all the women explained it to be, it inevitably becomes something which is internalized and reinforced through the more mundane everyday interactions (Whitehead & Perry, 2019).

Mary further explains how she looks to God to cope with any hardships she comes across, and how it helps her feel grateful for what she has, even when times are tough. Looking at one's world this way appears on the one hand, quite positive, and even profound in the sense that it allows a person to keep their spirits up. On the other hand, if one is to look back to Engels' (1880, 2017, p. 19-20) statements about religion, where it is explained as a tool of the ruling class with the purpose of suppressing the working class; one may speculate that an attitude of "God only gives us what we can handle" forms a convenient way to divert any discontent with the state of things as something the individual simply must bear and accept, thus allowing for a greater degree of exploitation to be exerted.

Moreover, Elizabeth, Judy, and Cheryl all admitted that there are certain guidelines for men and women respectively in their religions, in which men are to be the head of the households, the leaders, and spiritual guides, whereas women are supposed to fill the more supportive function of their male leaders. Women are hence to be led, and to provide services in the forms of e.g., childrearing and cooking.

[...] with Church of Christ, it's more of a, it's very traditional, the men do all the preaching and all the spoken roles, the women are basically, the women I guess can take care of the kids so, I guess it is a very traditional, and I guess I've always just accepted that as the way it is.

- Cheryl

A traditional organization of the church may be paralleled to the gendered narrative of American civic participation, where societal feats oftentimes are portrayed as intrinsically masculine and patriarchal (Whitehead & Perry, 2019). One may make the deduction that a religious organization which only allows its male members to take on leading positions inevitably will hold a perspective of societal feats as the consequence of the actions of men.

Cheryl demonstrates an awareness of the fact that the organization of her church is of a more traditional, patriarchal nature. However, by claiming that she has simply just accepted it as the way it is, she appears to not have questioned or problematized it despite the changes she has seen regarding gender equality in other facets of society. She goes on to describe how, due to her currently living with a man to whom she is not married, which is not acceptable in her church, she feels conflicted about not being “a good Christian” while still strongly holding on to the beliefs. A connection to the bourgeois morality may be found here, which holds the conviction that it is God’s law that women shall remain subservient as it serves to maintain the nuclear family structure and its inherent exploitation and subjugation of women in it (Dixon, 1977). Moreover, as Skeggs (1997) explains, religion has been used to grant white, workingclass women respectability, and as such, it may be hypothesized that the strong attachment Cheryl feels toward religion and the church is partially due to the degree of respectability it grants her, which in turn allows her to remain more lenient in terms of accepting a more traditional organizational structure. She explains how the promise of heaven, along with the community and support from the church are the main reasons for her subscribing to and remaining within the church.

Furthermore, Whitehead and Perry (2019) found a significant overlap between religion and politics amongst Americans on both an individual and societal level, and this was especially noticeable in how the women responded to the question regarding the separation of church and state. Majority of the women believed that there should be no separation, but rather they expressed a need to involve the church more in society which is in line with conservative politics (Philips-Fein, 2011). Several of the women expressed a concern with the development of the country's governance, and both Elizabeth and Judy believed rising crime rates in the country are a direct result of God being taken out of schools. Linda contrastingly maintained that, while she viewed the government as corrupt, including the church more would not make things any better.

We need to get back into it. I mean it needs to be, God needs to be back in, in the role of government and schools and all of it, I mean it's, I mean some of the stuff that is going on in the world is just a little bit crazy. And I think they're trying to push God out of the politics, and I think that's why some of it is just a little bit crazy.

- Mary

The government, it's just corrupt, and until they can fix that, there is nothing that adding church is gonna do to help that. [...] I mean, we've got presidents hiding taxes, and um, vital information not supposed to leave the white house, we're finding it in basements, and closets, it's just corrupt.

- Linda

5.5 Reality and ideals in conflict

An interesting finding which emerged during the process of coding the interviews was how several of the women within the span of their interviews provided demonstrations of how ideals and reality sometimes come into conflict with one another. As mentioned above, most of the women contended that men and women are equal, and their opinions on feminism suggests that they do not see the necessity for a movement that fights for the equal rights of women. However, both Mary and Elizabeth gave concrete examples of situations in which they have been treated differently on the basis of their gender.

Buying a car two years ago, it was like, I was invisible in the car dealership unless my husband was with me, and it was kind of like, they didn't wanna talk to me, it was my husband, until I finally told them I was buying the car not my husband, and if they wanted to sell me a vehicle they would speak with me and I would be the one that they would be dealing with and not my husband.

- Mary

[...] in the banking, at work, you know, we see the older guys in the same positions as the same ladies. There's still that dominance there where they get paid more, but you do their work for them, you know, that's just, I think in that particular maybe, line of work.

- Elizabeth

These statements demonstrate that even though the perception of equality between the sexes exists in the minds of the women, their lived realities indicate something different. It may be as suggested by Pomerantz et al (2013) that there is a refusal of admitting victimhood amongst women due to the contradiction that experiences such as these provide to the ideal of an existing social equality. This is further enforced by Cheryl, who does not consider herself as suppressed or empowered on the basis of her gender, and who maintains that men and women are more equal today, yet she remains part of a church which still enforces rigid, traditional, gender roles in its practice.

Moreover, both Elizabeth and Judy state that according to their religion, the man is supposed to be the head of the household, which in itself may be interpreted as a patriarchal notion contradicting a more egalitarian perspective. However, when I asked Elizabeth how she applies this notion in her own household, she simply replied that it is something which has not really been a factor, but rather that she and her husband make decisions mutually.

A quite clear contradiction was additionally provided by Mary, who initially claimed that a more traditional woman who stays home to take care of the children and household is a lucky woman. Yet, when I asked her if she would have rather taken on such a role if given the chance, the response provided a rather different perspective.

No, no, I don't think so. My husband was military so, for like six months there, I stayed at home, and I did not care for it. You know, it was only so much cleaning you could do in a day's time. You know, every day, I needed to be, I needed to work, I felt like I was contributing to the household [...] I enjoyed it, I enjoyed working.

Mary, and several of the other women maintained that having the means to allow for one parent to stay at home to take care of the kids is something positive. Simultaneously, almost all of them described how working and contributing to the household was something which felt good and important to them. One could parallel this to how Engels (1884, 2020) describes the dilemma for proletarian wives where they must make the choice between carrying out family duties or taking part in public production and guaranteeing their own financial independence. As most of the women point out, there is an economic necessity for both partners in a household to work and contribute, which is most likely due to stagnant wages (Mishel et al., 2015). It highlights the necessity of giving household management a more public character (Engels, 1884, 2020), which in turn stands in opposition with the individualism inherent to libertarian economic policy and conservative ideology.

6. Conclusion and discussion

The purpose of this essay was to explore how conceptions about gender roles, both traditional and modern, are produced and negotiated by Caucasian, American women, to examine the connection between notions of femininity and womanhood, and the economic, sociopolitical and religious context of the women's geographical locations, and to gain a deeper perspective on how old and new ideologies of gender may or may not coexist on a personal level. The essay was based on the research questions: *What notions of womanhood and femininity are held by Caucasian, American women? How do the women position themselves with regards to traditional and modern ideals of female identity? To what extent do their ideals regarding gender roles align with their realities?*

The results of this exploration demonstrate that most of the women ascribed motherhood as an important part of their identities, and the role of nurturer, and caretaker was described as central to womanhood. Men and women were often explained as possessing certain differentiating qualities, which were biologically inherent and complementary to one another, rather than a result of socialization (Eagly & Wood, 1987; 2012). For example, being nurturing was described as a female quality, while interests such as fishing or working on vehicles were deemed more male in nature. The complementary qualities of men and women were in turn used to argue the necessity of heterosexual relationships in the rearing of children, indicating a rather gender essentialist perspective on the roles of men and women (Crompton

& Lyonette, 2005). Moreover, holding a more rigid definition of the category “woman” may explain why some of the interviewees viewed women who do not act in accordance with the norm of femininity as unwomanly, along with demonstrating little understanding, and disagreement with the existence of trans women (Skeggs, 1997).

All the women were religious to a relatively large degree, and connections to all three mechanisms related to the connection between Christian nationalism and traditional gender ideologies (Whitehead & Perry, 2019) were found in the analyzed material. First, the protection of symbolic boundaries was related to in the emphasis on heterosexual families as optimal in the rearing of children. Secondly, the mutual reinforcement of social institutions could be found in some of the participants expressing that their religion was a central part in all aspects of their lives, and as such could be assumed to be reinforced through the more mundane everyday interactions. Lastly, the gendered narrative of American civic participation was inferred to stem from the way in which several of the women described their religions and churches as more patriarchal, especially in the case of Cheryl, who reported that her church specifically only has men in leading positions.

The equal opportunities of men and women, particularly in the labor market, was emphasized in all the interviews, and as such, none of the women identified themselves as feminist. Instead, they appeared to have a relatively negative view of feminism, where it in some cases was associated with “man bashing” or as a more radical ideology. Such attitudes were in line with post-feminist, and conservative ideologies (Pomerantz et al., 2013; PhilipsFein, 2011). The expressed ideal of existing gender equality was however contended by accounts where participants described concrete instances where they had experienced gender-based discrimination. It was furthermore contradicted by the way in which several of the women described how their religions are maintaining a patriarchal hierarchy within the church. As admitting victimhood in any of these instances stands in direct contradiction to the ideal of an existing social equality (Pomerantz et al., 2013), it may be inferred that such instances are dismissed, or ignored to protect one's own perception of the world.

The interviewees described how partaking in the work force is the main distinguishing feature of a modern woman, and while they were all employed at the time of the interviews, almost all of them positioned themselves as more traditional. The necessity of two people working in American society today (Mishel et al., 2015), was noted by several of the women, and it was thus understood that positioning oneself as traditional is not necessarily just related to one's position in the workforce. Rather, it may be proposed that their alignments with more

conservative, and religious stances on gender and sexuality is what makes these women consider themselves more traditional (Philips-Fein, 2011), which in turn is in line with the demographics of their geographical location (Data USA, n.d; PRRI, 2022). The contradiction between considering oneself more traditional and also egalitarian may be stated to demonstrate the connection between libertarian economics and conservative values which are inherent to, and dominate politics in contemporary American society (Philips-Fein, 2011).

6.1 Suggestions for future research

As this exploration was carried out on a relatively homogenous sample, it would have been of great interest to conduct a similar investigation on other groups. For instance, one could look at whether men from the same area as the women self-identify as fathers to the same extent as the women did. Alternatively, one could explore how women from more urban, and diverse parts of the country differ in terms of their perspectives on gender roles and what it means to be a woman. Such a comparison would potentially allow for an investigation of the extent to which politics and religion influence notions of gender and sexuality. Comparing different age groups would be another angle one could use to compare differences in beliefs and values. A potential limitation of this investigation is the choice of not asking the participants what their political alignments were. While they oftentimes expressed opinions which were more in line with conservative ideology, any conclusions in this regard become more speculative, and it may have been valuable to examine whether they themselves expressed alignment with the dominant politics of the area. Furthermore, as the sample of this investigation was quite small, no generalizations of its results may be made. However, it may serve as a foundation upon which to generate further research to explore the complexities and nuances of the topic of gender.

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Appendix: questionnaire

Provide explanations of:

- Informed consent
 - Anonymization
 - What will be included in the report
 - Any question is voluntary to respond to
 - Any information you don't want me to include will be removed
 - The right to withdrawal at any point during the interview
-
- Brief explanation of the different sections and how long it should take

Background questions

- Gender
- Age
- Residence (prior and now)
- Current occupation
- Education (highest level)
- Marital status + kids

Identity

- What does it mean to be a woman in your opinion?
 - Has this view changed over the course of your life?
- Can you think of any opportunities/limitations that come along with being a woman?
- Can you think of/describe any values that you feel are central to your identity?
 - Do you think these are common to the area you're living in?
- Would you identify yourself as a feminist? why/why not?

Society/culture

- When you hear the term “gender roles”, what comes to mind? (What do they look like for men vs women where you live) Do you feel that you fit in with these gender roles? why/why not?
- If you think about the norms/expectations (e.g., how to act, dress, look, life-choices) for women today vs when you grew up, would you say they've changed? If so, in what way?
- How would you explain the difference between a modern vs a traditional woman?
 - Which one do you most identify with? why?
- Do you think there are qualities that are inherently female or male in nature?
 - Is there such a thing as an “unwomanly” woman?
- In what ways do you think your surroundings have influenced the way you view womanhood?
- Regarding gender equality, in your opinion, would you say it's better, worse or unchanged today compared to when you were younger?

Work/family

- Why did you choose to work with (occupation)?
- You mentioned that you have #kids, was that something you always wanted?
- between being a woman, a wife, a mom, and a worker (specify occupation), do any of these feel more central to your identity?
- How are household chores divided in your household? Why was it divided that way?
- Is there such a thing as an optimal family structure? why/why not?
 - How do you view the more traditional notion of the nuclear family, where the husband goes to work, and the woman stays at home with the kids?

Religion

- Are you religious?
 - which religion
- How central is religion to your life and identity and the way you live?
 - Would you say it's common in your area for people to subscribe to religion?
- What role do you think religion has played regarding the way you view the roles of men and women in society? ◦ would you say your religion/church encourages men and women to act in different ways?
- There is an ongoing debate regarding the separation of church and state, what is your opinion on the role church should have in government? ◦ What benefits/limitations would you say there are with the inclusion of religious values in society in general?

Final questions

- Is there anything else you would like to include? Anything you feel I might have missed, or that you want to clarify?
- Is it okay if I reach out to you if I have any further questions?