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How caring work of older women gets disappeared: The gendered dynamics of changing everyday occupations in an older German couple

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ABSTRACT

Background: In older couples, everyday occupations need to be adjusted when one of the partners experiences a health decline. Gender dynamics will play a role in this process, yet there is little understanding about how gender can influence and shape changes in couples' occupations. **Aim:** To understand the changing occupations of old, independent-living couples when becoming caregivers and care receivers, through a gender lens. **Methods:** A narrative-in-action methodology with a case-study design has been chosen to enable an in-depth analysis of one couple. Besides joint and individual interviews with both partners, observations were made of their everyday occupations. The analytic process was interpretative, using gender theory as a lens for understanding. **Results:** In the couple's narrative there was a difference in the time spent on, and meaning given to, occupations performed by each partner to sustain everyday life. The wife was heavily enrolled in taking care of her husband, a gendered pattern that was rooted in their spousal history. While her efforts were taken-for-granted, his efforts were acknowledged as special. **Conclusion:** The adjustment of the everyday occupations of this older couple were gendered, and led to a disappearing of the woman's occupations and the care she was giving.

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In everyday life, humans perform many different occupations that connect them with their environment and create meaning (Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). While individuals can influence what they do, those actions can never be purely the individual's choice. Rather, occupational choices are influenced by various factors both within each individual (e.g., performance capacity, experience, motivation) and by their physical, social, cultural, and political environment (Huff et al., 2018). To understand human occupation, it is therefore necessary to go beyond the individual level (Josephsson, 2017) and adopt a transactional

perspective in which occupation gains meaning within the social, cultural, and historical context (Cutchin et al., 2006; Cutchin & Dickie, 2012; Hocking, 2000).

Gender theorists zoom in on gender as one of the powerful factors that influence what people do and who they are (Lindsey, 2011). In contrast to a biological perspective of 'sex', which refers to genes, hormones, and reproductive characteristics, 'gender' is considered to be a social process. It materializes, among other things, in an individual's sociocultural position and requires profound social learning (Lindsey, 2011). In this article, gender is acknowledged at the

intra- and inter-psychological level as socially constructed and performed through a set of rules, norms, and hierarchies (Gilbert & Rader, 2001; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gendered behaviour—or ‘doing gender’, a phrase coined by West and Zimmerman (1987)—can be seen in all areas of life, from public situations to the most intimate relationships, including how spouses interact and organize their everyday life. Gender theories help to explain gendered interactions and occupations, and how these (re)produce gender roles, gender identity, and relations (Tannenbaum et al., 2016). Gender is an organizing societal principle (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001) and embedded in everyday occupation and in all interactions.

In the field of occupational science, there is an increasing interest in the notion of gender, and the idea that gender is created and expressed through occupation (Angell, 2014; Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Dowers et al., 2019; Goodman et al., 2007; McCarthy et al., 2022). What humans do or avoid doing can be both a “means of resistance and change” (Angell, 2014, p. 105) and a site for creating social difference and inequality (Angell, 2014; Galvaan, 2015; Huff et al., 2018; Jackson, 1998). In their critical interpretive synthesis about informal caregiving, Reid et al. (2022) identified a need for occupational science research to turn more attention to diversity, particularly in relation to gender and gender identity.

In Beagan and Saunders’ (2005) study of body-focused occupations of young men and in Goodman et al.’s (2007) exploration of ‘doing dress’, the gendered and social nature of occupations is clearly visible. Looking through a gender lens can broaden understandings of human occupation and uncover conflicts, hierarchies, limitations, and possibilities that were previously mostly viewed from an individualistic perspective (Galvaan, 2015).

Gender also plays an important role in spousal relationships in which the everyday life of partners is typically shared and organized together with the goal of meeting the daily demands (work, household, leisure, social life, health, maintenance of environment) (Pickens & Pizur-Barnekow, 2009). Over time, couples establish a routine which determines how each partner contributes to the shared everyday life,

and which role and identity they take on. A couple’s routine is challenged if circumstances change or the health of one or both partners declines. Most couples face this situation in old age (van Nes et al., 2012). Not being able to do what one needs or wants to do means becoming dependent on care. As most initial care is provided within relationships, one spouse will need to enter the role as caregiver, while the other will become a care receiver (van Nes et al., 2012). Spousal caregiving is a common situation among older adults, with most initial care being carried out by spouses (Glauber, 2017; Lima et al., 2008).

In this study, caregiving is not only understood as caring *for*, but also as caring *about* somebody (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). Caring goes beyond what one does and includes emotional involvement. Both caregiving and care receiving requires the partners to learn new skills and to adapt to new roles (Atta-Konadu et al., 2011; Mattock & McIntyre, 2016; Plastow et al., 2015). This can be experienced as stressful for both partners but works out differently for men and women. Calasanti and Bowen (2006) have, for instance, shown that within spousal relationships, wives take domestic labour for granted and tend to view caring for husbands as part of their obligation. By contrast, becoming a carer marks “a sharp discontinuity” in husband’s notions of their relationships (Calasanti & Bowen, 2006, p. 262). Van Nes (2013) demonstrated that social participation of caregiving women is significantly lower than social participation of non-caregiving women, while no significant differences in participation were found for caregiving and non-caregiving men.

Many older adults in the western world wish and are expected to remain independent and in their familiar environment when ageing. High value is placed on autonomy and the competence of performing everyday occupations in older age (Abma & Bendien, 2019; Calasanti & Bowen, 2006; Szinovacz, 2000). Thus, caring for a spouse can be an attempt to avoid both leaving the familiar environment and drawing on professional care, emphasizing autonomy from outside support. So far, older adults’ experiences of becoming caregivers or care receivers have not been explored in depth from a gender perspective. Therefore, the aim of this

study was to understand the changing occupations of one old, independent-living couple when becoming caregivers and care receivers, through a gender lens.

Methodology

Our research question focussed on the gendered dynamics of changing everyday occupations within older couples, and a qualitative study seemed most appropriate to gain an insight in these socially constructed processes of meaning making (Gergen, 2015). As qualitative researchers are their own instruments, it is relevant to notice that the main researcher (AS) is a white woman, born and raised in Germany, and that she has grown up in the same culture as the couple selected for this study. The other authors are white women in their mid-life to senior years. All of us are married to men. Our disciplinary backgrounds range from social participation (TA) and gender studies in medicine (PV) to occupational science (AS, FvN).

For this research project, narrative methodology with a case-study design was chosen to enable an in-depth analysis of the couple as a unit (Abma & Stake, 2014). In narrative methodology, the connection between meaning and action in the daily lives of humans is emphasized (Josephsson & Alsaker, 2015). It is acknowledged that action occurs in a cultural context (Ricoeur, 1984) and that humans assign meaning to their actions in this specific context.

For this study, a combined narrative and ethnographic approach called ‘narrative-in-action’ (Alsaker, 2009; Alsaker & Josephsson, 2003, 2010; Reed et al., 2018a, 2018b) was chosen. Besides eliciting narratives through interviews, participants are observed in the performance of everyday occupations to get a better understanding of the meaning given to occupations by the participants (Josephsson & Alsaker, 2015).

Selecting an information-rich case

For this case study, one ‘information-rich’ case (Patton, 2002) was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of the gendered dynamics in everyday occupations within an older, heterosexual, community-dwelling couple dealing

with health decline. The first contact with possible participants was established through a parish community centre for older adults in a suburb of a large German city. The centre’s secretary passed information about the study to couples using community services and asked them to get in touch with the first author if they were interested in study participation. Three couples contacted the first author and volunteered to participate. After an initial telephone contact and a first interview with all couples, one couple, Mr and Mrs Tabbe (pseudonym), was selected. Reasons for choosing this couple over the other couples was their willingness and ability to share a rich narrative about their lives and their experiences of caregiving and care receiving over the life course.

Data collection

Data were collected over the course of one year by AS. Joint and individual interviews with both partners were conducted to give the participants the chance to tell their shared and individual narratives (van Nes, 2013). Additionally, observations during everyday situations in the participants’ home were carried out, as well as follow-up contacts by telephone. Overall, three narrative interviews with the couple, one narrative interview with each partner, and three telephone calls were conducted. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours, while the duration of phone calls was between 10 and 20 minutes. Observations and brief field notes were carried out before, during, and after the interviews and extensive field notes were written after the contact and a reflective diary was kept.

The first interview with both partners was opened with a very general question about the couple’s everyday life and changes in the past. Subsequently, probing questions and follow-up questions were asked. In later interviews or during telephone contacts, clarifying questions about topics mentioned before were asked, as well as a new invitation to describe everyday life and recent changes. Interviews were recorded digitally after consent and transcribed verbatim.

Observations occurred naturally when AS was at the couple’s house. She was present

when both partners performed everyday occupations such as preparing and having afternoon tea, taking the garbage out, reading the newspaper and moving around the flat. Both partners expressed that they enjoyed AS's visits and conversations and they seemed to be at ease in her presence. Both difficult and humorous topics were brought up by the couple.

Thematic analysis and interpretation

Thematic analysis was used to focus on the content of the couple's stories and to create a narrative in its sequential form. This also enabled the authors to make connections between the experiences described in the narrative and larger social structures, such as power relations or hidden inequalities (Riessman, 2008). Gender theories served as a resource for interpretation of the narratives, focusing on uncovering gender influences. Gender theories were used to help understand the gendered interactions and occupations, and how these (re)produced domains of gender such as gender roles and beliefs, gender identity, and relations (Tannenbaum et al., 2016). According to Tannenbaum et al. (2016), gender roles "represent the behavioural norms applied to men and women in society", gender identity "describes how we see ourselves and are seen by others", and gender relations "refers to how we interact with or are treated by people in the world around us, based on our ascribed or experienced gender" (p. 3).

The analytic process was interpretative and inductive and employed the hermeneutic circle as a basis for analysis, constantly comparing parts of the data with the emerging narrative (Kvale, 1996; Thorogood & Green, 2020). Data analysis started after the first interview and continued throughout the data collection period. Transcripts, field notes, reflections, and recordings were read or listened to repeatedly to discover an overall narrative. All data were broken down into sequences, constituting narrative episodes about certain circumstances or experiences, and then added into the main plot. Both the emerging narrative and single sequences were discussed at various points among all authors until a consensus was reached. The qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was used for data organization.

Interviews were conducted and transcribed in German (van Nes et al., 2010) by the first author. As all authors understand German, data were not translated into English apart from the quotes used in this article. Those quotes were translated by AS and the accuracy of translation was checked by all authors. The analytic process and the construction of the narrative was conducted in English, as were all the discussions between the authors during analysis.

Ethical considerations and trustworthiness

For this study, ethics approval was obtained from the ethics committee at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. The possible impact of the study on the participants was carefully considered and care was taken to protect them from harm. The study's purpose, methods used, and the role of the researcher were fully disclosed. At the time of the study, both partners of the Tabbe couple (pseudonym) were competent and able to make decisions and able to give or withhold consent. After a discussion we therefore decided it was ethically sound to include the couple. Both spouses gave their written consent and were granted the right to withdraw at any point of the study without having to state reasons. Privacy was ensured and all personal data were handled carefully. Pseudonyms were used when sharing interview data and data were stored in a safe place. No data containing personal information about the participants were transmitted or stored electronically.

To enhance trustworthiness, various triangulation methods were employed (Thorogood & Green, 2020). Data triangulation was paid heed by collecting data during interactions with both spouses, during interactions with each partner on their own, and through extending data collection over time. The combination of data sources and data collection approaches employed allowed for methods triangulation. With their diverse professional and personal backgrounds, all authors were involved in data analysis (investigator triangulation) and brought different theoretical perspectives to the analysis (theory triangulation).

The Case: Meal Planning and Preparation of Mr and Mrs Tabbe

During analysis it became clear that meals and meal preparation played an important role in the couple's past and present life. From a care ethics perspective, meal planning and preparation can be seen as a form of care beyond the production of nourishment and completion of a task. Therefore, the decision was made to focus on this particular caring occupation during data analysis. In this section, an introduction of the couple is presented, followed by a description of how they have been cooking meals and organizing kitchen work over the course of their married life together.

Introducing Mr and Mrs Tabbe

Mrs and Mr Tabbe, a heterosexual, married, white, middle-class couple, live in a spacious flat in a quiet suburb of a city in northern Germany. The impression of the flat is that of a space that is lived in, with small items such as photographs or souvenirs showing both inhabitant's interests and history. A sewing machine occupies one end of the big dining table, and on the windowsill are some paintbrushes and knitting materials. A stereo and a selection of CDs is in the living area, as are some sailing trophies, magazines, and books.

Mr Tabbe

On the researcher's first visit to the couple's house, she met Mr Tabbe on a bench outside the house; he had just taken out the garbage and was about to get some bottled water from the downstairs storage to take back up to the flat. He was 93 years old, short and slim and had silvery, unruly hair that was thinning at the back. Even though he appeared to be very fragile, he seemed to draw attention to himself through his presence, appearing much taller than he was when standing up. He was dressed in dark trousers and an ironed shirt. Outside the house, he used a walking stick, and had some difficulty climbing up the stairs to the flat. In the flat he used furniture to prop on when moving about. He welcomed the first author with a smile, started with small-talk and invited her

into the house. It seemed important to him to take on the role as host, offering the visitor coffee, entertaining her with stories, and showing her around the flat.

Mr Tabbe had very limited hearing but did not use a hearing aid. When communicating, his counterpart had to speak up to be understood, and following a conversation between others seemed to be difficult and tiring for him. Mrs Tabbe had hinted that her husband suffered from severe memory problems, which seemed less obvious in small-talk and conversations about the past but became visible when talking about recent events or dates. Also, his memory and overall performance seemed to vary greatly from day to day.

On a visit half a year later, Mr Tabbe had just returned from hospital, where he had been treated for neurological pain for 2 weeks. He seemed a lot less mobile, needed help to get up from a chair, was very unsteady when walking, and could hardly navigate in the flat. His hands trembled visibly, and to safely hold a cup he needed to stabilize it with both hands. His cognitive problems were more visible than before, but he could contribute with stories and memories to the conversation. His outward appearance had not changed much, and he was again dressed in a clean, freshly ironed shirt.

Mrs Tabbe

Mrs Tabbe welcomed the researcher on her first visit in the flat; they had spoken on the phone before and she had initially called the researcher after a local support group for older people had passed on the invitation for study participation. She was 89 years old and a small, slightly plump woman, who walked steadily but with some difficulty. In the flat, she walked without aids but used a rollator outdoors. She kept her hair short and was dressed in matching skirt and blouse, both plain but ironed and clean. She was very friendly, seemed to enjoy the company of others, and was comfortable talking about herself and her life. During our interviews, Mrs Tabbe took care to involve her husband into the conversation, addressing him directly and starting sentences for him to finish. To compensate for her hearing problems, she wore a hearing-aid, which was working well during our

conversation. She seemed to be alert, informed about recent events, and showed a great flexibility in her thinking. She did not seem to have rigid ideas about how things have to be done but could adapt to the demands of a certain situation. During the last visit, half a year later, Mrs Tabbe had not changed much but looked more tired and seemed to be less optimistic. While she expressed confidence that the couple was managing well during the first visits, by then she saw a problem and worried about the future.

The present situation

Mrs Tabbe had been providing care for her husband over the past years, while his memory and his physical abilities deteriorated and her own capacities decreased. Due to physical limitations, the couple did not participate in occupations outside the house any more. Mr Tabbe only left the house together with his wife for doctor's appointments, while Mrs Tabbe went out to do the grocery shopping and sometimes met with friends for coffee. Mr Tabbe's need for care had increased greatly in the past years. At the time of the first interview, he needed assistance with most everyday occupations and his wife felt that it was not safe to leave him alone in the flat anymore when she needed to go outside for appointments or grocery shopping.

The couple had help from professional carers who used to come twice a week before Mr Tabbe's hospitalization and changed the schedule to twice a day after his discharge. There were other informal caregivers, such as volunteers, a cleaner, and the couple's adult children, who helped with cleaning, laundry, ironing, shopping, and keeping Mr Tabbe company to give his wife some time to herself.

Upon the first encounter with the couple, they presented themselves as competent partners who managed their lives together and helped each other. However, about 4 months after the first interview, the fragility of the situation seemed to be clear to Mrs Tabbe. She acknowledged her own health problems and expressed doubt if she would be able to manage everyday life at home. She was actively looking at residential homes. Mr Tabbe did not seem to assess the situation critically and did not

express any concerns. This changed narrative cast a different light on the story and helps us to understand the work involved to keep this narrative of competence and togetherness alive.

The couple's narrative

Mr and Mrs Tabbe's story started in 1950s Germany. Mr Tabbe, who had to join the forces shortly before the end of World War II and remained a prisoner of war in Russia until 1950, had started a new life in a big city in northern Germany. He trained as an inland sailor and got a job with the harbour's fire brigade on a fireboat in a big port town and remained in this job until his retirement. Mrs Tabbe spent the wartime with her family and, in her role as oldest daughter, had to provide for her mother and younger sister as both her father and brother had to follow a military draft. She was interested in becoming a preschool teacher, but her physician deemed this job too strenuous for her. So, she trained to be a seamstress, sewing linen, towels, and aprons.

At a local dance, the couple got to know each other, married, and had two sons in the early 1960s. In their early years as a couple, Mrs Tabbe stayed at home to look after the children and manage the household, while her husband worked full time. During this time, she did some sewing-work for a local fashion company, working from her own home. At home, Mr Tabbe took on the responsibility for repair and maintenance work, such as mending broken equipment, mowing the lawn, or painting in the house. All household-related occupations, such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry, were performed by Mrs Tabbe. During the time the couple's two sons were small, this task division remained mostly the same. Mrs Tabbe planned all her occupations to include the children's schedule while her husband was relatively free to pursue his daily routine.

Mrs Tabbe goes out working, Mr Tabbe starts cooking meals

When the children were around 10 and 12 years old, Mrs Tabbe decided that she wanted to start a 1-year, full-time course to qualify as a sewing

pattern designer. She proposed this idea to her family, who promised to support her.

Fr.T: *Wir hatten das dann besprochen zu Hause, auch mit den Kindern-hab ich denn gesagt, nicht, was auf sie zukommt wenn ich jetzt arbeite 8 Stunden immer. Oder auch mit der Ausbildung. Und mein Mann auch. Und er sagt er hilft. Und die Kinder auch.*

Hr.T: *ja.*

Fr.T: *und dann ging das ganz gut.*

Hr.T: *jaja, immer mit vereinten Kräften!*

Fr.T: *Ja, wenn man zusammenhält und jeder hilft ein bisschen dann geht das auch ganz gut.*

[Mrs T: *We had discussed this at home, with the kids as well. I told them what would be waiting for them if I'd be working for 8 hours every day. Or with my training. And my husband, too. And he said he'd help. And the kids as well.*

Mr T: *Yes [affirming].*

Mrs T: *And then it went quite well.*

Mr T: *Yes, yes, always working with joint effort.*

Mrs T: *Yes, if you stick together and everybody helps a bit, it will work.]*

From this point, Mr Tabbe was more involved in the everyday occupations of cooking and looking after the children. As Mr Tabbe worked shifts, it was possible for him to be at home every other day to prepare lunch for the children and himself and help them with their homework. His wife wrote down recipes for him to follow so that he could learn how to cook. Mr Tabbe related that after a while, cooking became one of his favourite occupations and he characterized himself as a good cook. From Mrs Tabbe's narrations, it appeared that her husband would cook on certain days, but that cooking, meal planning, and preparations remained her responsibility. She described, for example, that

on the days her husband worked, she would get up early to prepare lunch for her children in advance so that they had something to eat when they returned from school.

In the joint interview, Mr Tabbe's involvement was talked about as follows:

I: *Was haben Sie denn gerne gemacht, zu Hause?*

Hr.T: *Zu Hause? Och, ich – gekocht!*

I: *Gekocht?*

Fr.T: *jaja. [bestätigend, lacht]*

Hr.T: *Mit Saubermachen war ich nicht so gut. [lacht]*

Fr.T: *Aber war ja schon viel. Kochen, ne, und Einkaufen und- dann mit den Kindern da ... [räuspert sich] ein bisschen die Schularbeiten machen und so, ne.*

[I: *What did you like to do at home?*

Mr T: *At home? Well, I... I cooked!*

I: *You cooked?*

Mrs T: *yes, yes. [affirming, laughs]*

Mr T: *I was not so good at cleaning. [laughs]*

Mrs T: *But it was rather a lot. Cooking, well, and shopping, and ... and then with the children, helping them a little with their homework and so on, yes.]*

As this quote illustrates, Mrs Tabbe valued the housework her husband did and acknowledged how much he had to do during those days with the children. It was indicated (for example, by Mrs Tabbe's affirming laugh) that he stepped outside the role that was typically expected of men at that time and contributed more than would be expected. However, Mrs Tabbe's own involvement, which exceeded that of her husband, is not mentioned as an achievement. Her husband also chose what kind of housework he wanted to do, leaving tasks like cleaning to his wife, arguing that he was not good at it.

After attending the course for 1 year, Mrs Tabbe successfully qualified as a designer for sewing patterns, and started work as both pattern designer and tailor for various companies. She also became the leader of the sewing department in a fashion company. Even though

successful at work, she described being able to work as a privilege and expressed amazement about the fact that she enjoyed work and got paid as well. She saw her main work as being in the home, caring for her family, thus keeping to gendered norms of the time.

Fr.T: *Ja, ja, War damals noch dass viele (Frauen) zu Hause gearbeitet-also nicht gearbeitet haben. Musste man ja auch den – muss der Mann ja auch einverstanden sein. Ne, [die Arbeit] war ganz gut. Also hat mir auch Spass gemacht. Ich hab zu meinem Mann gesagt, ich hätte das ja auch als Hobby gemacht, ne, und jetzt bekomme ich noch Geld dafür. [lacht]*

[Mrs T: *Well, at that time, many women were working at home – I mean, were not working. One had to ask – the husband had to agree ... Yes, it [work] was quite good. Well, I enjoyed doing it. I said to my husband that I would have done it as a hobby, wouldn't I? And now I even get paid for it. [laughs]*]

In this quote, Mrs Tabbe referred to a law that was passed in Germany in 1977, ending the situation that a woman was only allowed to take on paid work if her husband agreed. It became clear in how she talked about her work that all occupations related to childcare and the household were not counted as work, and that she experienced having a paid job as a privilege. To her and her husband, it was normal that a woman did all the unpaid work in addition to her paid work, and that looking after the family's well-being remained her main responsibility. This labour division was typical in German families in the 1970s and is continuing in various forms until today.

Mr Tabbe gets praised for his cooking

After the couple's children had grown up, Mr Tabbe stopped cooking regularly, and Mrs

Tabbe did most of the meal planning, shopping, and cooking. She described that her husband "helped" with the cooking, and she conveyed the impression that even when he did cook, his cooking always required some help or planning from her. In contrast, Mr Tabbe described himself as taking over the cooking and did not mention it as a team effort.

A quote illustrates how the work was planned and organized by Mrs Tabbe during a time a few years ago when she could not stand up for longer periods of time in the kitchen due to back pain:

I: *Ihre Frau hat ja erzählt vom Malen und Nähen- was machen Sie gerne?*

Hr.T: *Ich koche! [sehr spontane Äusserung]*

I: *Sie hatten mal erzählt Sie machen das jetzt zusammen.*

Fr.T: *Ja- abwaschen. Mein Mann trocknet dann ab.*

Hr.T: *Ja, das mache ich auch. Abtrocknen, und sowas, das mache ich.*

Fr.T: *Geschirrspüler-*

Hr.T: *Geschirrspüler wieder leer machen-*

I: *Das ist Ihre Arbeit?*

Hr.T: *Nicht immer, aber –*

Fr.T: *Und kochen war, eine Zeit lang da hab ich vorbereitet- und dann konnte ich nicht mehr stehen und dann hat mein Mann dann gekocht. Und da hab ich ihm alles hingestellt und da haben die Kinder unten mitgegessen und dann war auch noch nen Freund von unserem Enkel da und da hat mein Mann das nicht so der Reihenfolge nach gemacht sondern so nach seinem- und da hab ich gedacht „oh Gott“, aber dann haben sie ihn gelobt, „hast du ganz toll gemacht, schmeckt gut das Gulasch.“ [lacht]*

[I: *Your wife has told me about [her interest for] painting and sewing. What do you like to do?*]

Mr T: *I cook! [very spontaneous comment]*

- I: *Last time you told me that you do this together now-?*
- Mrs T: *Yes, doing the dishes. My husband dries.*
- Mr T: *Yes, this is something I also do. Drying and things like that, that's what I do.*
- Mrs T: *The dishwasher-*
- Mr T: *[interrupts his wife] Emptying the dishwasher-*
- I: *That is your task?*
- Mr T: *Not always, but-*
- Mrs T: *And cooking was, for a time- I would then prepare and then I could not stand [in the kitchen] anymore and then my husband would cook. I put everything on the counter for him and the children would come up to eat with us and then there also was a friend of our grandson, and my husband did not do it [the cooking] in the right order but in his- and I thought, 'My god', but then they all praised him, said 'You did very well, the goulash tastes great'. [laughs]]*

It is visible that Mrs Tabbe's preparatory work was not mentioned or acknowledged by those who come to eat. Instead, Mr Tabbe got all the credit for cooking the meal. His wife accepted it as his achievement and acknowledged his success, despite not cooking in the "right order", indicating that her skills and experience would suggest a different way of doing things. His contribution to dishwashing was also described, while it remained unsaid that his wife seemed to wash the dishes while he dried, and that she would empty the dishwasher whenever her husband did not do it. Again, it became visible that Mr Tabbe's engagement in kitchen work was greater than what would typically be expected in his role.

Hidden caring work by Mrs Tabbe

During the last interview with the couple, it became apparent that memory problems, unsteady walking, and weak grip were preventing Mr Tabbe from doing any kitchen work. His

wife was performing all occupations related to meal preparation herself, while still trying to involve her husband and supporting his feeling of competency and independence. The narrative was one of reciprocity and competence. The couple talked with pride about mastering difficult situations, such as managing to take cooking in turns (as illustrated above).

Apart from providing visible support, such as laying out her husband's clothes and helping him get dressed in the mornings, Mrs Tabbe also helped in less obvious ways. This hidden caring work is illustrated in the following example. Some occupations, such as taking out the garbage and fetching water from the downstairs storage, were difficult for Mr Tabbe to perform, due to his physical and cognitive problems. But it was important for him to perform these tasks as they gave him a feeling of having a purpose and also of caring for his wife. To make it possible for her husband to continue doing these tasks, Mrs Tabbe had started writing him a note to take with him, reminding him of what he wanted to do there. Thus, he could still complete the task on his own and retained the feeling of competence and of contributing to everyday life, while the responsibility and preparation work was silently taken on by Mrs Tabbe.

Mrs Tabbe's hidden caring work can also be seen in the following episode: Being the host was an important role for Mr Tabbe. While his cognitive and physical abilities had decreased considerably since the previous visit to the couple, Mrs Tabbe's planning made it possible for Mr Tabbe to still fulfil this role. Mrs Tabbe had, for instance, arranged some errands during this time and laid the coffee table for two. Upon the researcher's arrival, Mr Tabbe was able to invite her in for coffee and cake and fulfil his role as host. These examples show Mrs Tabbe's care for her husband beyond tending to his needs when she was present, to include planning for him during times of absence.

Both spouses spoke very fondly of each other and told many stories about past events that emphasized the achievement of the other partner, and not their own. Both treated each other with great respect. The following example shows the respect and emotional support Mr Tabbe gave his wife despite his dementia. During the

second individual interview, Mrs Tabbe talked about her own worries and problems and that several times in the past months she had burnt a saucepan on the stove because she had forgotten that she had put it on. One day, a saucepan was so badly burnt that she could not clean it anymore and decided to put it in the bin, despite really liking this particular saucepan. When Mr Tabbe took the garbage out, he must have found the saucepan and decided to clean it for his wife. He successfully did so in the outside sink, returned with a clean saucepan, and gave it back to his wife without any accusations about her burning it or throwing it in the garbage. This showed a great emotional tenderness on his part when he just did something for her when things went wrong. Small gestures such as this helped both partners retain the feeling of mastering everyday life together.

So, even though there is an inequality in the relationship between Mr and Mrs Tabbe, the interactions of both partners and also their stories revealed that they shared a loving relationship, admiring the other's achievements and trying to give support when needed. This mutual love and respectful relationship remained alive in late life.

Discussion

In the couple's narrative, both the difference in the time spent on occupations performed by the partners and the lack of acknowledgement of this imbalance are striking. To understand this, it is important to view this through a gender lens.

Disappearing act

In the couple's narrative, it becomes visible that throughout her life, Mrs Tabbe has felt responsible for the family and domestic life, even when she started working. At first glance, gendered occupations seemed to have shifted when Mr Tabbe started cooking, but the underlying pattern remained the same, as Mrs Tabbe remained responsible for the meal planning. This was also the case later in life, as illustrated by examples of hidden caring work completed by Mrs Tabbe.

This occupational pattern can be related to the gendered distinction between the public

and private domain (Fletcher, 1999). Acting within the private sphere is seen as natural female behaviour, which can be emotionally rewarding, but which is not perceived as work or as personal achievements. This perception leads to a paradox Fletcher (1999) described as "relational activity is not needed and women must provide it" (p. 112). Relational skills are expected from women and are not seen as their competence but as personality traits. Reducing these skills to something women 'are' instead of something women 'do' makes their contribution and merits invisible, and women's contribution 'disappears'.

When looking at the couple's narrative in the light of these disappearing dynamics, it becomes visible that Mrs Tabbe challenged the way occupations were divided within the couple when she discussed her wish to go to work. She took on a weak position, letting her family decide if they were willing to support her in her desire to take on work outside the house. After the family had approved of her plans to return to work, Mr Tabbe took on selected parts of the housework, namely cooking and looking after the children, and stepped outside the traditional gender role of a man at that time (1960s). Yet, Mrs Tabbe remained in charge of organizing all household related occupations. This was not mentioned but seen as a normal part of her role. In other words, the work she did at home disappeared.

When the couple grew older, the same gendered pattern was still visible. Mr Tabbe took on occasional tasks such as doing repairs or mowing the lawn, and stopped doing them when his health made them difficult. Those tasks were then taken on by others, such as the couple's son or hired professionals. Mr Tabbe described that he would 'help' his wife in the household, indicating that the responsibility for all household-related occupations would lie with his wife. If he felt like cooking, he would cook whatever his wife had planned, but most of the times she would just do the cooking on her own. Mr Tabbe admits that he is not "good" at cleaning, but it remains unspoken that it is assumed that his wife is good at it and that she would take on this task. This shows a great difference in how those occupations are perceived. While they seem to be optional for Mr Tabbe, they are expected of Mrs Tabbe.

Moreover, while Mr Tabbe got acknowledgement for performing those tasks, which are not within the expectations of his role, Mrs Tabbe's accomplishments disappear.

Though roles changed during the couple's relationship, gendered power structures remained in place (Hochschild, 1983). From the couple's narrative it also becomes clear that despite both partners being influenced by their gender roles, both seem to be quite satisfied with their roles and overall life, indicating that gender inequality does not necessarily lead to discontent.

Privileged irresponsibility

Mr Tabbe's self-description of not being "*good at cleaning*" reveals another concept of gendered power relations, called privileged irresponsibility (Tronto, 1990). This term refers to ways in which privileged groups excuse themselves from responsibility to perform caring work by relegating those tasks to less advantaged groups, while at the same time denying their reliance on this work (Tronto, 2010; Zembylas et al., 2014). The exercise of power is concealed, and privilege is reproduced (Zembylas et al., 2014). Mr Tabbe's explanation of not being good at cleaning shows that he exercised his power to delegate the performance of this task, which might not be compatible with his notion of masculinity, to his wife. However, Mr Tabbe's personal understanding of masculinity, as well as his wife's perspective, remained implicit and covert, yet manifested visibly in the occupations.

Mrs Tabbe in turn, did not have the power to delegate this task and as the house needed to be cleaned to provide a safe and comfortable living environment for the family, she had to either take on this task or to challenge her husband's perception of entitlement. When Mr Tabbe made this statement in the interview, it was not commented on by his wife, and cleaning was not mentioned as something that would be expected of him during the rest of the conversation. This illustrates that caring work often goes unnoticed and is undervalued in terms of status and material rewards (Zembylas et al., 2014), and that the performance of caring work is not necessarily determined according to who has the best skills or pleasure in doing this work, but rather according to gendered power structures.

As Galvaan (2015) pointed out, actions that may seem like a choice are co-constructed and embedded within contexts. Thus, even though Mrs Tabbe had taken on caring work for her husband, her decision to do so was influenced by her socialization and consequent role and her environment. The same dynamic played a role when looking at the other forms of care Mrs Tabbe provided for her husband. Mrs Tabbe seemed to have high social skills and very good practical skills for organizing the household and facilitating her husband's involvement. In addition, she managed the couple's social life, their formal and informal support system, helped her husband to retain a feeling of competence and contributing, gave emotional support, and was careful to protect their roles as husband and wife. Taking on all this work might seem to be a natural consequence of both Mrs Tabbe's skills and her role. On closer inspection, it can be seen as work delegated to her through her husband's privileged irresponsibility. This required Mrs Tabbe to learn the skills necessary to fulfil this role, while also mirroring her husband's position through taking on disadvantaged responsibility.

Caring identity

Mrs Tabbe showed a lot of care for her husband that stretched beyond caring *for* him; it also included caring *about* him. This *caring about* is perfectly illustrated by the way she prepared for the visit of the researcher by making her husband feel like the host, a role he always liked to play. Using her social and emotional skills Mrs Tabbe took care of her husband's dignity and identity. This kind of care not only involves occupations, but also social organization and emotional involvement (Benoit & Heitlinger, 1998). The fact that Mrs Tabbe took on the role as caregiver and identified as a caregiver can be understood as an expression of the gender socialization of men and women (Chodorow, 1978). For women, this socialization process is often directed to producing feminine-typed *caring identities*, which encompass the compulsion to care for others. This socialization process starts in women's younger years and is often (re-)produced in care workers' vocational training and workplaces (Stam &

Keskiner, 2020). Gender socialization is a life-long process.

Having a ‘caring identity’ is seen as a normative feminine ideal, and women judge themselves and are judged by others by their performance in carrying out caring responsibilities (Forssén et al., 2005). This emotional labour requires time, planning, and effort, yet the common assumption is that women can give it naturally and without effort. Attributing caring to inherent female skills contributes to hiding the actual work that caring involves, and makes it difficult, even for women to “see how much effort, and knowledge, is part of caring” (Forssén et al., 2005, p. 664).

Implications

This case study of the Tabbe couple illustrates that both socialization and the environment have a strong influence on roles and on choice of occupations within a heterosexual relationship of a very old couple. It became visible that responsibilities and time spent on everyday occupations was not equally divided between the partners and that Mrs Tabbe took on a lot more work. Factors that contributed to this imbalance of responsibilities included seeing care-work as a normative feminine ideal, disappearing the work that was actually done, and excusing a lack of contribution by privileged irresponsibility. Despite this imbalance of responsibilities and Mrs Tabbe’s difficulty coping with all the demands of caring for her husband, neither partner expressed dissatisfaction with the division of work within the relationship, confirming the strong influence of gender dynamics. Gendered roles and behavioural norms seemed to be so deeply integrated into both partners’ thinking that they were not questioned or perceived as inequalities. Making occupational choices did not seem to happen on the individual level but was inextricably linked to the contexts of the couple’s reality.

Limitations and implications for further studies

One may question whether one case study can be generalized. Statistical generalization is, of course, not possible based on one case. Yet, in

case study research it is possible to learn from one particular case and help the reader to make a ‘naturalistic generalization.’ In naturalistic generalization it is the reader who is enabled to transfer insights from the studied case to another context. Thick descriptions allow the reader to understand the context and meaning of a case. A so-called ‘vicarious experience’ offers readers a basis to transfer knowledge from the studied case to their own context (Abma & Stake, 2014).

This case study focused on one very old couple who identified as cisgendered and heterosexual and who lived in the suburban parts of a large city in Germany. Thus, the situation of this couple is shaped by their socialization and their environment and the findings cannot be generalized beyond these individuals. Analysis was carried out by a team of female researchers, inevitably influencing the results of this study, and possibly resulting in an under exploration of the concept of masculinity. While the results cannot be generalized to other populations, they point to the importance of gender dynamics and environmental factors in caring relationships and raise questions for further research.

Shifting the focus to couples with a different sexual identification could further illuminate the role gender plays in caregiving relationships. An exploration of couples with different cultural backgrounds and working with a more diverse research team could also bring new insights. The Tabbe couple seemed to be quite liberal in their views for their time. It would also be interesting to explore gender roles in caregiving in younger couples and in couples from other social backgrounds.

Conclusion

The results of this study point towards the importance of adopting a transactional view when trying to understand the motivation for occupations. Viewing occupation through a gender lens helps to illustrate how occupational choice is co-created and how inequalities can be overlooked or accepted as the norm.

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