



FACULTY
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SCIENCES

“It Is Difficult to Do 50/50”

A Qualitative Study on the Experiences of Unpaid
Labour and Love Among Cohabiting Heterosexual
Couples Without Children in Sweden

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Abstract

This thesis explores the dynamics of relationships, focusing on the themes of love, unpaid labour and unequal division. This research examines how traditional gender roles and societal expectations shape the experiences of individuals within heterosexual relationships in Sweden. Through a qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study reveals the multifaceted nature of love as both an emotional bond and a site of potential exploitation.

The findings highlight how the unequal division of unpaid labour perpetuates gender inequality, with women disproportionately bearing the burden of unpaid labour. This imbalance can have long term consequences and affect personal well-being but also reinforces patriarchal norms. The concepts of "love labour", "doing gender" and "love power" are analysed to understand how unpaid labour often are undervalued and exploited. The research underscores the importance of recognising and addressing gender inequality to promote more equitable intimate relationships.

This thesis contributes to the broader sociological and gender studies discourse on gender, unpaid labour, love and relationships by providing insights into the lived experiences of individuals navigating the complexities of love and unpaid labour.

Keywords: unpaid labour, love, doing gender, love power, love labour, heterosexual relationships.

Popular science abstract

This thesis explores the dynamics of relationships, with a focus on love, unpaid labour, and the unequal division of household responsibilities within heterosexual couples without children in Sweden. By using qualitative research methods, including interviews and thematic analysis, the study provides insights into how traditional gender roles and societal expectations shape the experiences of individuals.

The findings reveal that women often bear the disproportionate burden of unpaid labour, impacting and personal well-being while reinforcing patriarchal norms. Through the analysis of concepts such as "love labour," "doing gender," and "love power," the research underscores how unpaid labour is undervalued and exploited within relationships.

By recognizing and addressing gender inequality, this research aims to promote more equitable intimate relationships. It contributes to broader sociological and gender studies discourse by providing a deeper understanding of how love and unpaid labour intersect in people's lives, shaping their experiences and relationships.

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1. Introduction

The topic of work-family balance is getting more and more attention which has also led to unpaid labour at home being made more visible and getting more recognition (MacDonald, Phipps & Lethbridge, 2005, pp. 63-64). Unpaid labour has been explored for decades and been understood by feminist sociologists as an expression of the “patriarchal oppression of women” (van Hooff, 2011, p. 19). Research has shown that even if women have increased their participation of paid labour, men have not matched with the same degree of participation in the unpaid labour at home and there is an unequal division of this labour in heterosexual relationships (van Hooff, 2011, p. 19). Unpaid labour has often been made invisible and not always seen as legitimate work (Jung & O’Brien, 2019, p. 190). Why unpaid labour has not been understood as labour is because it is sometimes recognised as something that is just done out of love, while others mean that it is unpaid work (Federici, 1980, p. 253).

Studies show that women do more and are responsible for the different types of unpaid labour overall (e.g. Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich & Voltmer, 2023, p. 486; van Hooff, 2011, p. 22; Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003, p. 182). Causes for “gender inequality in unpaid labour” are often identified as gender norms, stereotypes and gender role expectations (Jung & O’Brien, 2019, p. 186). Further, tasks that men and women perform are gendered, e.g. the routine tasks that are repetitive, time consuming and often not optional, are female coded. Tasks that are done less frequently and more occasionally such as repairs or yard work are often considered to be male coded (Jung & O’Brien, 2019, p. 186). Research on the division of unpaid labour is important as unequal divisions have both short-term and long-term consequences. Some of the consequences regarding the unequal division have a bigger negative impact on women, affecting their economy, physical and mental health, vocational health and social life (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2023; Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2021a; Länsstyrelsen Skåne, 2023; Jung & O’Brien, 2019).

1.1. The Swedish context

Working toward gender equality is one of the political goals in Sweden and for decades this has been the broad political consensus (Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003, p. 181; Nyman, Reinikainen & Eriksson, 2018, p. 37). Sweden has six equality goals to make women and men have the same opportunity to shape their own lives and society. This considers aspects such as power, influence, education, health, economy, work and men's violence against women. One of these goals toward gender equality is that unpaid home and care labour should be equally divided (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, n.d.). Despite Swedes overall egalitarian attitudes regarding both paid and unpaid labour, as well as some improvements toward equal distribution over decades, the unpaid labour is still primarily women's responsibility and conform to traditional gender patterns (Nyman, Reinikainen & Eriksson, 2018, p. 36; Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003, p. 182). Statistics show that women do more of the unpaid labour than men and that women are spending more time on the daily tasks such as cooking, cleaning and caring for their own children in comparison to men. (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2021a; Statistics Sweden, 2022). Surveys done about equality in Sweden show that men more frequently think Sweden is equal and men consider issues regarding inequality between the sexes to be less important than women (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2021b).

1.2. What is unpaid labour?

Unpaid domestic labour¹ is a term for both housework and care work. It also includes the different activities for these types of work, such as cooking, doing laundry, cleaning, yard work as well as helping each other (Statistics Sweden, 2022,

¹ In this thesis unpaid domestic labour will also be referred to as just unpaid labour. Unpaid labour is not only done in the private sphere but also at e.g. workplaces, however unpaid labour in other settings is not in the scope for this thesis.

p. 13). In this thesis I will discuss different aspects of unpaid labour with a focus on day-to-day life which consists of everyday and weekly tasks. Unpaid labour includes a wide variety of tasks such as cleaning cooking, planning, organising, be supportive, showing appreciation and nurturing relationships both emotionally and practically (Jung & O'Brien, 2019, p. 185; McLean et al., 2023, pp. 2-3; Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich & Voltmer, 2023, p. 475; Erickson, 2005, p. 343; Lynch, 2009, p. 413). See further definition and discussion of unpaid labour in the *Previous research and theoretical framework* chapter.

1.3. Love

To better understand the experience of unpaid labour, the aspect of love in relation to unpaid labour will be explored. Love can have many meanings (Jackson, 2014, p. 34), and in this thesis the focus will be on romantic love in heterosexual relationships. It is important for humans to be in loving relationships, something they long for. Love relationships are complex as they can be joyful and comforting but also hurtful (García-Andrade & Sabido-Ramos, 2018, p. 137). The aspect of love will also be further defined and discussed in the *Previous research and theoretical framework* chapter.

1.4. Aims and research questions

There is a substantial amount of research on the topic of heterosexual relationships and different aspects of unpaid labour, but heterosexual couples without children have not been given the same attention as heterosexual couples with children (Holmberg, 2013, pp. 13-14). It is not hard to imagine that children could possibly change the dynamics of the relationships and increased labour and responsibilities. It is, however, possible that gender power relations are still present before potential children (Holmberg, 2013, pp. 14-15, 18). Research indicates that Swedish couples without children tend to be happier and more satisfied with their lives compared to couples with children. Overall, couples without children tend to have higher levels of economic well-being, more leisure time, and greater satisfaction with their

relationships compared to couples with children (Statistics Sweden, 2019). Therefore, I am interested in how couples navigate the unpaid labour where there are no children to take into account, letting the dynamics and experiences of the two of them be in focus. The gendered division of unpaid labour has mainly been researched with a focus on housework, but the other categories of unpaid labour have not been given the same attention. Even though heterosexual couples have previously been the subject of unpaid labour research, the contradiction of the persistent gender inequality in societies with egalitarian ideologies are very prominent in heterosexual relationships (Gunnarsson, 2014, p. 97). I want to explore this to broaden the field further regarding heterosexual couples without children in relation to unpaid labour and love.

To conclude, this study aims to explore how heterosexual couples without children perceive their relationship in relation to unpaid labour and love. The research focuses on understanding how couples without children divide and navigate unpaid labour, with an interest in cognitive, emotional and love labour. The study seeks to shed light on the gendered structures of everyday life within heterosexual relationships. The research questions centre on how couples understand the distribution of unpaid labour and how love impacts this division. To achieve this aim, the thesis will investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: How do heterosexual couples without children in Sweden experience division of unpaid labour?

RQ2: What is the relationship between love and unpaid work?

1.5. Outline of thesis

In the following chapter previous research as well as the theoretical framework will be presented. The key concepts of the thesis will be outlined as well as relevant previous research on different aspects of unpaid labour. Next, the chapter on

methodology presents the epistemological standpoint and research approach followed by the process of data collection, data analysis and a presentation of the participants. A discussion on the ethical considerations, reflections, positionality, limitations and delimitations follows. In the fourth chapter, the focus shifts to the findings and the analysis, which explore the participant's experiences in relation to different aspects of unpaid labour. The theoretical framework and previous research presented in chapter two will be applied to the analysis of the data. Finally, the fifth and concluding chapter includes the conclusion of the findings, a final discussion and a section dedicated to future research directions.

2. Previous research and theoretical framework

In this chapter, the theoretical framework and previous research will be presented. I have chosen to combine the two different sections as concepts and empirical material is intertwined. The chapter begins with the definitions of the different types of unpaid labour that are going to be discussed and analysed in the thesis: practical labour, cognitive labour, emotional labour and love labour. *Love labour* is one of the main concepts for the analysis and will be elaborated on further in this section. What follows is an account of a further explanation of love as well as previous research on love and unpaid labour. In this section the concept of *love power* will also be presented. In the section that follows, gendered aspects of unpaid labour will be the focal point including the introduction of the concept of *doing gender* and related previous research. This chapter ends with a short description of how the theoretical concepts introduced will be applied in the analysis.

2.1. Definitions of unpaid labour

Unpaid labour can be divided into different categories and in this thesis, I will discuss *practical labour*, *cognitive labour*, *emotional labour* and *love labour*, with a focus on the latter three. They have been elected and identified through readings

of previous research on the topic of unpaid labour; these four categories emerged as relevant in relation to the aim of this study. By defining each type of unpaid labour individually, it is possible to illustrate the various dimensions and as well explore the interconnections between them.

2.1.1 Practical labour

The practical labour can also be defined as housework and sometimes referred to routine tasks work, as in unpaid tasks that help maintaining a home such as cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping or other household goods, doing the laundry and paying bills (Jung & O'Brien, 2019, p. 185). The routine tasks can sometimes be understood as a physical dimension (Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich & Voltmer, 2023, p. 475). Women experience more stress in relation to housework than men (MacDonald, Phipps & Lethbridge, 2005, p. 63).

2.1.2. Cognitive labour

Cognitive labour can be defined as “anticipating needs, identifying options for meeting needs, making decisions” (McLean et al., 2023, p. 2). It also includes planning, organising, reminding, “assigning tasks to their partner” (Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich & Voltmer, 2023, p. 486). In more practical terms it could imply e.g. planning what to eat and what needs to be bought, seeing and planning what needs to be fixed or done and keeping track of what is planned (McLean et al., 2023, p. 3). Cognitive labour has often been perceived as women’s work (McLean et al., 2023, p. 2). The cognitive aspects of unpaid labour have not received the same attention as the routine work even if they are often closely related (Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich & Voltmer, 2023, p. 475).

2.1.3. Emotional labour

The aspects of emotional labour include practices such as listening closely, initiating “talking things over”, respecting partners point of view, encouraging, showing appreciation and doing favours for partner “without being asked” (Erickson, 2005, p. 343). The emotional labour is done through care, nurturing,

awareness, affection, respect or compassion and it is important to note that emotional labour does not have to be exhausting or unpleasant, “it can also be rewarding and energising” (Müller, 2019, p. 848).

What characterises emotional labour is that it produces “well-being or comfort”, is done in the private and is fundamental in relationships (Müller, 2019, p. 848). “Emotional labour provides a good example to illustrate gender-specific exploitation” as it is something that women do more, something they are perceived to be naturally better at as they are more caring and it is also “valued in a specific way” because it is not seen as labour but rather as something embodied in women and as something that could be both time and energy consuming (Müller, 2019, pp. 848-849), which can be understood similar to how housework has been made into a natural attribute for women (Federici, 1980, p. 254). Emotional labour, as previously mentioned, does not necessarily have to be experienced as a burden, but rather something that is rewarding and enjoyable, and therefore seen as something that cannot be exploited (Müller, 2019, p. 849). Women and men are socialised into different norms and roles where women learn to be supportive, caring for others and are expected to behave in line with that, while men are held to other norms and standards (Müller, 2019, p. 852; Holmberg, 2013, p. 76). The way women get exploited can be understood as gender specific due to their “social position within hierarchical gender relations” (Müller, 2019, p. 841). The justification of the labour they do as well as how that labour is inadequately valued is linked to gender (Müller, 2019, pp. 841-842). By looking at the gender specific exploitation in intimate relationships it is possible to critically analyse “how hierarchical gender relations are sustained and reproduced” (Müller, 2019, p. 842). Müller’s work highlights the gendered aspects of emotional labour. The gendered aspects of unpaid labour will be further elaborated in the following sections.

2.1.4. Mental labour

Cognitive and emotional labour are sometimes lumped together as the definitions have previously been vague but have since been further defined as their own kind of labour they have been examined more separately (McLean et al., 2023, p. 2).

While routine tasks are well recognized, cognitive and emotional aspects of unpaid labour are often overlooked (Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich & Voltmer, 2023, p. 475). When combined, emotional and cognitive labour is often defined as mental load (Dean, Churchill & Ruppner, 2022, p. 13). “The mental load is, as we subsequently argue, invisible and thus performed internally by those engaged in its labour” (Dean, Churchill & Ruppner, 2022, p. 14). The mental load might affect both a person's mental and physical health as well as the relationship. Gender inequality in relations to mental labour is shown to have a negative impact on a person's well-being, especially prominent among women (Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich & Voltmer, 2023, pp. 475, 486). Emotional and cognitive labour can be understood as a mental load rather than just labour as it is of a more constant character and is usually made invisible. The routine tasks are often experienced as a load as well but are often limited to a certain time and space and emotional aspects are not always required (Dean, Churchill & Ruppner, 2022, pp. 14, 17). The mental load is generally not understood as a form of labour because it is done internally and out of love (Dean, Churchill & Ruppner, 2022, p. 16). In this thesis the concept of mental labour will be used to describe experiences of cognitive and emotional labour that are closely intertwined.

2.1.5. Love labour

The fourth category of labour is *love labour*. It encompasses emotional and other forms of work which aims at enriching and supporting others as well as tending bonds between individuals. “Love relations are created through love labour in relations of high interdependency where there is strong attachment, intimacy and responsibility over time” (Lynch, 2009, p. 413). The tasks of love labour focus on enhancing the well-being and bonds between individuals. “All love labour involves care work, but not all care work involves love labour” (Lynch, 2009, p. 413). Love labour is “affectively-driven” and also includes, as briefly mentioned, other types of labour such as emotional work, cognitive labour and physical labour to varying degrees and in different situations (Lynch, 2007, p. 550).

The concept of love labour that will be applied in this work is based on the work of Kathleen Lynch, more specifically the aspect of love labour in primary care relations will be the focal point (Lynch, 2007). The primary care relations are the intimate relations that entail interdependence, engagement and strong attachment. Lynch describes that this prototypical relationship for this type of relation is between children and parents (Lynch, 2007, p. 555), however, I think it is plausible to apply this to romantic relations between adult as I understand those relationships have similar requirements such as time, commitment, responsibility and emotional engagement, as well as love relationships involves chosen dependency (Lynch, 2007, pp. 556-557).

Love labour is essential to sustain primary care relationships, “that the realization of love, as opposed to the declaration of love, requires work” (Lynch, 2007, p. 550). What distinct love labour from general care work is the importance of devotion, mutuality, responsibility and trust (Lynch, 2007, p. 550). Love labour is important as it adds substance to feelings of love and care through its practices. Without putting in the effort to show love through actions, feelings of love or care for others may end up being reduced to mere rhetoric that lacks real meaning or impact in our actions (Lynch, 2007, p. 550). To maintain and develop a relationship of love and care takes time and effort. This work can be enjoyable but also demanding. All the aspects of love labour have to be divided equally between men and women. The outcomes of this labour can be felt and seen but are harder to measure (Lynch, 2007, p. 554).

Work inspired by feminist perspectives have been significant in bringing issues of care and love into the public sphere. Scholars have highlighted the importance of care and love as public goods, emphasising caring as essential work that should “be rewarded and distributed equally between women and men” (Lynch 2007, p. 552). Further, feminist scholars have highlighted how affective domains are sites where social actions are interconnected with political, cultural and economic spheres, as well how power relations are related to care relations (Lynch, 2007, p. 553). Love labour is characterised by mutual dependence. While one partner may do more love work than the other, the person receiving care is not

necessarily passive or powerless. Thus, love labour involves a mutual relationship of power and control, which is expressed through the act of caring (Lynch, 2007, p. 559). If the burdens and benefits of love labour are distributed unequally it can result in affective inequalities, and Lynch mean that it is a gendered issue as women are often morally obligated to care (Lynch, 2009, p. 410). “There are deep gender inequalities in the doing of care and love work. It is women’s unwaged care and related domestic labour that frees men up to exercise control in the public sphere of politics, the economy and culture” (Lynch, 2009, p. 411). Due to men’s cultural and power position, they can without any extensive effort take advantage of women’s care work. This should however not be of the fault of individuals but rather the social constructions of gender where masculinity is not associated with care work and due to these structures women often become “the default carers” (Lynch, 2009, p. 412). Women's role as caregivers is often seen as a "free choice." However, women face a strong moral obligation to perform care work, which is not equally imposed on men. This gendered moral code compels women to take on the majority of primary caregiving responsibilities, leaving many feelings like they have no other option (Lynch, 2009, p. 412). The assumptions of men and women regarding care and love need to change to be able to change the gendered power relations (Lynch, 2009, p. 414). Love labour is one of the main theoretical concepts in the analysis and will be used to explore how love labour is done and valued in heterosexual relationships. Next, more aspects of love will be disclosed.

2.2. Love in relation to unpaid labour

Love is not just an emotion one "has," but something one "does" and "feels" in relation to others (Smart, 2007, p. 59, as cited in Jackson, 2014, p. 37). However, love is not only relational in the sense of the bond between those involved; it is also shaped and given meaning through interactions with others. The way love is experienced depends on how we interpret cultural meanings and everyday interactions (Jackson, 2014, p. 37). bell hooks describe how “the word “love” is most often defined as a noun, yet all the more astute theorists of love acknowledge

that we would all love better if we used it as a verb” (hooks, 2018, p. 4). Being loved and cared for is an essential human need throughout life. Humans are relational beings that are capable of forming relationships that are intimate and caring which brings us joy and warmth (Lynch, 2007, p. 553). Giving your partner e.g. your attention and time are ways to show love (hooks, 2018, p. 163). Viewing love as culturally mediated advances our understanding beyond seeing it as an asocial and innate phenomenon. It acknowledges the role of social interaction and practice in shaping our understanding of ourselves and our relationships (Jackson, 2014, p. 37).

The nature of love is complex, and the heterosexual love reproduces gendered power relations due to the norms associated with masculinity and femininity. While love is recognized as a site of gendered power imbalances it is also essential for human fulfilment (Gunnarsson, Garcia-Andrade & Jónasdóttir, 2018, p. 3). Dualities, contradictions and dynamics are inherent to love. The power of love can manifest in both mutually enhancing and egalitarian, as well as oppressive and exploitative ways, offering new perspectives on different forms of love (Gunnarsson, Garcia-Andrade & Jónasdóttir, 2018, p. 3).

Previous studies on the topic of unpaid labour have explored dynamics of love. A study by Carin Holmberg (2003) has looked at childless couples in Sweden where the couples were perceived and were considered by themselves and others as equal. By looking at how couples of men and women by practices of e.g. love, care, conversations, how they solve conflicts maintain and reproduce the patriarchal structures of women’s subordination and men's superiority (Holmberg, 2003, p. 19). Even if the couple relationship is something both partners care about there is still an asymmetric power balance between men and women (Holmberg, 2003, p. 20). Holmberg’s study has been a big inspiration for my work as well.

The results from Holmberg’s study show that both the men and women show care for each other through physical touch such as hugs, kisses, being physically close, holding hands or other types of body language (Holmberg, 2003, p. 153). Women show their care more actively, also by telling him that she likes him, making it nice for them in their home, emotionally taking care of him by asking

how he is, keeping him in order and encouraging and supporting him (Holmberg, 2003, pp. 153-154, 156). The women also describe how they wish he would say he likes her more often or woo her more (Holmberg, 2013, p. 154). The men describe that it is not always that easy to see her care as it is not always visible (Holmberg, 2003, p. 156). The women also describe a wish to be treated in a similar way as she treats him (Holmberg, 2003, p. 157). Holmberg discusses these results by saying that the women show love in their everyday life, continuously, by recurring actions and by taking care of their partner. The men show their love in a more occasional way except the physical expressions of love (Holmberg, 2003, p. 157). He describes how she helps him when he has a lot to do by doing his share of the housework, he does not do the same for her as often. He does not problematise the difference in their ways of showing love, her way of relating to him is seen as given and sometimes for granted (Holmberg, 2003, p. 158). Similar to previously mentioned studies, upbringing and paid labour are factors used for explaining inequality in the home and as reasons for not being able to implement equality (Holmberg, 2003, p. 183).

It is important to understand how the voluntary subordination of women can be understood, and expressed in equal couples (Holmberg, 2003, p. 67). This concept sheds light on the complexities of unpaid labour within couples, particularly regarding the aspect of love and care, and the challenges in achieving an equal division of labour. Even if the study is done in the 1990's, Holmberg writes that it is still relevant since the structure of asymmetrical distribution of love power is still the same in heterosexual couples, with women having the overall responsibility for getting things done. However, what this distribution exactly implies differs for individual couples and time (Holmberg, 2019, p. 27). If men did their half of the unpaid labour, the change toward equality would not be too far away, but still this seems to be difficult to change which shows how hard it is to disrupt gender power structures as well as men's resistance to change. (Holmberg, 2019, p. 29). "Men are able to accept our services and take pleasure in them because they presume that housework is easy for us, that we enjoy it because we do it for their love" (Federici, 1980, p. 260). Similar to housework, caregiving can be

motivated by love, but it can still be time consuming, stressful, physically demanding and take emotional effort (MacDonald, Phipps & Lethbridge, 2005, pp. 63-64).

2.2.1. Love power

I will now present the concept of *love power*. The human capacity of love, and love power, encompasses the creative and productive aspects of love in gender relationships, which are essential in the production and reproduction of society, comparable to labour power (Jónasdóttir, 2011, p. 45). Love power is exchanged in acts of giving and receiving (Jónasdóttir, 2018, p. 20). Despite formal socioeconomic equality, women often find themselves exploited within relationships. Women's capacity for love gets exploited by men, which should be understood as forms of individual and collective power that women no longer are in control over (Jónasdóttir, 2011, p. 49).

By analysing love relationships in terms of exploitative practices we can better understand love relationships and socio-sexual life. However, not all sexual activity and love relationships in patriarchal societies are necessarily exploitative. Jónasdóttir's concept of love power acknowledges that non-exploitative modes of production exist, although not common. Furthermore, the position of exploiters is not tied to men or limit exploitative relationships to heterosexual relations only (Jónasdóttir, 2011, p. 53). Similar to how emotional labour is not necessarily a burden, love exploitation does not have to mean that one gets mistreated or is unhappy and not all love relationships are by nature exploitative (Jónasdóttir, 2011, pp. 52-53). Love can be both empowering and disempowering (Gunnarsson, Garcia-Andrade & Jónasdóttir, 2018, p. 4).

Love power “can make sense of the human vulnerability resulting from the fact that we need to love and be loved, which can make us prone to accept unequal conditions when this need is not met, only in light of love’s constructive power” (Gunnarsson, Garcia-Andrade & Jónasdóttir, 2018, p. 4). It is possible to understand how patriarchy is reproduced by using Jónasdóttir’s work about love power and how the social practice of love is organised, and by women giving care

and love to a greater extent than men do, patriarchy is maintained (Holmberg, 2003, p. 68). “Patriarchal love as an exploitative relationship, where men appropriate more of women’s loving energies than they give in return” (Gunnarsson, Garcia-Andrade & Jónasdóttir, 2018, p. 4). “Because women care *about* those they care *for*, they do not recognize this arrangement as exploitative. Caring becomes integral to how women practice love” (Jackson, 2014, p. 43).

The findings of unequal caretaking in heterosexual relationships in van Hooff’s study is in line with the concept of love power, as women were the primary caretaker of men instead of equal caring (van Hooff, 2011, p. 28). “The findings of this study indicate that both the male and female partners within these heterosexual couples deployed strategies to justify the continuing inequalities upon which heterosexual relationships are based, rather than challenging them. Traditional gender roles resurface when couples move in together, undermining any attempts at equality” (van Hooff, 2011, p. 28).

2.3. Gender in relation to unpaid labour

2.3.1. Doing gender

The social arrangements between the sexes can be perceived as natural and fundamental. By looking at it through the lens of *doing gender* it is easier to question these seemingly natural arrangements that legitimate unequal ways of organising social life (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.146). “Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures”” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). The concept of doing gender has evolved and applied in multiple directions, this thesis will however be using the concept based on the work of West and Zimmerman.

Social arrangements, such as the balance between family and work, can enable individuals to take on roles traditionally associated with biology. This emphasises gender as something individuals *do* influenced by social situations.

Gender can thus be understood as an outcome of the social arrangements and as a way to justify societal division (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). Gender has often been viewed as something natural and biological determined in Western societies, with certain traits associated with men and women. These assumptions lead to social, behavioural and psychological consequences (West & Zimmerman, 1987, pp. 127-128). It's not just about being a man or a woman, but also about acting in ways that society considers appropriate for that gender or perceive you as. West and Zimmerman understand this as an ongoing process of behaviour rather than just an inherent identity (West & Zimmerman, 2009, pp. 113-114). They argue that gender is a product of social doings, a product of interactions rather than traits or roles (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 129). When looking at the concept of doing gender in relation to unpaid labour, women do the majority of it but it is often understood as a fair arrangement even if the woman has a paid employment as well, but different explanations are used to justify the division (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 143).

Theories such as doing gender have gotten some criticism for not paying the mental labour enough attention (Dean, Churchill & Ruppner, 2022, p. 20). In this thesis I will try to implement the mental labour in the analysis. The concept of doing gender can be seen in other studies exploring unpaid labour. An interview study on Swedish participants from the late 1990's and beginning of 2000's show that even if there has been some change in attitudes regarding gender norms, the division of unpaid labour has not changed that much (Nyman, Reinikainen & Eriksson, 2018, pp. 39-40). Some of the participants describe how their upbringing is a reason, or at least perceived as a reason for doing things a certain way. Personal interests and preferences are used as reasons for the division as well. Further personality and their individual traits are being used to explain their division; what they are suitable to do and therefore legitimises the unequal division, e.g. goes faster if that person does it (Nyman, Reinikainen & Eriksson, 2018, p. 41). The study shows "doing gender is an important aspect of how the partners see each other and their relationship. In their accounts of their everyday lives both couples describe, define and understand actions, personalities and traits in gendered ways. In their ways of

ascribing certain skills, interest and behaviors (or lack of) to themselves and their partner” (Nyman, Reinikainen & Eriksson, 2018, p. 42). Doing gender is not always done consciously or in a reflexive way, especially the gendered aspect of their actions. There is not always an intention to reproduce gender and as a result also the unpaid division of unpaid labour gets reproduced even by couples with the intent to share equally (Nyman, Reinikainen & Eriksson, 2018, p. 39). The gendered division is reproduced and maintained through practices that also make the couples division invisible to see as gender inequality as it was justified as something else. Instead of explaining the unequal division by gender inequality, personal traits, competence, interests and love etc. are used as explanations, that gender inequality is “made into something else” (Nyman, Reinikainen & Eriksson, 2018, pp. 38, 44).

Studies made on Swedish couples show that perceived fairness in relation to division of labour is a complex matter (Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003, p. 181). There are multiple ways to organise everyday life and couples sometimes perceive themselves as doing it in a way that is gender equal or sometimes have a hard time to apply gender equality practices on their own lives (Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003, p. 203). The specific life situations of the couples is also important to consider as this is often part of the reasoning for how they organise their life, including the unpaid labour at home, such as how busy their work is or their economic conditions (Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003, p. 203).

In an interview study with cohabiting heterosexual couples between 20 to 35 years old without children, all the participants claim they want to be equal but the majority of them did not practise equality (van Hooff, 2011, pp. 19, 21). The couples used justifications such as women’s high standards, how women have more competence performing housework and who have more time outside paid work to explain and defend the unequal distribution. Instead of challenging the inequality, heterosexual relationships often defend it by saying it is based on practicalities or that it is just a temporary division (van Hooff, 2011, pp. 19-20). Preferences, standards and individual choices are disguising gender expectations in new, complex forms (van Hooff, 2011, p. 20). Explanations such as women are better at doing certain things, women’s higher standards, or that some women find

housework satisfying are strategies for justifying unequal division (van Hooff, 2011, pp. 22-23). Women describe how the different roles related to unpaid labour often just happen, and that there is not a lot of reflexive negotiation or discussion, which could be the tools needed to disrupt the traditional gender roles. Being aware of inequality is not enough (van Hooff, 2011, p. 28). Men's resistance against sharing the unpaid equal by referring to these justifications maintains the male privilege by depoliticising the question of unpaid labour (van Hooff, 2011, p. 28). Why women that strive for equality are doing the majority of the unpaid labour needs further exploration (van Hooff, 2011, p. 29).

One of the consequences of unequal division is relationship dissatisfaction. A study done on Swedish data shows for example that "women who report performing more housework are less likely to be satisfied with their relationships, and are more likely to consider breaking up" (Ruppanner, Brandén & Turunen, 2018, p. 75). The division of unpaid labour affects the relationship quality, creating conflicts and impacting the relationship in a negative way. However, in relationships where couples acknowledging the other's contribution to the unpaid labour decreases the feelings of relationship dissatisfaction (Ruppanner, Brandén & Turunen, 2018, pp. 76-78).

In the analysis chapter, the theoretical concepts of *love labour*, *love power* and *doing gender* will be applied to deepen the analysis of the data. Applying Lynch's concept to heterosexual relationships will allow a deeper understanding of the dynamics of these relationships, including how love labour is performed, negotiated, and valued by both partners. It will also shed light on how traditional gender norms and expectations may impact the division of love labour within these relationships. The concept of love power by Jónasdóttir will help analyse how power dynamics in a love relationship influence the unpaid labour. Love power, will, similarly, to love labour, explore how expressions of love and care justifies certain divisions of unpaid labour. West and Zimmerman's concept of doing gender is useful in the analysis of the participants' experience as it would help interpret how and reasons why the unpaid labour gets divided in a certain way.

3. Methodology

This following chapter will present the methodology as well as the method for this thesis. First my epistemological and research approach will be presented followed by a section about the data collection. It includes description and the method chosen and the sampling. The next section includes the depiction of the data analysis process before moving on to a discussion on ethical considerations and reflections on the process as well as positionality. A brief discussion about the limitations and delimitations of this study will be found at the end of this chapter.

3.1. Research approach

The hermeneutic perspective has inspired my epistemological standpoint. I understand knowledge as contextual and situated. Through the interaction between researcher and interviewee understandings and meanings are constructed (Mason, 2018, p. 110; Kvale, 2007, p. 143). I chose this perspective as “people’s knowledge views, understanding, interpretations, stories and narratives, language and discourses, experiences, interactions, perceptions, sensations and so on are meaningful properties of the social reality” that I want to explore in this thesis (Mason, 2018, p. 111). Central for the hermeneutic tradition is interpretation of the multiplicity of meanings of texts and the preunderstandings of the researcher (Kvale, 2007, p. 21). Within the hermeneutic tradition, the researcher’s background and pre-understandings is important as it also influences the knowledge production (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p. 74). Qualitative semi-structured interviews is a method that is fitted to explore the interviewees' experiences and how they view their world (Kvale, 2007, p. 9). The underpinnings of the perspective say that knowledge is contextual and situated, which is contextualised in this study by highlighting that the interaction between researcher and interviewee understandings and meanings are constructed for the participants. This is exemplified through my interview conversations where the material produced was the leading material to create the research.

My approach has mainly been inductive as it has been primarily data-driven throughout the process, but my pre-understandings of the field have influenced decisions along the way such as the interview questions. The inductive reasoning of developing explanations from the data has been the most prominent (Mason, 2018, p. 228).

3.2. Data collection

3.2.1 Semi-structured interviews and interview process

I have chosen qualitative semi-structured interviews as I want to explore the experiences of the interviewees. Interviews are a suitable method to capture this knowledge as it gives the researcher the possibility to ask follow up questions and go deeper on the topics that are important for the interviewee (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 85). It also relates to the hermeneutic understanding of knowledge production as the role of both the researcher and interviewee are involved in the process (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 85).

To collect data, I conducted 12 individual interviews with both the man and the woman in 6 heterosexual relationships. 10 of them were conducted online and 2 were done in person. The interviews were between around 40 minutes to 100 minutes. In the beginning of the interviews I presented myself, the topic, gave practical information about the consent, asked if they had any questions about the written consent form they had filled out and also asked to get a verbal consent. I then gave some examples of unpaid labour; routine tasks, cognitive as well as emotional labour. I proceeded by asking some background questions and background questions about their relationship as a way to “warm up” (Mason, 2018, p. 123). I then continued to ask about the division of unpaid labour, how they experience that division, the cognitive and the emotional labour, how they express love, as well as questions about how the unpaid labour affects how they feel about their relationship and the future of the relationship. (See the full interview guide in Appendix 1). Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility to the interview. Even

though the interview guide was followed to a certain extent, there was the possibility to e.g. adapt questions, ask follow-up questions (Mason, 2018, p. 123).

I developed the research questions partially by looking at previous research. I was e.g. inspired by Ruppanner, Brandén & Turunen (2018) to ask how and in which ways the unpaid labour affected the relationship and how they felt about the relationship, inspired by Holmberg (2013) to ask about the experienced fairness, and Federici (1980) and Erickson (2005) inspired questions regarding their thoughts on why the division is the way it is. Due to my mainly inductive approach I did not have any theories that were definite before my interviews but knew I wanted to ask questions regarding expectations in relation to gender and about how they show love and care.

There are always advantages and disadvantages with a chosen method but due to the aim of this thesis and the research question, interviews were quite a given choice as I wanted to be able to let the participants give their perspective and reflections, and the possibility to ask follow up questions as well. The interviews could have been conducted in other ways, such as couples' interviews, but I decided to prioritise individual interviews. There are some interesting possibilities with joint interviews as well, such as the opportunity to understand partners' interactions and negotiations in their daily lives and hear their discussions regarding discrepancies in their perceptions (Nyman, Reinikainen & Eriksson, 2018, p. 39). However due to both the time limit of the thesis and the experiences I was mainly interested about their individual experience I choose to do the interviews individually. By doing the interviews individually I wanted to give the participants the possibility to explicitly share their experience of unpaid labour in their relationship without possibly feeling hindered by having their partner in the same room, even if it would not necessarily be an issue. By interviewing both partners in the same couple it gives me a possible opportunity to explore how their experiences can be similar and different in certain aspects. The intention is not to see if they answered in the same way, but rather to see if the experiences differ even in similar situations, and in which ways.

3.2.2. Sampling

The criteria were couples in a heterosexual relationship that live together, have no children and are between the ages of approximately 20-35. When searching for participants I used an age span of 20-35 but as an approximate (i.e. they could be younger or older than that span). This span captures people in the transition to adulthood as well as young adults (Horne et.al, 2018). Being flexible with the age makes it possible to include couples where one of the partners is either younger or older than 20-35. There is also a certain time limit to the work with the thesis, so this age span was making it easier to find possible participants as it increases the possible sample due to the flexibility. In the end, the participants were between 24-33 years old.

The sample technique used was convenience sampling. This technique implies selecting participants based on their accessibility. In other words, the researcher chooses participants who are available and convenient to include, instead of using random or more structured approaches of sampling (Golzar, Noor & Tajik, 2022, p. 72). Benefits to this method are that it is easy and not very time-consuming, however it might not always provide a representative sample of the population and therefore may the findings not be applicable to a broader population. Another disadvantage is the risk of sample bias (Golzar, Noor & Tajik, 2022, p. 72). This is understood as a limitation for this research. However, despite these limitations, convenience sampling was deemed appropriate for this study due to its practical benefits, especially given the study's aim to capture participants' perceptions without seeking broader generalisation beyond the sample. (Golzar, Noor & Tajik, 2022, p. 73).

I searched for participants through friends, i.e. friends of friends, and in different groups on social media. In the end, the majority of the participants were found through groups on Facebook but two couples through friends. The participants were, as mentioned above, between 24-33 years old. They all have some type of occupation, either studying, working (hourly/part-time or full-time) or both. In only one couple both partners are working, otherwise are either one or both of them studying. A majority of the participants were currently studying at

university, but most of them had either not yet finished or dropped out. The participants who are working, mainly work in commerce and hospitality, but also social work, media and in IT. All the participants have lived in Sweden for a longer period of time and they all live in the south or middle of Sweden.

In this thesis, the couples have identified themselves as being in a heterosexual relationship, and I have not asked for their sexual orientation as it is not in the focal point for this study. The couple that had been together for the shortest amount of time have been together for about two years and lived together for about one year. The couple that have been together for the longest have been together for about 7 years and have cohabited for about 6 years. The majority of the couples have been together and lived together for about 5 years or more, while two couples have been in a relationship and cohabited for less than 5 years.

I will not provide a more detailed overview of the participants as this could affect the anonymity (see 3.4. *Ethical considerations* for further discussion on this matter). In the analysis, the participants will be referred to as Woman A-F and Man G-L. Which letter they have been assigned has been randomised.

3.3 Data analysis

I started this project with an overall wonder how cohabiting couples in heterosexual relationships without kids experience and navigate unpaid labour at home. As previously mentioned, I have been working with a quite inductive approach and did therefore ask questions to capture different aspects of unpaid labour. However, a completely inductive approach is rare as I am influenced by my pre-understands and my epistemological standpoint but predominate inductive approach as the data-based meanings has been prioritised (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 69; Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 83-84; Byrne, 2022, p. 1397). The initial quite broad approach allowed me to capture a broad spectrum of different aspects of unpaid labour. Adopting this approach has enabled me to dynamically adapt the focus of the study during the research process. However, one drawback of this broad approach is that some of the collected data may not directly contribute to the analysis and aim of the thesis,

although it has nevertheless provided valuable insights for contextualising and understanding the broader phenomenon being analysed. The choice of analysing conversations is also a suitable method for analysing the concept of doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 2009, p. 116). For the analysis I chose to use thematic analysis as it is flexible and makes it possible to interpret the patterns identified within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 78-79). With an approach of latent thematic analysis enables to not only describe the data but also to interpret underlying ideas and meanings. During the work with the themes this would mean that there already is some interpretative work. In other words, the analysis is not only descriptive but also theorised (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

I did not follow any guidelines for thematic analysis strictly as I understand methods as dynamic and flexible, but I did implement a similar process to my thematic analysis as Braun & Clarke describes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After each interview, I wrote down some reflections and memos about the content of the interview that stood out, questions that needed revising and things I could do better as an interviewer. I started to see some recurring themes in the data during the interview process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). When I started working with the transcription I highlighted sections and kept memos as well. My research question guided me, and since I had already thought and reflected a bit on the data after the interviews, I had a vague idea of what I was interested to focus on but kept an open mind during the initial work with the analysis so I would not exclude any section that could be possibly interesting (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). My approach in this study meant that I did open codes that reflected the content (Byrne, 2022, pp. 1396-1397). I then went through the transcriptions and assigned initial codes to the data set before I identified different themes by looking at possible combinations of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 88-89), as well as looking at my memos from the interview process. I then worked with reviewing and refining the themes by trying to find the core of the themes and what aspect they capture. This step also included identifying sub themes related to the main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 91-92). The data was interpreted and analysed through lenses of doing gender, love power and love labour, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

Two main themes were identified for the analysis. The first one was *Making sense of the division of unpaid labour* and relates to the first research question (RQ1). The sub themes were identified as *factors for division* and *expectations*. *Personal traits, preferences, not seeing labour* are some examples of codes of the former and *striving toward equality in a heterosexual relationship, mothering and gratitude* are some examples of codes for the later.

The second main theme was “Dynamics of love and unpaid labour” and relates to the second research question (RQ2). *Ways of showing love and unconditional love?* was identified as the sub themes and the codes were various expressions of love languages as well as *effects of love* and *effects of unpaid labour*.

The analysis was driven by the themes identified in the data and by the quotes from the interviewees as a way to ensure that their voices are being heard as well to ensure high validity. The extracts presented will illustrate my arguments in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). The interviews were all done in Swedish and the quotes have been translated by me from Swedish to English. I am a Swedish native speaker and have worked close to the text to try to capture the essence in the segments being used. Some of the quotes have been modified to keep things out that could potentially interfere with anonymity, e.g. excluding geographical locations, names and details that could be specific to the particular couple.

3.4 Ethical considerations

One of the most challenging aspects of this thesis has been to ensure the participants anonymity. Since the interviews were done separately but with their partner still in the dataset, anonymity has been proven to sometimes be difficult, especially in describing specific situations due to the fact that the other partner could figure out who said it. This has affected the way I present both the participants and the findings to ensure anonymity. I have tried to find a balance between keeping the anonymity and showing the different dimensions and experiences of unpaid labour. The overview of the participants is therefore not very detailed. To recur to the discussion about doing individual or couples interviews in the section about the interview

process, these considerations about each individual's anonymity could have been avoided by doing couples interviews. However, the aim of this thesis had a focus on the individual experience, and I wanted to give the participants a space where they could share their feelings and thoughts without having to take their partner's feelings into consideration.

Another measure to protect the anonymity of the participants is that the data collected has been stored on an encrypted USB drive. When the project has received a passing grade, the data will be deleted. The participants have been given information about what data that will be collected as well as how it will be stored. They have all given both written and verbal informed consent before the interviews.

3.5. Reflexivity and positionality of researcher

When planning to write my thesis about this topic and doing interviews on it, it became noticeable that this could possibly be a very sensitive topic. When searching for participants for the interviews there were a few couples or someone in the couple that felt that it was too sensitive and personal and therefore not comfortable participating. The unpaid labour is part of their everyday life and has real consequences, e.g. affecting relationship satisfaction (Ruppanner, Brandén & Turunen, 2018) or people's well-being (see e.g. Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2023). It is therefore not unimaginable that this could bring out a variety of different feelings for the participants. Being aware of the possibly sensitive topic and moving forward I thought a lot about how the interviews could affect the participants. Here my role as a researcher is important, to make the participants as comfortable as possible. Even if the interview situation can be understood as one where there are asymmetrical power hierarchies (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p. 51), I wanted the interviewees to be as comfortable as possible. I reminded the participants in the beginning of the interview that they could decide for themselves if they wanted to answer a question or not.

I have reflected on the possible effect of me being in a similar age and situation (studying) as most of them, if that helped create a space that felt safe. For

example, during the interviews with some of the women I felt like they perceived me as a “relatable” person as they would make references and say things similar to “you know how men are”. I overall felt like the participants were comfortable sharing the good and the less good aspects of their relationship, about their life together and how they experience unpaid labour. At the end of the interviews, I asked how it felt to talk about this topic. Many of them said that it had been interesting, made them reflect about the unpaid labour more than before and some said that it was rewarding. Several of them also said that they wanted to participate in my study as they wanted to reflect and discuss the matter of unpaid labour more.

The initial contact with potential participants was always made through the woman in the couple; I either contacted or was contacted by the woman in each couple first. This is due to the fact that the friends of friends I was reaching out to were always women. It could also be explained by the fact that the social media groups I used to find participants are either separate or more directed towards women than men. However, in the contact I tried to lift the responsibility from the women to organise both their own and their partners interview, being the middle hand, so I strived to have separate contact with both the man and the woman in the couple, which worked out in all of the cases except one. This was important to me as there are often women that take the cognitive responsibility and I did not want to reproduce that more than necessary. This also would ensure that they could have individual contact with me if they had any questions or concerns they did not want to share with their partner.

3.6. Limitations and delimitations

There are some limitations due to the chosen data collection method. As discussed regarding ethical considerations, the individual interviews have limited to which extent the participants can be presented as well what type of analysis can be done. The aim, however, has not been to see if the couples answer the same, this has mainly been an issue of how to present the participants in a way to keep their anonymity. The choice of type of interview is something that further research with

a similar aim or topic should consider and reflect on. As mentioned above the sampling technique entails some limitations as well.

One of this thesis' delimitations is that the interest is not in how the couples actually divide the unpaid labour but rather in their experience and how they perceive it. The findings will therefore not be able to answer how the division actually is. I will also not focus on the more occasional tasks e.g. repairs and yard work (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2021b). These are often tasks men spend more time on, but these will not be discussed extensively in this thesis as the interest is in people's day-to-day life. Gender, age and what type of relationship and life situation (heterosexual relationship without children) were some of the criteria for participating in this study and what will be the intersections that are included, which lead to some delimitations. Regarding the topic of unpaid labour, it could also be interesting to add an even wider intersectional perspective, see further discussion in section 5.3 *Future research*.

4. Findings and analysis

In this chapter the findings and the analysis will be presented and divided into two main sections based on the two research questions. In each of the main sections, the relevant findings will be presented along with the analysis. The different sections are further divided into the main themes identified.

The first section of this chapter will respond to the first research question (RQ1): *How do heterosexual couples without kids in Sweden experience division of unpaid labour?* To be able to answer this question this section will delve into different factors that affect the unpaid labour, more specifically what affects the division. The categories of Expectations and feelings related to unpaid labour will also be analysed in this section.

Love will be integrated throughout the analysis as it is intertwined with different themes of the thesis, but will be primarily concentrated in the second section of the analysis that refers to the second research question (RQ2): *What is*

the relationship between love and unpaid labour? In this section I will explore the relations between expressions of love and unpaid labour mainly through the theoretical concepts of love labour and love power. This section will also explore how love and unpaid labour affects the relationship.

4.1. Making sense of inequality

4.1.1 Factors for dividing unpaid labour

This is the first main section. It is constructed on the themes of *the way we are*, *not noticing labour*, and *some challenges faced*. These themes will now be presented but first a short overview of the division of labour is described among the couples.

The couples organise the unpaid labour in a few different ways, most of them did not have strict or necessarily “hard” divisions of who does what, doing some of the routine tasks together or at least at the same time such as cooking or cleaning but the majority of the couples do not do the tasks together. They usually do it when it fits them. But there are also occurrences of couples having quite clear definitions of who does what (and the other partner does in general not get involved in the other partner’s responsibilities), one doing the clear majority of the unpaid labour. The practical labour is either experienced as quite equally divided or that the woman does more. The experience of unpaid labour is not homogenous as different factors when organising the division seem to be present in different relationships. The following sections will go deeper into how the couples understand their division of unpaid labour by looking at the reasoning behind the distribution of labour.

The participants were asked what is important when dividing unpaid labour and feelings of fairness and what they respectively preferred to do was a common answer:

“The most important thing is that it feels right in some way, that not one person feels like they are carrying the heavier load, because then it can be the start of a conflict” - Man G

In another interview the participant says this about how they divide the unpaid labour:

“I: What decides how you split it between you? Like what you think is fun and what you're good at?

M: I mean, pretty much. I'd say that my partner does, it feels like, a lot of the stuff she does she thinks is quite fun or relaxing sort of. I think food and cooking is very fun and then it's kind of just, it's more natural for me to do the shopping because I know what is needed”

- Man H

Woman D explains that she thinks it is important to work toward a feeling of what is fair, but what is fair is “incredibly diffuse”:

“It depends on the person. If you want to pull a bigger load because it is your love language, then of course you can do it. But in our relationship, I feel quite strongly that it should be fair based on that we should do the same amount, that we should put down the same amount of time and effort” - Woman D

The unclear definition of what is fair might possibly make it harder to find a division that is equal and feels fair. The feeling of fairness as a measurement if they are happy with the division is used by many of the participants. As Nordenmark and Nyman (2003) writes, there are multiple ways to organise everyday life and even when perceiving the way, they divide labour feels fair does that also mean that it is equal?

When asked questions regarding how cognitive and emotional labour is divided the participants said that it was not as easy to make a clear statement, compared to talking about the practical labour. Some couples described how they use certain “tools” for making a shift in the responsibilities, e.g. planning the food

for the week together and through that share the responsibilities. However, it was more often described that the women do more of the cognitive and emotional labour. Multiple women describe how they have to remind their partners to do certain things even if it is his responsibility. When asked about why they feel like they have to remind them, there is different reasonings behind it; how they (the women) are as a person, that they get stressed if they are not sure the task will be done even if they rationally know it is not the end of the world if that does not.

The way we are

The division of labour is sometimes divided based on what the couples prefer to do, how they are as a person, and their personality trait. In the interviews some of the participants, both women and men, describe that the women in the relationships like to plan and be in charge. It made me wonder if it really is an interest or something they enjoy, or is it a result of a lack of planning from their partner or something they have been taught growing up? It could possibly be a combination of different factors. How come a majority of the women then seem to have project managers as their personality? Is it that inherent or is it something that they have been socialised into? When some of the interviewees reflected on why they think they had a certain division it was often difficult to be sure if it was divided due to their personality or preference and what might have been something they are taught or expected to like. The gendered expectations in society make some arrangements seem natural (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 143). When practices of doing gender are made into something else, they become harder to detect.

The women described themselves as the “planning type” and “project manager” more often, while the men rarely described themselves as being the one doing the planning by themselves (unless food related), otherwise it was often described as something they do together or something their partner does. One of the men says:

“I agree that it is work. But I also think she likes to keep track of things and think it is fun to plan things. (...) It does not mean that it is fun and not a job. But I think she thinks it is more okay” - Man K

The challenge of how to separate what is work and what is fun becomes apparent in this quote. One could think: does it become less of a job just because the person thinks it fun? The perceived naturalisation of the division of unpaid labour that has been presented (Federici, 1980, p. 254; Müller, 2019, pp. 848-849; Holmberg, 2003, p. 76; Nyman, Reinikainen & Eriksson 2018, pp. 3, 44) is found in this data as well.

This also points out what is understood to be labour. Similar to Dean, Churchill and Ruppanner (2022, p. 16), the quote from Man K highlights how some things might be seen as fun or perhaps because it is done out of love and therefore not always perceived as labour to the degree it actually is labour. This is especially true to mental labour. The labour that is done internally is not as easy to measure and perhaps therefore not as easy to acknowledge or notice (Dean, Churchill & Ruppanner, 2022). Factors such as personality traits and preferences are used to justify the organising of the unpaid labour.

Another factor that some of the participants described influenced how the division of labour was made is the impact of a person's upbringing:

“I: Do you think it is important to aim towards an equal relationship?”

M: Yes, I think it is important that it is equal, and both are satisfied. It was a bit different for my parents because my dad was working and my mom did not, she was like a housewife. It was very different then, but I saw that it could cause conflicts between them. She had multiple children to take care of the house. And then, when she wanted my dad to do more at home and my dad felt like his role was to work, and when I think about that, I think I have seen the negative with that thing so that's why I think it is important to have it equal.

I: Has your upbringing, has it affected the way you want your relationship to be like? Particularly in regard to unpaid labour.

M: Yeah I would say that, I would like to do differently, like, that both help and feel satisfied and feel like it is fair.” - Man G

These justifications found are also similar to the ones in van Hooff’s (2011) as well as Nyman, Reinikainen and Eriksson’s (2018) studies. The participants discuss different possible explanations for the division, but gender is very infrequently used as one of these explanations.

Not noticing labour

Not all labour seems to be noticeable to the same degree. Cognitive, emotional and love labour is often seen as invisible, but the practical labour can also be hard to notice. This relates to another recurring topic in the interviews. Some of the women and men describe how the men sometimes had difficulties to see the labour that needs to be done or the work their partners had done.

Woman D explains that during a period of time her partner did not take initiative to do certain practical tasks and when she brought it up, he explained that he does not notice that some should be done. She continues by saying instead of having to tell him when the tasks are due, she would rather do it herself. When asked to reflect on why she thinks he does not see the labour she says that she is more observant on those types of details than he is and says:

“Why? Is it from his childhood? Is it because he is a guy? I don’t know” - Woman D

Woman F tells another example of men not seeing labour.

“W: But he thinks that he is the only one that does the dishes and I also think he does the dishes more often, but I’m like, sure I do the dishes sometimes absolutely. While I know that there are some

things he never does (...). But, but I take care of a lot of the general stuff that maybe isn't as noticeable, sure, it is very noticeable if mountains of dirty dishes disappears, but a lot of the other stuff, stuff that isn't as noticeable or things you do that often, then it's always me who does it (...) I mean, tasks like that always tend to end up on me. And then, because like, he has no interest in like, well... (...) No but... I mean, maybe he doesn't consider that equally important”

- Woman F

The way the participants describe their partner and their ability to not see labour indicates an explanation that it is just the way they are. This is in line with the other explanations previously mentioned and also make it seem quite hard to do changes if wanted.

Some challenges faced

The seemingly natural arrangements that West and Zimmerman discuss can be found in this data. Like mentioned above, the explanation of the way they are is one of them. Further, even if the participants reflect on the reasoning why they are in certain way or organised the unpaid labour in a certain way, they also describe the challenges regarding changing the way the unpaid labour is organised:

“I absolutely think that I do a lot of the thought..., emotional responsibility, I think I am always two steps ahead, and I do not think there is anything about it, it is who I am, maybe with therapy. And I do not know if he can do anything about it either because I do not know if he could, but in some ways it feels like that type of labour also is a bit about personality, that I am more of the planning type and such, I do not know. It is interesting why it is recurring or like a little bit of recurring pattern in many heterosexual relationships, but, yeah in our duality, then it feels like because he is

more laid back and I am more... yeah, planning, thinking ahead and I do not know if I can do anything about it. I am not sure if I feel, no it would have been very nice if I would not need to remind him about everything, but, I do not know..." - Woman A

"I think it is hard to make it equally divided. It feels like I still miss things, social responsibility and taking initiative and to talk more. I think that if it is gonna be fair, I would need more structure so that it is easier for me to understand what is happening and when and how and such. It feels a bit hard because it is, my partner does it more "right", do better things. But then we would have to make it harder for her by having more structure which maybe she does not want (...) Because I think she likes it better to fix things when it is needed (...) and I do not want to take that away from her, making it more boring (...) even if it might be what I need. That is what I think. I think maybe that is why I struggle to take initiatives." - Man K

This quote by Man K highlights something that is recurring in the data: division made due to preferences. Man K describes how he does not want to make the labour more boring for his partner. This made me wonder what the most important factors are when deciding how to organise the unpaid labour. Whose preferences should be the norm of how they do unpaid labour? And also, would changing the organisation in a way that makes him take more responsibility and initiative be more troublesome or beneficial for his partner?

I believe that organising the unpaid labour in a way that makes him take on more responsibility and initiatives would be beneficial as it could even out the gender inequalities in the relationship. Even if it becomes more boring for her she would most likely have more time and energy for other things that could give her more joy than unpaid labour.

To sum up, the practical work seems easier to discuss how it is divided compared to the cognitive and emotional labour. Justifications such as personality

traits, upbringing and preferences are used to explain the unequal division which makes the practices of doing gender invisible. Through these practices doing so gender inequality is reproduced. How to make these practices visible are understood hard, as it is difficult to apply societal structures on the relationship.

4.1.2. Expectations & feelings

This is the second main section. It is constructed on the themes of *striving for equality*, *mothering*, and *gratitude*. These themes are now presented.

Firstly, I will present some findings presented by the interviewees that relate to general expectations in the relationship. As shown in the section above, division of unpaid labour can be understood in multiple ways. Unpaid labour also creates different feelings and expectations among the participants.

“When me and my partner talked about this before, that it is good for us to be more aware and talk about how it is in the relationship, what can be better and such with the work but I think that, I don’t know, there’s so much emotions about it, about being, the expectations on what women are in a relationship, that I think that or maybe I have more expectations of myself than I think I do.” -
Woman B

When Man J is asked if he has any expectations on his partner he says:

“Yeah, I don’t know. Nothing I can think of right away, but it is also like, yeah no, I try to not be obvious with but, but but like that I, I don’t expect her to this and this or like, at the same time as she is, she is, I don’t know what to say, but she is like a cis woman/woman, and I think that she surely has expectations based on gender expectations that she is supposed to be in a certain way towards me, like and such, but I try not to exacerbate it, but I am sure it still is

there either way I think, but I think I have, I struggle to pinpoint exactly what it could be, but I am convinced that there is some”
- Man J

The expectations for women are described more as something that is rooted in a bigger framework, in the societal norms of how they should be as a person overall. Woman B’s feelings towards the expectations could be interpreted as more complicated and not necessarily in a positive way. In the interview with Man L, he describes how there are certain expectations that he will be the one doing repairs but when asked how it feels to have these expectations imposed on him, he describes it as “quite fun” and not giving him any displeasure. Most men in this study did not express that they felt any specific expectations due to their gender while some of the women explained that they do feel some pressure.

4.1.2.1 Striving for equality

This describes how the participants spoke about equality during the interviews. A couple of the women talked about the ambivalent feelings of being in a heterosexual relationship in regard to unpaid labour. They say that it is something they try to be vary about and reflect on but also hard sometimes to see the structures you are aware of in the setting of the relationship. One interviewee says:

“I think it is hard sometimes to apply it on something that is so close, that is so natural for me now, or, yeah, this is our little life and I think it is hard to apply those bigger structures, structural analysis on our little life” - Woman A

Another woman says:

“It is difficult to do 50/50” - Woman E

All of the participants said equality was important and talked about it in varying degrees, but nonetheless important. However, it was only some of the women that talked about the relations between being feminist or wanting equality and at the same time being in a heterosexual relationship and the possible implications.

Some of the women also described how they want their relationship to be perceived by others. Even if they are aware that their relationship is not 100 percent equal, they want others to believe that they are, or at least close to being equal and that they keep their male partners to those standards. When Woman A was asked if she feels any pressure about their relationship being in a certain way she says that she and her close friends had their feminist awakening together and that she wants to keep her partner to the standards that she would expect her friends' partners to be held at. She says that she cares about how her relationship is perceived from the outside. It is easy to compare your relationship to others and want others to think they take equal responsibility:

“It is like when he takes initiative to cook dinner, I feel more keen to tell about it, or if they (her friends, editor’s note) are visiting I want him to cook so we look more equal” - Woman A

Woman B describes that in some relationships there are more expectations on the woman regarding housework but that she does not experience it that way. She has expectations on her partner to be doing his part:

“Then... then you hear stuff like, well... if it's a hetero relationship that the guy expects the girl to do more at home. And it really isn't like that. But I feel like... I'm struggling with those thoughts a bit. (...) Yeah, but I do expect him to, like, that he should want to do it in a fair way and... I mean like, expectations that he will want to do it (...) But I don't think he has any expectations on me to do mine, I mean my chores... Because it is about that there's a... a, it's more unequal overall with us... I mean men and women, like... in

relationships, like I still expect that he would try more, to do more to meet the expectations and do it” - Woman B

Woman E reflects on what she gets out of being in a heterosexual relationship:

“In some ways I lose time, or rather that he gains more time, because if I would live on my own I would have still done as much, but he gains time because most of the time someone else does the tasks (...) I gain nothing by being in a relationship with him. I feel good and it’s nice but am I really feeling good if I feel like it's unfair?” - Woman E

Woman E continues to reflect on how being aware of gender inequality makes her feel like a bad feminist, because she lives in a relationship where she is not happy with how the unpaid labour is divided. She explains that she is aware that she is not in an equal relationship and that she blames herself for being in this situation, but at the same time, she and her partner are just two people that are trying their best. The ambition of trying their best could be found in the majority of the couples in this study. As discussed throughout the analysis, the couples express an aim toward equality in the relationship but experience challenges to get there.

The feelings of Woman E regarding being in an unequal relationship is described as ambivalent. These feelings are shared among some of the other women in this study. Woman E continues to describe how she feels the pressure to be the one reaching the ideal of being in an equal relationship but feels at the same time that she does not want to be the only one with that responsibility, it is something they should do together. But in the end, she is the one that is feeling more pressure to reach that goal.

When Woman E is asked if she thinks unpaid labour affects their relationship in any way and the way she feels for the relationship she says:

“I would say it does. In the end, I do not think I could be in a relationship that is unfair. (...) It is not possible to do 50/50 but if the other person is not willing to work on how to try to make it possible and the times I can feel that I am not getting that communication or that it has actually been done that way, I always think every time that when, I don't want to. I don't want to be, I don't want to be in that relationship. In the end, I don't want to stand here and make decision because they were better (editor's note: from an economical perspective). It makes me stressed about the future, but I don't think that is reflected... I can't see that happening to us” - Woman E

The way these women describe their feelings of wanting equality but live in an unequal relationship also highlights the ambivalent feelings. None of the men expressed similar experiences or feelings. The ambivalent feelings substantiate the complexity of being in a relationship that might not live up to your ideal ideas of what an equal relationship should be like. How the unpaid labour affects the relationship will be elaborated further in *4.2 The relationship between love and unpaid labour*.

To strive toward an equal relationship while being in a heterosexual relationship is described by the interviewees as something that involves ambivalent feelings. The women feel both expectations to be good girlfriends, do their part of the unpaid labour as well as trying to achieve equality. At the same time the men have not expressed any explicit expectations that they should take on the main responsibility in changing the relationship, even if many of the men talk about how they want their relationship to be more equal. I will end this section with a quote that seems fitting to the theme:

“Women are in an impossible situation in that many of them are trying, on an individual basis, to change the system in ways that require collective efforts” (Haavind, 1984, p. 166, as cited in Gunnarsson, 2014, p. 108).

4.1.2.2 Mothering

This theme arose during the interviews when some of the women spoke about the feeling of “mothering” their partner. Moving on now to analyse the feelings of “mothering”. Some of the women share that they are careful not to become “mothers” or “mothering” but sometimes feel like they have to. The feeling of having to be a “mother” is associated with feelings of helping but at the same time also taking over responsibilities.

“I'm trying to, well... like... I don't want to like, mother anyone (...)
I feel like it's often me who just like, solves it to get it over and done with and when it's something as trivial (...) it takes like 2 minutes and it'll relieve me of my stress so why don't you just do it? (...) After years together and yeah now he knows men and know that, yeah, I think it becomes a trap, like now he knows that I, if he doesn't take hold of the matter, then I will solve it. Maybe that's why he is not as prone to, in some way, solve it. That's why I also have, try to take a step back as I don't want to be the one who always take the ultimate responsibility” - Woman A

Another woman describes the feelings of mothering in the following way:

“I'm trying to think about... like, fighting with myself that I can't be anyone's mother. I can't be anyone's teacher. I can't take any responsibility for him to learn about the invisible labour without...So, I can like buy you a book and say read this, like, here is some background for you. I can encourage you to go and talk to someone else about this, because you need to educate yourself. And I say it loud and clear every time we have a fight like, I'm not put on this earth to be educational/pedagogical right now” - Woman E

The feeling of having to “mother” could be interpreted in relation to the expectations of women being the ones that cares and help others to a greater extent than men. As Lynch argues (2009, pp. 411-412), men take advantage of women’s love labour. Trying to break free from the role of “mothering” could be understood as a way to go against the gender norms that are imposed on women. It should, however, not be understood as the women no longer care about their partners but rather as a call for men to take their responsibility and take the actions needed to even out the inequalities.

4.2.2.3 Gratitude

This theme presents how some feelings of gratitude were said by two of the female interviewees. The theme of gratitude might not explicitly relate to any of my theoretical frameworks, but it highlights interesting aspects. A few of the women also describe how they feel like they have to be grateful that their partner does some of the unpaid labour, but they are unsure if they should feel gratitude.

“One time when he pointed out that I didn’t thank him for doing the dishes, and then I said that it is nothing to say thank you for as it was his turn, I had done the dishes all week. If you do something extra, then I will thank you. But if you do your part of the job I will not thank you. (...) If you do the dishes or cook dinner one time this week, I will not say thank you, you have done your minimum. (...) The workload varies from week to week, and if I sometimes had to leave in a rush without having done anything, and when I get home he has done my part, then I feel very grateful, but usually he is not taking off my workload, most often he either does his part and nothing more. It’s more common that I do more of his share if we in some way try to do 50/50” - Woman E

“It feels like in many heterosexual relationships, the women have more of the cognitive and emotional, and often the practical responsibility as well. I feel like we have figured out a way where the practical responsibility is favourable, however, I think that, I forgot to say, that I sometimes feel like I have to thank him for doing the dishes, and say thank you. I am not sure if he would say that to me, or maybe he would say thank you but not in the same way, not in a surprised way (...) of course he should do the dishes, or I don’t get surprised in that way, more like it is not something you see that often, you get fed with images of women taking responsibility” -

Woman A

One aspect is the gendered differences of what is expected of men and women in relation to unpaid labour is made visible by the two quotes above. Both these women express feelings that it goes without saying that they should share the unpaid labour equally and when their partners expect them to be thankful for doing the minimum, they are not sure how to feel about it. This could be understood as some of the women’s expectations of their partners.

To conclude, the analysis of the experiences of unpaid labour have shown that there are similarities in this data to the findings in van Hooff’s (2011, p. 217) study. It shows that even in relationships where they strive toward equality it does not always translate into practice. The justifications as who they are as a person or other factors is almost perceived as static or fixed, and therefore the changes to equality might seem like an almost impossible effort to make. Gender is rarely used by the participants as a reason for the specific division of labour. If mentioned, gender is often described as a possible factor. This line of reasoning can be compared to the suggestion by Nyman, Reinikainen and Eriksson (2018, p. 39) that the practice of doing gender is not necessarily done consciously. By not thinking that a certain division is based on gendered aspects it also makes those aspects invisible.

Some of the participants reflected on how it could be a combination of gendered norms and gendered inequality and the aspects that were assigned to them as a person, which was also described as something that makes it harder to separate what is what. It is possible that some tasks are preferred by a person not due to their gender, but it would imaginably be achievable to have an equal division of unpaid labour. To do that, the gendered aspects would need to become visible and the norms produced through socialisation needs to be dismantled.

4.2. The relationship between love and unpaid labour

4.2.1. Love languages

One theme that stood out already during the interview process was the accounts of love languages. The term love language was recurring during multiple interviews. When asked how they show care and affection in their relationship, it was common among the men that they show it through words of affirmation and physical touch, while the women often do the same as well as acts of service. The women often described how they try to see their partners' needs and help them.

“I think he shows love in the small things. He is very good at giving compliments, more small gestures and physical touch, while I am more like ‘okay what can I do for you’” - Woman A

When Woman A was asked if she feels like her partner appreciate what she does for the relationship and the unpaid labour she says:

“Yeah I do think so. Maybe that he does not always understand that some things that I do takes time out of my day. But yeah, I think in general that he sees it as the way I show love” - Woman A

Another woman says this about their love languages:

“W: I would say that I show it by doing things. My love language is for sure acts of service. I am always thinking what I can do to make him feel less stressed, make it possible to rest when he is sick, I make sure I have cooked when he gets home and that there is dishes to be done so he does not feel like he has to do it to make me happy, instead, I have already done it. (...) Or if he has a lot of exams I make a lot of meal prepping for him. (...) I do things that make his everyday life easier because I think it is nice. I really think I use unpaid/invisible labour as my love language in a way”

I: How do you think he shows appreciation for you? That he appreciates and cares about you?

W: Not always in the way I would like to maybe. We have talked about it and I have said that I would appreciate getting the same treatment back. If I do one thing it is also a sign or showing that I would also appreciate it if you would make my days easier if I am tired or such, he is not as good at doing that, he does not think about it. He is not always as observant and if he is stressed, then he has difficulty seeing anything else I think. His love language is more like physical touch (...) I would say that he is verbal, saying he likes me, gives me affection, closeness, hugs and kisses, he always has time for me” - Woman E

These findings are similar to how the women in Holmberg’s study (Holmberg, 2013, p. 157) describe it. The women in this study show their love in a quite active way, through the practices that can be understood as love labour. One couple did stand out as they both express love through acts of service. Woman E also describes how she wishes that her partner saw her needs as well as she sees his but feels like he can argue that she does not have to show love by doing things, which can sometimes make her feel like her love language is not appreciated.

“It feels a bit silly talking about love languages, I think it has something, or is onto something, to understand how the other person show love and see it as something positive and that I have to remember that even if he does not take the initiative to go grocery shopping for me, he still pays attention to and nurture our relationship in his own nice ways” - Woman A

The act of showing love has an impact on the partners well-being.

“It's always nice that someone else has done things, it means that I can relax, if I do things, then she can relax. It is important, yeah, it is still, it affects the relationship as well when doing things, like out of love. It is to feel appreciation, which is an important part of the whole” - Man K

Showing love can be done in a variety of ways and it is difficult to rank which is the best or most valuable way as it seems to be based on the individual's preferences. Even if it is not possible to value love languages as in which language expresses more love or which love language that is worth more, one could argue that the physical touch and acts of service require more time and effort. Drawing on the concept of love labour, Lynch describes the importance that love labour is done through practices that includes the different types of labour to add substance to the feelings of love and care (Lynch, 2007, p. 550), which can include emotional, cognitive and practical labour. Woman A and Woman E describe how their love language involves both thinking of what could help or improve their partner's day, and include a practical task such as meal prep.

Woman A explicitly says that her partner does not always see the time unpaid labour takes out of her day, and that he mainly understands it as a practice of love. Even if it is a practice of love, the time and effort she puts into it might be devalued.

The gendered differences described by the participants show that women might do love labour that is more time and energy consuming, however, it does not mean that expressing their love in this way is unpleasurable (Lynch 2007, p. 554). In regard to the concepts of love power, the women do not describe themselves in ways that would imply that they feel exploited through their love. They rather express wishes to be treated in a similar way, as Woman E explicitly exemplifies. The asymmetrical power relations between men and women as well as affective inequalities could arguably be reproduced through the different ways men and women do love labour, through their love languages. This could also be understood through the concept of love power. When women give care and love to a greater extent than they get back, it indicates how patriarchy is reproduced and maintained through these practices of love (Gunnarsson, Garcia-Andrade & Jónasdóttir, 2018).

In short, by adding the aspect of love, in particular love labour and love power, adds another dimension, that may not necessarily simplify division of labour but rather shows the complexity and nuances in unequal distribution of unpaid labour in a relationship.

4.2.2. “I love him even though...”

This theme arose during the interviews when the participants spoke about how love might affect the division of unpaid labour in the relationship, and vice versa.

The participants describe how they want to be in a relationship with their partner even if it is not equal because they love them, but it does cause some mixed feelings.

Woman E says that she never wanted to be the one doing all the labour but either way, here she is, in a relationship where she does more of the unpaid labour. She reflects on if an option should be to end the relationship, but she says that she loves him and wants to be with him no matter how messy he is.

“In the end, it is all about if he respects me (...) That I feel respected, listened to and loved is what is important in the end.” - Woman E

The feelings of still wanting to be together goes both ways. When asked about how the unpaid labour affects their relationship and if it affects how they feel about the relationship. Man J says:

“M: Yeah, in some ways I guess it does since you still walk around and get irritated and I know that she does it too. That is the way it is. It’s not only from my perspective but in that way, absolutely. Absolutely, it does. (...) Also the relationship, or no, not how I feel for the relationship, then it’s like no, no I would not say... I am still, like, yeah what do you say, no but I feel, I feel like she is the one I want to be with no matter what, and so what, yeah what if she is the way she is, like, she is, she is how she is and I am like I am. It is just a part of, of us, and that becomes, I don’t know, it becomes part of the relationship in some way, like. And no it has never made me feel like, no, this is not going to work out” - Man J

Woman F describes a situation where she felt irritated that her partner did not take initiative to do a practical task:

“It doesn’t come naturally to him or he might not be the most practical person (...) and I love him even though, but, but then I become the one that has to do it (...) which is a bit annoying” - Woman F

She continues to describe that even if she gets irritated and feels like that she then has to take the responsibility for something he could possibly solve, the irritation is not long-lived.

Most of the participants feel like they are appreciated by their partners, although some ambivalent feelings as demonstrated in the sections above. Even if the division is unequal and sometimes is described as a burden or as unfair, none of the participants expressed any possibilities for ending the relationship due to this distribution of division. Acknowledging a partner’s work or contribution

lessens the feeling of dissatisfaction in the relationship according to the results of Ruppner, Brandén and Turunen's study (2018, pp. 76-78). How much unpaid labour affects the relationship varies among the participants. Some did not think it was anything that mattered that much while others said that they felt like how they experience the division of unpaid labour is important for how they feel about the relationship.

To say that their love is unconditional would be to exaggerate. Many of the women said that they would not accept if the unpaid labour was too unfair or if they felt like their partner did not even try to do better. However, they did express emotions of being able to put up with the unfairness partly because they love their partners. This could be interpreted that the intent of the partners' behaviours and actions seem to play a part. Both the concept of love labour and the concept of love power describes how power dynamics is present in love relationships. Love power and love labour talks about exploitation but that it does not have to be experienced as a burden. Lynch describes how men take advantage of women's care work, similar to how Jónasdóttir explain how men exploit women's love. Men and women are socialised into different roles regarding care and love work, where according to Lynch (2009, p. 412), women often feel like they have no other option than to do love labour. Interpreting the experiences of the women in this study, the women value that work and do not seem to mind doing it but would like their partners to do that labour to the same extent as them.

Similar to the analysis regarding being in an unequal relationship in the first section of this chapter, women are put in the position where they want to change the inequality in their relationship, and often the men as well but the men express feelings of uncertainty of how to do it. As Lynch writes (2009, pp. 412-414), there is a need for a change on a societal level to even out the gendered power relations, which could arguably emphasise the responsibility of the individual man to do their part and take their responsibility. By not acknowledging the gendered practices of dividing unpaid labour in certain ways reproduces and maintains gender inequality.

It could be argued that love affects the division of unpaid labour more than unpaid labour affects love. Even if love does not make one immune from feeling unfairness or conflict, unequal division of labour does not seem to cause relationship dissatisfaction to the degree that they have to break up. As shown in the quotes in this chapter, even if they are irritated or struggle with the ambivalent feelings, they still want to be with their partner because they love them. There is a complexity in cohabiting with the person you love. You do certain things out of love, because you want them to feel appreciated, acknowledge them or make their day easier. The division between love language and unpaid labour is not always a clear distinction.

The couples I interviewed felt like they truly care about - and love, each other. It is complex because in a relationship there should not be only about the practical, it is about showing that you care and that you love the other person. This should of course also mean that you truly put down the effort to make your partner feel appreciated, not exhausted from doing all the unpaid labour, ease the burden and step up. They care and love each other; it is important for all of the couples that their partner is doing well but also that the division of labour is somewhat fair. The concept of love, specifically love labour and love power, introduces another dimension. This might not make the division of labor simpler but instead highlights the complexities in the unequal distribution of unpaid work within a relationship.

5. Final discussion and conclusion

In the following pages, a final discussion and conclusion of this study will be presented. Suggestions for future research are included at the end of this section.

5.2 Final discussion

The way the participants describe their relationship and experiences of unpaid labour show that it is hard to always have a clear understanding of how the unpaid

labour is distributed in the relationship. Explanations such as upbringing, preferences, and “the way they are” are often used to describe as well as in some cases to justify the unequal division within the couple’s relationship. Through these, gendered inequalities in the division of labour are made invisible and are therefore harder to change. Some of the participants reflect on this and show that it is difficult to know why the division is in a certain way; what is a personality trait and what is learned behaviour due to gender norms and expectations. The practical labour is often easier to see how it is divided while the cognitive, emotional and love labour is not as apparent.

The aspect of love does not make the distribution of unequal division of unpaid labour easier as well. A good relationship consists of love and care, but it is important that love labour is something both partners do. Maybe it is not possible to say if one love language is better than another but acts of service is an expression of love that often includes different types of unpaid labour (practical, cognitive and emotional labour), and therefore possibly more time and energy consuming. It can however still be enjoyable. The women described overall how their love language is often, in addition to other expressions, acts of service.

From the interviews, it is evident that relationships are complex, and all the feelings are not streamlined, rather ambivalent. How to organise everyday life when it is just the two of them and wanting to have an equal division when it is something they strive toward could at first seem like a quite easy task to do. But for these participants it is not always perceived to be that simple. Even if you are aware of gender norms and the expectations they create, making changes is hard. Almost all couples describe that they want to change the way responsibilities and tasks are distributed, how to do it seems to be less clear. But as some of the participants said, it is sometimes hard to apply what you know about the imposed norms on your own relationship.

When striving for equality it is easier to see gender inequality as big societal structures, but harder to see them, or to apply that knowledge in their own situation. A bit of a “doing as good as I can”-mindset. The main responsibility of changing gender inequalities should perhaps not be put on individuals. To reach gender

equality there must be a will to strive toward it. It is easier to believe in something but the actions to do something about it is not always easy to translate into practice. None of the couples describing the asymmetrical division of labour as it is now is experienced as being a big enough issue that it could possibly end the relationship, but that it does cause irritation and sometimes conflicts in the relationship.

To summarise, it is easier said than done to divide the labour equally. Different factors play a part in how the unpaid labour is organised and the impact of love should not be underestimated. How the division is done might vary over time and the different factors and expectations that affect the division can change.

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has explored how heterosexual couples without children understand their relationship in relation to unpaid labour and love through qualitative semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. I find similar conclusions about the complexity of relationships and unpaid labour that previous research has presented.

RQ1: How do heterosexual couples without children in Sweden experience the division of unpaid labour?

To conclude, as seen in this study and further discussed earlier in the final discussion, the experience of unpaid labour within a relationship is seemingly complex and multifaceted. The participants in this study experienced the division of unpaid labour in various ways, and the first theme showed how there are many ways to divide the unpaid labour within the relationship such as basing it on the social differences of the individuals in the couple. Here, personality traits such as being a “planner” or not and how the participants understand labour in the relationship affects how they divide the work between them, exemplified by the differences in not noticing if something is considered to be labour or not. Other

challenges in dividing the unpaid labour equally were presented, for example how the dividing of household work is decided on personal preferences, which arguably affects the organising within the relationship.

Further, we can see that unpaid labour also creates different feelings and expectations among the participants. In the theme of expectations and feelings, it is highlighted that even in relationships where individuals strive toward equality it does not always translate into practice. The participants in this study experienced various expectations and feelings when talking about their relationship and the second theme showed how participants who strive for equality are also faced with ambivalent feelings such as doubting how being a feminist translates in a heterosexual couple and how their relationship is perceived by others such as their friends. Further, the theme of mothering highlights how some of the women struggled with caring for their partner since it could bring up contradictory feelings of helping their partner and simultaneously taking on too much responsibility. Lastly, an unexpected theme was gratitude that highlighted interesting aspects that participants felt grateful for their partner's work around the house and at the same time did not automatically feel thankful.

RQ2: What is the relationship between love and unpaid labour?

Love and specifically love languages can be interpreted as a way of understanding some of the reasoning for the division of unpaid labour. One could argue that love has a greater impact on the division of unpaid labour than that of unpaid labour has on love for my participants. While unequal division of labour may lead to feelings of unfairness or conflict, it does not result in feelings of relationship dissatisfaction to the extent of causing a breakup. As evidenced by the quotes in the previous chapter, even when individuals experience irritation or ambivalence, their love for their partner remains a strong factor in their desire to stay together. Cohabiting with a loved one adds complexity to the relationship dynamics, as actions motivated by love, can blur the distinction between acts of love and unpaid labour.

Love is arguably a force to be reckoned with since one of my main findings shows that even though some participants experience an unequal division of unpaid labour which leads to irritation and possibly conflict, none of the couples thought it was reason enough to break up because they love their partner and want to be with them to a greater extent than the negative feelings caused through the experience of unequal division of unpaid labour.

These findings are in line with previous research regarding using explanations and justifications for the unequal division, as well the complex nature of relationships of cohabiting couples. This study highlights the experienced complexity and challenges of trying to be equal in a heterosexual relationship.

5.3 Future research

There is a need for more research overall on unpaid labour but specifically with a more intersectional lens as a lot of the research existing on mental labour is overall have participants that are white, heterosexual and from the middle class (Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich & Voltmer, 2023, p. 487; McLean et al, 2023). The theoretical framework of love power is applicable on other relationships than heterosexual ones (Gunnarson, Garcia-Andrade & Jónasdóttir, 2018, p. 5), and would also be interesting to apply to non-heterosexual relationships. Other intersectional aspects could also be of interest in future research as this would broaden the field of unpaid labour.

One aspect that did not get analysed further due to mainly not being frequently discussed or did not go in depth in the interviews was time valuation. This was mentioned in relation to one's occupation, e.g. a person who only works part-time or studies feels like they should do more of the unpaid labour than their partner who has a full-time job. This topic has been written about before but could possibly be explored further.

Another aspect that I decided not to explore further is how food preparation was described as a pleasant task by some of the participants and therefore not seen

as a burden and often described to a great extent as something enjoyable. In Van Hooff's (2011) study, the food preparation also sticks out in a similar way as in this thesis. This could possibly also be explored further in future research.

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7. Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview guide (translated from Swedish to English)

BACKGROUND QUESTIONS:

- How old are you?
- Where do you live?
- What is your educational level?
- What do you do for a living?

BACKGROUND ON THE RELATIONSHIP:

- How long have you been in a relationship?
- How long have you lived together?
- What was the reason for moving in together?
- What were you looking forward to about living together?

QUESTIONS ABOUT DIVISION OF UNPAID LABOUR:

- Could you describe how the division of labour is divided?
 - How come the division is this way?
 - Do you wish it was in a different way?
- How do you feel about this distribution?
- What is important for you when distributing the labour?
- Do you discuss unpaid labour in your relationship?
- How do you decide what to do? Is it something you do together or who takes initiative?
- Is it important to be in a relationship that is equal?
- Do you have the same perception of what e.g. a cleaned home implies or what needs to be done before people come over?
 - If not, how do you deal with having different standards?

- Do you feel like you have time and energy to do other things besides what you do for a living and the unpaid labour?

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE EMOTIONAL LABOUR AND EXPECTATIONS

How would you describe that you like and appreciate your partner?

- How do you feel like your partner shows it to you?
- What is important to both maintain and maybe improve a relationship?
- Do you feel like your partner notices and appreciates the work you do?
- Do you feel any expectations to be in a certain way in your relationship?
 - Being someone's partner?
 - Being a woman/man?
- Do you have any expectations for your partner?
- Does the unpaid labour affect your relationship in any way?
 - Does it affect how you feel about the relationship?

THE FUTURE:

- Do you think you would like to have children one day?
 - How do you think that would affect the distribution of unpaid labour?
 - Does the distribution today affect the decision to want to have children?

CLOSING QUESTIONS:

- Is there anything you would like to add?
- How has it felt to talk about this?

Thank you!