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Introduction

Local loops and micro-mobilities of care: Rethinking care in egalitarian contexts

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journals.sagepub.com/home/esp**Lise Widding Isaksen** 

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Abstract

This introduction to the Special Issue *Local loops and micro-mobilities of care: Rethinking care in egalitarian contexts* argues for the importance of analysing local organizations of care. This is a necessary addition to current scholarship which has focused on the globalization of care. Yet, in many parts of the world, such as the Northern and Eastern European countries, on which this issue focuses, care provision continues to be mainly local and migrant care workers are complementary. Nevertheless, the daily organization of care can be as complex as in the global care chains. To address this local complexity, we propose two concepts: the notion of local care loops and care as patchwork. The concept of local care loops is a sensitizing one that emphasizes routine, daily practices and micro-mobilities of care that create loops around daily practices of care. Patchwork refers to practices that are simultaneously routinized activities but that are also changing from day to day, depending on the available resources and constraints (of time, money, and caregivers), as well as the local geographies and distances that need to be connected in the loops. The introduction also presents the six articles that make up this Special Issue. The articles identify similarities and differences in processes related to the commodification of childcare and transforming gender ideologies in post-socialist and social-democratic welfare societies.

Keywords

Care loops, care, gender equality, mobilities, egalitarianism

Introduction

This Special Issue develops the notion of local loops of care to analyse the local institutional arrangements of care and the micro-mobilities that emerge around the daily provision of care. In this issue the

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focus of the majority of our articles is on childcare but some of our contributions also take into account eldercare. We argue that *care loops* is a concept apt for the analysis of a variety of care practices. While great conceptual efforts have been done to analyse global, transnational and intergenerational mobilities for care as global care chains (Hochschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2001; Yeates, 2009) and care circulations (Baldassar et al., 2007; Baldassar and Merla, 2014), local solutions to local problems in families' everyday life has gained less research (see Bikova, 2010; Dimova et al., 2015). Focusing on the local organizations of care help to discern diverging and converging patterns of care across national contexts (see also Anderson and Shutes, 2014; Lutz, 2008). The articles included in this Special Issues examine three Nordic welfare societies – Norway, Sweden and Finland – and three post-socialist societies – Czech Republic, Slovenia and Slovakia – where globalization of care is present, but (still) not integrated as a socially accepted and recognized solution to local care problems.

Our selected cases have some typical characteristics and known diversity. The three post-socialist societies represent two very young independent nations with a Soviet bloc past and one ex-Yugoslavian society. The Czech Republic and Slovakia both share characteristics as relatively young independent nations after the split up of former Czechoslovakia in 1993 and have a different political history than Slovenia who became an independent republic in 1991. Among the Nordic welfare societies, Finland and Sweden are members of the European Union while Norway is not. All three societies share national histories as social-democratic welfare societies with gender-egalitarian norms and values. Norway is different in the way universal childcare services were implemented in 2003, much later than in Finland and Sweden. However, all three societies are currently experiencing neoliberal reforms of established institutional interaction between the state, the family and the market.

The most important characteristics of our sample is a shared history of egalitarian social policies in which a cornerstone has been variations of institutional interactions between the state, the market and the family. Following analysis involves studies of

gender equality-oriented care practices and policies that influence such practices. We use emerging demands for paid domestic care work among families with children as a prism to explore how changing care practices and gender relations are influenced by local norms and political processes. In a sub-set of articles, we also deal with the elderly. The aim is to search for variance to better understand how the specific arrangements are formed within each case.

Care as patchwork and local care loops

In this Special Issue, we draw on 'mobilities' literature to understand the everyday organization of care, with a particular focus on childcare. We examine how daily practices of care imply different kinds of micro-mobilities, including the daily, neighbourhood mobilities – what we here term 'care loops'. Inspired by Bissell's (2013) concept of loop in his study of neighbourhood mobilities, we propose the notion of *local care loops* as a sensitizing concept that emphasizes the routine, daily practices, and micro-mobilities of care that create loops within and between the home, the workplace, the kindergarten and school, the sites where hobbies and sports take place, and the homes of grandparents and paid local care workers and so forth. Care loops is a spatial concept and a visual metaphor aimed to capture families' daily complexities related to the doing of everyday logistics around care.

These local loops of care are not haphazard but structured by welfare services, labour market policies, and gender ideologies, norms and policies. Care loops are organized by daily practices of care and care-related activities such feeding, dressing, bathing, but also by picking up and playing with children. In order to understand what childcare entails, we thus need to analyse not only the daily activities and practices of care but also the micro-mobilities – the care loops as well as the social policies that structure care practices and care loops. Care can hence be understood as *patchwork*, a constellation possible to daily alterations made from different smaller patterns. The notion of patchwork highlights that care practices are simultaneously routinized activities but also changing from day to day,

depending on the available resources and constraints (of time, money and caregivers), as well as the local geographies and distances that need to be connected in the loops. Our conceptualization of *care as patchwork* draws inspiration both from Marta Szebehely's (2004) notion of a 'care puzzle' and from Laura Balbo's (1987) notion of crazy quilts. A 'care puzzle' according to Szebehely (2004) describes situations in which eldercare is provided by a diversity of actors that can change over time according to the needs of the care receiver and in which the care is constituted by parts that can fit well or less well together (see also Gavanas, 2013). Understanding of care as patchwork, we are inspired by Laura Balbo's (1987) work on the 'patchwork quilt' as a metaphor describing women's work. Balbo (1987: 49) writes:

What is involved in women's work? Much planning and imagination is needed. Women make decisions on the basis of how much time they have; how much money; what distances they have to travel; who is available to substitute them, to help, to share; who needs what. There is a design, a purpose and a strategy in selecting and piecing together. Women continuously choose between alternatives, combining whatever variety of resources are available in order to maximize their value . . . They carry the responsibility for this apparently trivial decision-making process: they work endlessly at their crazy quilts, striving for balance, trying to introduce some methods and pattern.

The quote from Balbo highlights well the myriad of everyday activities that care providers need to include in order to organize the daily care loops, including the distances and micro-mobilities.

While Balbo had the Italian service society and women's invisible work in the family in mind, contemporary mothers in (post)egalitarian welfare societies weave local gender norms into their 'crazy quilts'.

In drawing attention to the variety of daily practices needed in the patchwork of care, Balbo's concept is broader than Szebehely's (2004) notion of care puzzle that focuses more on the different providers of care. Balbo's and Szebehely's work inspire us to consider the importance of analysing the gendered nature of care, the persistence of care as women's work but also the involvement of fathers and male

caregivers in the patchwork of care. Besides gender differences, the daily patchwork of care relates to different welfare societies, social class differences and inequalities that are expressed in different ideologies on gender equality and egalitarianism.

Gender equality and care in (post)egalitarian contexts

Instead of understanding gender equality or egalitarianism as a unidimensional construct ranging from the traditional to the egalitarian, we follow recent research on diversities of egalitarianisms (Grunow et al., 2018; Knight and Brinton, 2017) that has challenged the assumption of egalitarianism as a unidimensional concept. Grunow et al. (2018), for instance, demonstrate that contemporary gender ideologies present in European countries are mixes of gender essentialist and egalitarian views. Research by Yu and Lee (2013) suggests that societies can become more egalitarian along one dimension of gender ideology and at the same time more traditional along another. Thus, different gender ideologies vary across countries and can combine traditional and egalitarian views.

Today, Eastern European and Nordic countries experience neoliberal reforms and changes regarding women's labour market participation that have paved the way for re-traditionalization in Eastern Europe and increasing commodification in the Nordic countries. During the socialist era, women's labour market participation rates were high and families' care patchwork relied on state-organized universal care services. However, men's caring roles remained limited and women carried the main burden of domestic and household work. Similarly, in (post)social-democratic Nordic societies, public care services have made it possible for women to enter labour markets but cash-for-care policies might prolong mothers' parental leave. Thus, employment rate for women with children under 3 years old is at a much lower level in Finland (51.6% in 2014) that promotes home care for small children than for instance in Denmark (75.8%) or Slovenia (71.9%). These rates are significantly higher than in Czech Republic (22.3%) or Slovakia (16.7%) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD 2019a). The differences in employment rates of mothers with small children demonstrates also that we need to consider the divergence within Eastern Europe or the Nordic countries. Figures on public expenditure on family benefits demonstrate greater convergence among the two regions: Nordic countries is above 3% of gross domestic product (GDP) while Eastern European countries remain below 3% GDP (OECD 2019b).

Scholars working on welfare state and family policy comparisons have argued that there are tendencies for an increasing presence of migrant caregivers in well-off households in Nordic welfare states (e.g. Korpi et al., 2013; see also Williams, 2012). Such tendencies exist despite – or perhaps because of – the presence of family policies that have traditionally supported women's labour market participation as well as men's caring roles according to an earner-carer model. Also, public care provision is increasingly supplemented by private services. For instance, the introduction of a tax credit for domestic services in Sweden and Finland and the 'cash allowance' to parents in Norway stress 'individual choice' dimension in the patchwork of care. Households and families can 'choose' to outsource housework like cleaning, caring and other services to commercial markets. There are hence two competing egalitarian-oriented family models present in the Nordic context: gender equality as a fair sharing of goods and burdens in household work between men and women, and gender equality as a social practice based on the 'outsourcing' of cleaning and caring services. Both models have class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity aspects.

During the socialist era, female and maternal employment was a widely shared ideal. However, gender equality in labour markets was combined with traditional inequality structures in the household (Klenner and Leiber, 2010: 10). After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, a gender-conservative turn occurred in Central and Eastern European countries (Saxonberg, 2011). In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, family policies shifted from socialist policies based on government-subsidized childcare services towards rather conservative, familialist policies focusing on long maternal and parental leaves and cutting down

government-subsidized nurseries (Saxonberg and Sirovátka, 2006, see also Burikova, this issue). In both contexts, fathers' involvement in childcare remains modest, and mothers rely on informally paid part-time carers or intergenerational care systems in their daily patchwork of childcare. In Slovenia, childcare systems remain egalitarian in the sense that public childcare institutions are universal, socially recognized, and on the top of parents' preferences. As a contrast to childcare, eldercare is deinstitutionalized and processes of informalization and commercialization are taking place. Thus, in all three contexts, migrant domestic care workers are (still) relatively absent in childcare, but more present in domestic eldercare.

Globalization and austerity measures that have cut available public care services combined with increasing labour market flexibility demands have paved the way for an emergence of migrant domestic care workers in the Nordic countries. Migrant workers are nowadays employed as childcare and eldercare workers in domestic as well as institutional settings (Isaksen, 2010; Wrede and Näre, 2013). Paid domestic work and cleaning services are market and policy responses to expectations of egalitarianism in households. They have become perceived as strategies for the labour market integration of migrant workers (see also Näre, 2013).

The six case studies

Collectively, we have developed this Special Thematic Issue around the themes of gender-egalitarianism, migration, care and social policy issues. The articles identify similarities and differences in processes related to the commodification of childcare and transforming gender ideologies in post-socialist and social-democratic welfare societies. An aspect of the increasing commodification of care is the emergence of migrant care work, but often as an addition to public childcare provision, as the studies of contemporary childcare practices in Norway, Sweden and Finland demonstrate. In some post-socialist central European countries like Slovakia and Czech Republic, the supply of local women to do paid childcare is good, and informal childcare in private households is considered appropriate and

high-quality care. In Slovenia, like in Finland, Sweden and Norway, state-organized universal childcare still has a hegemonic status, even if commercial childcare is emerging.

In these new forms of interaction between states, markets and families, care practices and gender ideologies are transforming. An interesting aspect of these European contexts is that local care problems are still mainly resolved locally. This is in contrast to other contexts in Europe where immigration is the solution to local care problems. The organization of daily micro-mobilities between home, kindergarten, work, shopping and other everyday activities are related to how families/parents regulate relations between themselves and the persons caring for their children in public and private spaces. Unlike in Sweden and in Finland, Norway has not introduced tax credits for domestic services. Instead, the au pair scheme has emerged as a significant way for Norwegian families to find flexible childcare workers. Drawing on research on au pairs, Isaksen and Bikova analyse the daily care loops between home and kindergarten that are aided by au pairs so that childcare remains with parents but household and 'mobility work' is outsourced to au pairs.

Thus, we are witnessing the emergence of migrant domestic care work in Nordic welfare societies, but then in combination with universal childcare, and not as a substitute for lacking services. This is an illustration of changing parental norms and increasing social inequalities. The article by Sara Eldén and Terese Anving discusses how the introduction of the tax deduction for domestic services (known as RUT) in 2007 has changed the everyday doings of care in Swedish families. The deduction has created a formal market for nanny services employed through agencies and with employment contracts, and a more informal market of au pairs. Au pairs do not have formal employment contracts as the au pair scheme is officially about 'cultural exchange' in which care and household work can be required in exchange for room and board. Analysing the local care loops and everyday patchwork of care from the perspective of care workers, parents and children, the authors demonstrate how the hiring of nannies and au pairs is reproducing gendered inequalities both between and within families. Families have unequal resources and access

to realizing ideals of gender equality and 'good' parenting, and within families, implicit assumptions and expectations of gendered doing of care emerge.

The article by Lena Näre and Elisabeth Wide discusses similar transformations taking place in Finland. The tax credit for domestic services was introduced already in 2001 and there are various cash-for-care schemes that have promoted new public-private combinations of childcare services in Finland. Drawing on qualitative research among Finnish parents who employ migrant nannies and au pairs, Näre and Wide offer a time-economy perspective to the analysis of local care loops. Accordingly, it is precisely the organization of care loops which time to be gained in two areas where time has become short. The organization of care loops is done in ways which maximize time available for wage labour and quality time with children, a possibility that is available only for the most affluent groups in society. The authors argue that inequalities between families also derive from emerging differences in time use which follow social class divisions.

Two kinds of care loops can coexist in one national context, as in the case of Slovenia discussed by Majda Hrzenjak. The contemporary Slovenian childcare system originates from the 1970s socialist Yugoslavia. It is characterized by a universal defamilialized system of publicly funded childcare which includes good quality, affordable preschool, and state-covered maternal and parental leave. Informal paid childcare is used to supplement public childcare in the daily patchwork of care in managing the local care loops between different local sites of care. The case of eldercare presents a different picture however. Due to the absence of sufficient public care services, the market for self-employed care workers offering home-based eldercare services is growing – many of whom are migrants. Cross-border care loops are emerging in eldercare. Hrzenjak's article demonstrates well the importance of state policies in shaping care loops.

Also in the Czech Republic, childcare loops are mainly local, as argued by Adéla Souralová who analyses the organization of childcare from socialist to post-socialist era. In contrast to the defamilialized childcare in Slovenia, in Communist Czechoslovakia and contemporary Czech Republic collective day

care for children under 3 years was never an adopted policy. Daily patchwork of care and the local care loops in Czech Republic rely on gendered care contracts between generations of women, mothers and grandmothers. Thus, women's labour market participation depends on the availability of grandmothers, which is also supported by social policies, namely the particular retirement schemes, namely the scaling of women's retirement age according to the number of children as well as the popularity and possibility of early retirement in order to provide for care for grandchildren. Souralová concludes that while the role of mothers has changed from socialist mother-worker to post-socialist mother-carer, the role of grandmothers as the bed rock of the state has remained the same.

Slovakia offers yet another organization of child-care in the Eastern Europe, as is apparent in Zuzana Burikova's article. Here, similar to Finland, the state offers cash-for-care schemes for the care of children under 3 years old. This has created a market for paid childcare, which is not yet widespread, but is developing. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with employers and paid domestic and childcare workers, Burikova demonstrates that this form of labour takes place within the informal labour markets and is characteristically a middle-class phenomenon in that both employers and workers are middle-class. The demand for paid childcare is not full-time childcare but rather takes the form of part-time workers who are employed to help families manage care patchwork and the micro-mobilities within the daily care loops between home and schools and other sites of children's extracurricular activities.

Balancing social and emotional proximity/distance in public versus private, intimate relations are embedded in class, gender and ethnic hierarchies. The articles in this issue examine how 'local care loops' are done in different European and regional contexts sharing an egalitarian (socialist/social-democratic) past, where care problems were solved through state-organized universal care services. Societies with egalitarian welfare ideologies, like (post)social-democratic Nordic societies and post-socialist societies, are now transforming and are increasingly influenced by neoliberal policies and the

commercialization of care and welfare. Consequently, previous dominant egalitarian models are transforming into a variety of differentiated and local variations of gender-egalitarian practices.


Finally, the articles in our issue collectively demonstrate that comparative welfare state and social policy research needs to pay more attention to the local organizations of care. There are significant differences between countries within regional areas that are commonly imagined as homogeneous, such as the Nordic countries or Eastern European countries. National and municipal contexts play an important role in shaping the local care loops. We hope that our issue provides useful conceptual tools for future research along these lines.

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