Gendered Norms and Family Roles in the Narratives of Hungarian Elite Members and Their Partners

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Abstract. Our paper contributes to studies on the enduring underrepresentation of women in elite positions through the analysis of elite members' and their partners' narratives on career and partnership. Using a dataset of 34 individual interviews (17 couples) among Hungary's political, economic, and cultural elite, we explore how narrators project themselves in the context of their marital relationships and family roles. We identify three pairs of narratives during our analysis. Narratives show the positions from where narrators discuss the theme of career and partnership as elite member/partner, power couple/non-power couple, and male/female. Our findings show that narrative positioning is significantly gendered, and it is strongly connected to the traditional gendered role system. Having an elite position or pursuing a career calls for explanation only from women. In the meantime, a non-power couple position calls for explanation from men, which suggests the increasing presence of the norm of equality in the Hungarian elite.

Keywords: elite, narrative, career, family, gender

Introduction

There is considerable evidence that women in most societies are underrepresented in elite positions (Bass–Avolio 1994, Dahlerup 2006, Norris 2006). Scholars commonly argue that traditional gender attitudes have significant effects on the leadership positions of men and women. There are several explanations for why women have not risen to the top, including gender discrimination (Bertrand–Hallock 2001, Smith et al. 2013), internalized gender norms (Singh–Vinnicombe

2004), gender-based stereotypes about attitudes and leadership style, etc. (Chang 2000, Cotter et al. 2001, Eagly–Carli 2007, Oakley 2000, Powell–Graves 2003). However, elite literature mainly focuses on the work and leadership positions of men and women (i.e. glass ceiling and glass wall effects) and has lower emphasis on family roles and partnership.

The present research does not aim to deal with all the social, cultural, and institutional causes of gender imbalance in the Hungarian elite. The existing, though decreasing, social mechanisms of gender discrimination in the labour market (e.g. glass ceiling and glass wall effects) are well researched (see the works of Fodor 2009; Ilonszki 2004; Nagy 2009, 2007, 2001; Palasik–Sípos 2005; Várnagy–Ilonszki 2012, and others).

Instead, we focus on factors related to family life. In professions that have high social prestige because of high salaries and require high-level qualifications, the so-called "career advancement double standard" implies that women who have children are considered less serious about their career, while fathers are more likely to get promotion. Gender inequalities in career prospects are aggravated by gendered differences of family commitments. Several researchers argue that female career trajectories become very limited in the family-intensive life phase (Budig–England 2001, Leuze–Rusconi 2009).

This study aims to extend the reviewed literature that documents how family commitments of women result in inequalities in female career trajectories. We aim to explore the inequalities in everyday practices through elite couples' narratives and how they discuss and perceive their career and family life as it affects experiences and status in the context of elite career. We aim to contribute to the explanations on the lasting underrepresentation of women in elite positions through the analysis of the elite's narratives on career and partnership issues and related gendered norms. We use a dataset of 34 individual interviews (17 couples) among Hungary's political, economic, and cultural elite. The method of interviewing both spouses of the chosen elite families allows us to identify the narrative of elite members and also that of their partners. Narrative analysis provides an alternative explanation for women's exclusion from elite professions through the subjective aspects of social life. We argue that personal narratives can best reveal innermost thoughts, manifest norms and latent attitudes, frames of references and reactions to different life situations (Reis–Judd 2000, Reissman 2013).

The paper begins with a brief review on gendered norms and on women's underrepresentation in the elite. Methodology is also presented in the first part of the paper. The second part explores the narratives of elite members and their partners about their career and family life. Three pairs of narrative roles have been identified: elite member/partner, power couple/non-power couple, and male/female. These pairs of narratives show three different bases of points of view: status-based, career-structure-based, and gender-based narrative perspectives.

Different narratives show the differences in perceptions and meanings of gendered norms and family roles among elite couples.

Gendered Norms and Attitudes

Gendered social norms are important factors that maintain unequal relationships between women and men (Marcus–Harper 2014, West–Zimmerman 1987). Gender systems define expectations and prescribe the proper behaviour for men and women. They emphasize differences between men and women as the basis for gender inequality (Ridgeway–Smith-Lovin 1999). In family life, gender systems establish the caregiver norm for women, which restrains them from a professional career. This norm prescribes that in families women should be the ones that primarily take care of children and elderly family members. This mechanism contributes to gender inequalities in the following areas: in the family, the labour market, and policy making (Hobson et al. 2014). Gendered norms and inequality are constructed and reinforced in everyday practices and individual relations. Gender inequalities are often associated with the gendered division of domestic labour and gendered family roles (Crompton–Lyonette 2006). Changes in division of household labour are rather slow. Several researchers show that women continue to do more household tasks than men, even if men's activities have increased substantially (Falussy 2001, Sayer 2005, Sík–Szép 2001). Gendered norms are also institutionalized by occupational segregation and traditional division of household labour (Badgett–Folbre 1999).

Nevertheless, western societies are leaving behind the former common model of family life characterized by the specialization of women in housework and caregiving and men in paid work and are heading for more egalitarian gender roles (Esping-Andersen 2009, Milkie–Peltola 1999). Attitudes supporting gender inequality have shown a strong decline in value surveys (Cotter et al. 2011, Kaufman et al. 2016). In Hungary, although the dual-earner model became common after the Second World War, social attitudes towards family are rather traditional. In general, childbearing and childrearing are considered to be of prime importance for women, and gender inequalities in sharing the housework are commonly accepted (Dupcsik–Tóth 2014, Murinkó 2014). Based on the data of *Generations and Gender Survey*, Murinkó examined several dimensions of attitudes to gender and family roles in a comparative study (Murinkó 2014). The analysis compared three Western European (Norway, France, and Germany) and three Eastern European (Hungary, Poland, and Romania) countries. The three post-communist countries were less egalitarian than the three Western European countries. In the three Eastern European countries, people tended to accept inequality between men and women. For Hungarians, childbearing and

a two-parent family were very important, and, unlike in Romania and Poland, Hungarians thought that children's interests are eminently important and that mothers should avoid paid work and stay at home with their pre-school children (Murinkó 2014).

According to recent value surveys, in Hungary, the prevalence of traditional values and gender roles is stable and still high, but compared to other European countries, the education and labour force participation gap between men and women is relatively low. This leads to some tension in the Hungarian society between attitudes, preferred gender roles, and practices shaped by economic reality (Hajdu–Hajdu 2018).

However, in line with European trends, several studies show that higher levels of social status correlate with more egalitarian attitudes in Hungary as well (Csurgó–Megyesi 2006, Shelton–John 1996). In her recent study, Gregor found that higher educated respondents had more egalitarian views in general, but in the meantime they were somewhat polarized in their attitudes: while some of them were coherently egalitarian, others, although they approved equal rights, prioritized family and motherhood in the life of women (Gregor 2016).

Women's Underrepresentation in the Elite

The Hungarian elite, like the elites of most European countries, consists mainly of highly educated, middle-aged males. The proportion of female elite members in all of the different political, economic, and cultural spheres are under 20 per cent (Kristóf 2012). According to the European Union's *Gender Equality Index*,[1] the general level of gender equality in Hungary is in line with other Central Eastern European countries. However, in the domain of power that measures the gaps between women's and men's representation in the political and economic spheres, Hungary performs the worst among new EU Member States. Although the chances of a woman getting into the elite have slightly increased over the past decade, there is still an unbalanced participation and access to decision-making compared to European averages (Kristóf 2012).

Topics related to gender norms are essential when we seek to understand women's underrepresentation in the elite. Many studies argue that balancing work and family is a greater challenge in women's lives than in men's (e.g. Becker–Moen 1999, Blair-Loy 2005, Hochschild–Machung, 2012). A comparative elite study of 27 countries showed that women in leadership positions are much less likely to be married than their male counterparts (Vianello–Moore 2000). Besides, married women with traditional values do not want to outearn their husbands or work

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1   http://eige.europa.eu/content/gender-equality-index. The index consists of six different domains of inequality: work, money, knowledge, time, health, and power.

significantly longer hours than their husbands. This often causes that they choose to opt out from the labour market altogether or at least look for a job below their potential (Fleche et al. 2018). In a study concerning Hungarian female leaders, Nagy found that, unlike their male counterparts, female managers were "grateful" for the supportive attitude of their partner (Nagy 2016).

In line with these findings, a recent study explored serious gender-based differences in terms of marital status and the number of children within the Hungarian elite in 2018. 89.8% of male elite members while only 75.3% of elite women have children. 77.5% of men and only 41.2% of women are married in the elite group. The proportion of divorced status is significantly higher among women than men among the elite.[2] These findings strongly suggest that becoming part of the elite is less reconcilable with traditional family life (marriage and childbearing) for women than for men.

According to Esseveld and Andersson, three main forms of family life could be distinguished in the elite. The most traditional one is often referred to as a "two-person career": a top leader with a non-working partner, usually a home-centred, family-making wife. In the case of a "dual-earner couple", the partner of the elite member works but does not hold a leading position. Thirdly, in a "dual-career couple", both partners pursue full-time and highly-paid, professional/managerial jobs (Esseveld–Andersson 2000).

An important characteristic of the first and partly the second couple type is a more traditional gender role division. These forms of life provide a supportive background for the elite member, who can hence afford more time and energy for work (Dribe–Stanfors 2010). Meanwhile, in the case of the dual career way of life, the partner of the elite member also pursues a career characterized by high professional standards, continuous progress through a hierarchy, and high degrees of challenge and commitment (Dribe–Stanfors 2010). It is likely that he or she also has an elite or sub-elite position, and thus this type is often called a power couple.

It has been reported in Hungary that family task sharing is more equal in highly educated urban families (Blaskó 2006, Falussy 2001, Sík–Szép 2001, Solera 2008). What is considered a fair division of household tasks depends on the values of the couples. According to a study comparing 29 countries, women in more egalitarian couples are more likely to consider doing a larger share of housework to be unfair (Jansen et al. 2016).

Nevertheless, specifically in the Hungarian elite, this issue has never been studied. A study concerning the USA showed that changes towards a more equal family task sharing are slower in families of elite professionals than in the society as a whole (Coltrane 2004). This may be linked to career types: among couples

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2   Data source: NKFIH OTKA *Circulation and Dissent in the Hungarian Cultural Elite* research project (Principal Investigator: Luca Kristóf).

in the elite, non-working spouses are more common than in the lower strata of society. Moreover, the symbolic distinction of separate gendered spheres is linked to male dominance throughout society, and individuals in elite professions are characterized to a great extent by these gendered norms. This provides a possible explanation why women are underrepresented in elite professions and why gender equality is progressing more slowly among the elite (Coltrane 2004).

Data and Methods

During our research in the Spring of 2014, we conducted 34 individual semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of the Hungarian political, economic, and cultural elite and their partners.[3] In line with the mainstream of Hungarian elite studies (Csite–Kovách 1999, Csurgó–Megyesi 2011, Kristóf 2012, Szelényi et al. 1995), the sample of the political elite was taken from the *Handbook of Hungarian Public Life*, which registers members of the government, leading bureaucrats of ministries, mayors, and leaders of the most important social organizations. The economic elite sample contained top managers of the biggest firms in Hungary, taken from the Hoppenstedt-Bonnier firm register. The cultural elite sample included members of the Academy of Sciences, university rectors, heads of research institutes, leaders of publishing houses and the media, and holders of the most prestigious state-sponsored art award (i.e. the Kossuth Prize). The sampling method was not representative; we sought respondents who fulfilled the sampling criteria and could be contacted via personal acquaintances in one or two steps. Without a recommendation from a common acquaintance, none of the elite members were willing to take part in a research that concerned their private lives. Nevertheless, one must be aware that this method caused selection bias in our sample.

   Our 34 respondents formed 17 heterosexual couples: 17 elite members and their spouses. It was a condition for entering the sample that both partners consented to being interviewed. However, interviews were conducted individually. The interviews averaged around an hour in length. After clarifying the respondent's age, marital status, and number of children, we asked questions on his or her professional background, career history, and family life.

   From the 17 selected elite members 7 were politicians (2 former ministers, 3 state secretaries, 1 MP, and 1 mayor), 5 were top managers, and 5 were cultural elite members (2 university rectors, 1 member of the Academy of Sciences, and 2 artists awarded the Kossuth Prize). Some of our respondents shifted between various segments of the elite society throughout their lives, such as top manager/

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3   We conducted another analysis with different analytical focuses based on this research. Results are published in a previous article in the *Journal of Family Issues* (Csurgó–Kristóf 2018).

state secretary in finance or minister/university rector. They were categorized by their latest position. Eleven of the selected elite members were male and six female. In 6 cases, partners of the elite members turned out to be also members of the elite in their own right (3 women and 3 men). Nevertheless, in all of the remaining 11 couples, partners were also highly educated professionals (i.e. academics, physicians, or managers). The age of our respondents varied between 37 and 70; the majority of the interviewees were in their fifties. All couples had child(ren), most of them still living with their parents. All but one couple lived in Budapest or the suburban region of the capital.

Interview data were analysed by Atlas.ti content analysis software. We conducted a qualitative thematic text analysis and analysed the spouse narratives separately, but we also focused on the relationships for husband–wife dyads during the analysis. We generated codes related to work–family themes and collected the descriptions and stories on career, everyday life, and work–life trade-offs into 70 starting codes produced through the terminology used by the interviewees. During the analysis process, we grouped the codes into analytical themes, which concerned attitudes and values towards family norms, roles and work–life balance. We then created 11 themes, including modern and traditional family norms, work–life balance, elite lifestyle, career trajectories, and family and also grouped the texts into six code groups of narrative points of view: elite, partner, power couple, non-power couple, male, and female. Analytical themes organized and structured the analysis of narratives. We intended to identify identity constructions in the content of our interviews by using a positioning approach for a discursive analysis (Reissman 2013). Positioning is understood here as a discursive construction of personal narrations (Harré–Langenhove 1998). We did not only focus on the themes related to family and career coordination, but we also paid attention to how the narrators position themselves, perform, and present their family roles and norms in the situation of the interview. Our analysis presents how elite couples negotiate the question of career and partnership from different points of view, which are seen here as the narrative positions of narrators. Narrative positions are related to different perceptions of work–life balance. In addition, our results show that the narratives are significantly gendered.

Through the analysis of elite couples' narratives on career and partnership, our paper aimed to contribute to studies on the enduring underrepresentation of women in elite positions. We analysed narratives on career and partnership, applying a performative analytical approach (Reissman, 2013) to explore how narrators projected themselves in the context of their marital relationships and family roles and how this is related to their attitudes, norms, and expectations of roles and role combinations. We found that narratives, the points of view from which our interviewees perceive and discuss their career and partnership, are significantly determined by their attitudes and norms of gender roles. Attitudes,

feelings, norms, and personal expectations for work–life balance are involved in a narrative positioning expressed through their storytelling.

Results of the Content Analysis

Narratives on Carrier and Partnership

Women's underrepresentation in the elite is often associated with role conflicts and gendered family commitment (Becker–Moen 1999, Coltrane 2004). To understand this, the present section focuses on our interviewees' experiences of career and partnership, how they perceive the impacts of the elite career on their partnership and everyday family life.

Personal narratives can be analysed in several ways. Here, we use a performative analytical approach, which regards narratives as the performance of the storytellers on their identities and roles (Reissman 2013). This approach is based on Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor on how individuals (actors) develop their identities through social interactions (performances) with others (audiences) (Goffman 2000). During the analysis, we seek to explore how narrative identities are developed by the discourses on career and partnership. We apply here the approach of Harré and van Langenhove (1998:17) on social positioning, who claimed that "fluid positioning and not fixed roles are used by people to cope with the situations they find themselves in".

Thus, narratives and projected identities are strongly determined by the interview situation and the request of the interviewers to talk as a member of an elite couple. Narratives that are constructed and presented in the situation of storytelling are only restricted parts of the interviewees' identity. Narratives are regarded as discourses of elite spouses in our research. Elite spouses can position themselves during the storytelling as elite members or partners, and they can also perform the role of power couple or non-power couple. In addition, we have also classified male and female narrative perspectives that imply a special discussion on career and partnership, including gendered demands of individuals.

According to the content analysis, we classified three opposite pairs of narratives (elite/partner, power couple/non-power couple, male/female) constructing different narrative roles that present different approaches on the professional and family life of elite couples. Using these pairs of narratives by our interviewees was not exclusive: for example, during the interview, they could position themselves first as an elite member and then as a member of a power couple, or some of them could choose first the narrative role of power couple and later shift to the female one, and so on. Nevertheless, all the narratives are strongly determined by the narrators' gender norms.

Narratives of the Elite Member and the Elite Partner

Elite member and partner as two opposite narratives were identified related to the positioning of self in our interview situation, where we contacted them as elite spouses (see *Graph 1*).
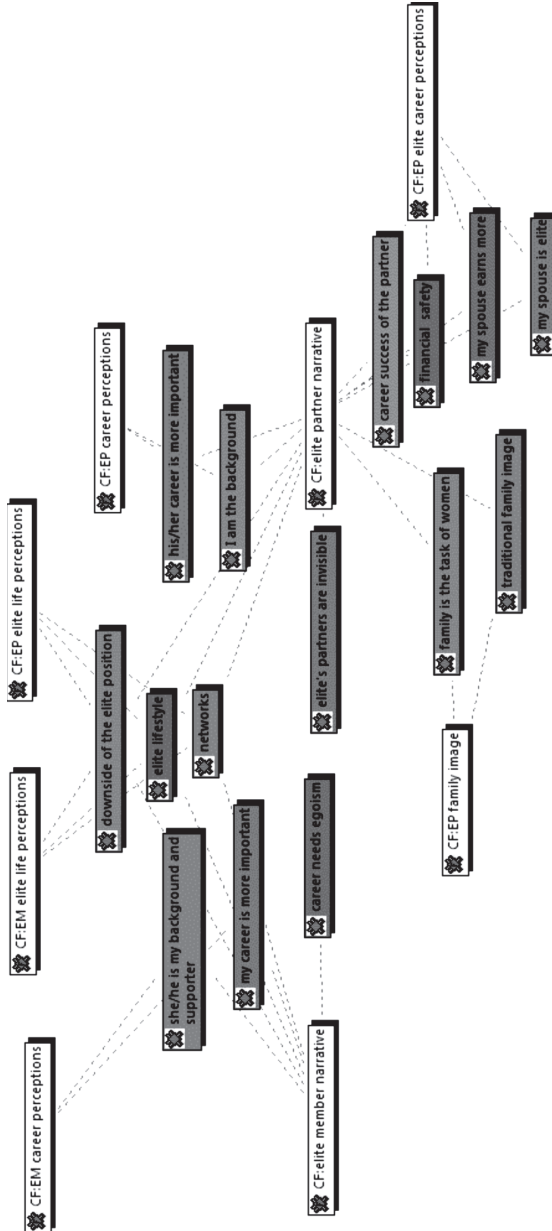
Graph 1. *Coded themes in elite member and elite partner narratives*

Source: authors' results based on the content analysis of the interviews

Interviewees who have positioned themselves as elite members discussed the theme of career and partnership through the stories of their own career trajectories and privileged status. The narrative of elite members consists of a long explanation on how they have reached their position. At the centre of the narrative is the speaker as an agent of their professional life. They evaluate their current situation according to their career interests and experiences.

Most of the elite member narrators direct the interview to the topic of career commitment, including the topic of role of networking, for example. They highlighted that strong commitment is needed and that it has resulted in unequal family roles. In most cases, elite career has been presented as a "one-person show", where their spouse appeared as background and supporter.

> Dora fulfils classical female roles. Starting with childbearing, childrearing, keeping the fire of the home, cooking, things like this. She never really tried to have a say in what I am doing. We mutually discuss stuffs. But related to my work, we do not make decisions together. I decide alone. Of course, she is in it as a conversation partner and as someone who has a point of view. But, for example, my candidacy to be a mayor was not a common decision, it was mine, and she accepted it. (Zsolt (M), 44, mayor, his wife is an assistant professor in law)[4]

This kind of hierarchical relationship was presented as the downside of an elite career; however, it was regarded as a necessary consequence of an elite form of life. Narrators who have regarded themselves as elite members claimed that "elite career needs egoism".

Here, the elite partner's narrative complements that of the elite member. Speakers positioned themselves as elite partners through the storytelling about their partner's career trajectories and the formation of their privileged life. Elite life-form, elite networks, and financial safety were highlighted in the stories of the partners. Narrators described themselves as the background and supporter of their elite spouse. Invisibility was claimed as the main characteristic of the elite partner in their narratives, and it was also expressed by the neglect of their own professional trajectories. They regarded the partner's career as their main capital for an elite lifestyle. From this perspective, family roles and difficulties were hardly discussed. Even if narrators reported downsides of the elite position (lack of free and family time), these were eclipsed by positive aspects of an elite lifestyle.

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4   Names of the interviewees were changed for the sake of anonymity. The language of the interviews was Hungarian. The excerpts presented in this article were translated into English by a native speaker.

> It is rather a disadvantage that he is my husband. I did another degree after the kids were born, but not even my current job is independent of him. Everybody is an acquaintance or colleague or enemy of him. No one looks at me for who I am, but it is as if there were a cloud behind me and they talk to that cloud. (…) Financial safety feels good because I am paid peanuts here. It is a luxury to work so hard for so little money. However, I can do it because he makes money for our living. (Emma (F), 38, archivist, her husband is a reputed historian)

Elite partner narrators built their narratives through the presentation of an elite way of life and their background position, as it was presented as a result of their common decision to have a family. Traditional family roles with a positive attitude towards the manifest or latent statement that "family is the main resource and support of an elite career" also appear in this discourse (see *Graph 1*).

Status-based perceptions of career and partnership are strongly connected to a hierarchical partnership presented as a consequence of elite status. Both elite member and elite partner narratives are strongly characterized by traditional gender norms. Work–life balance is not a focus of the discussion in either narrative. Since work–life balance does not appear as a problem in these narratives due to this hierarchical partnership, we can say it does not cause narrative tension. Work is related to the sphere of the elite member, while family life is the sphere of the elite partner. This separation results in the lack of demand for balancing work and life. It is important to highlight that mostly male narrators position themselves in the elite member narrative role, while elite partner narratives are exclusively female narratives. These gender differences in the narratives confirm the significant impact of the ideology of separate spheres on the exclusion of women from elite professions (Coltrane 2004).

Narratives of the Power Couple and Non-Power Couple

The second pair of narratives found in the interviews were the power couple and the non-power couple narratives (see *Graph 2*).
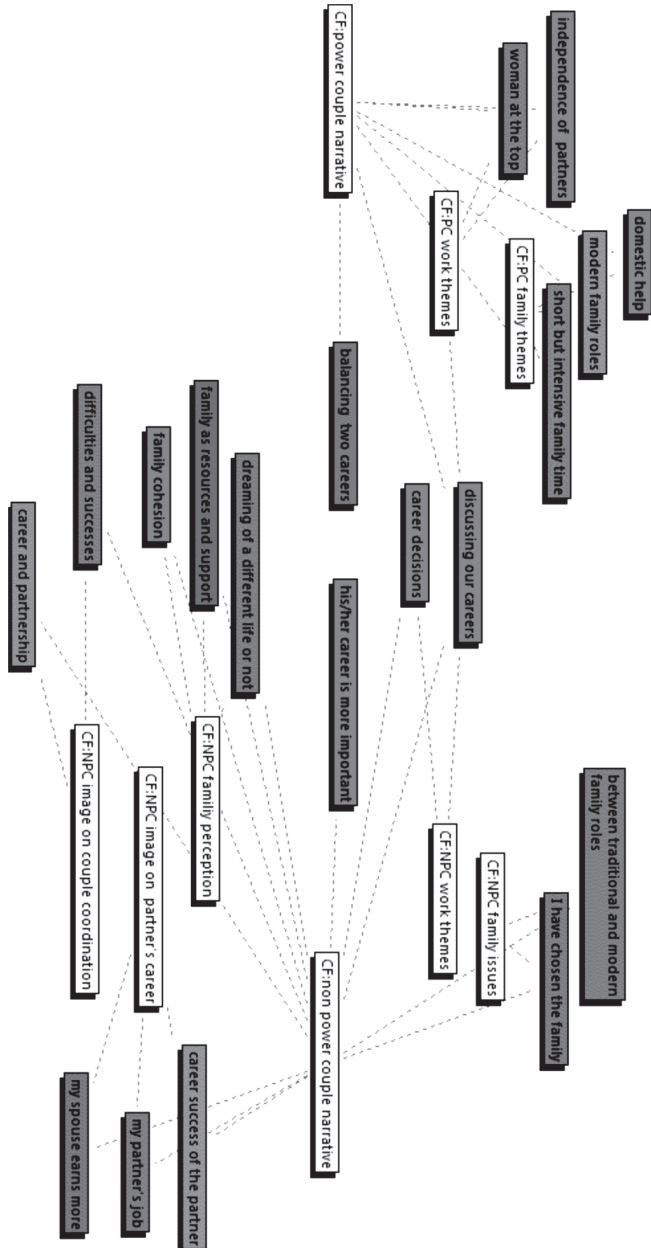
Graph 2. *Coded themes in power couple and non-power couple narratives*

Source: authors' results based on the content analysis of the interviews

Some of our interviewees concerning their career and way of life positioned themselves as a power couple. Topics arising from the narratives of power couple are strongly connected to their career life. The most important and significant topics of their talks are career decisions (their own and their partner's) and balancing career phases. The question of independence mainly concerning spouses' career life is very much highlighted in the power couple narrative. Women's career ("women at the top") was also significantly discussed in power couple narratives. In the context of family life, they talk about short but intensive participation and the importance of domestic help.

> I think that some people can give a lot to their children by giving them plenty of attention, by always being with them. Perhaps we give them less attention, but at the same time we can give lots of other things in exchange. It is not always good for a child if his or her mother gives him or her attention 24 hours a day. Instead, she goes and sees her mother on the stage. Often the quality of family life is more important than the quantity. (Tamás (M), 43, top manager; his wife is a pianist)

Modern family roles with egalitarian attitudes are strongly emphasized. Narrators introduce themselves as partners who care about their spouse's career but also pursue a career with a leading position. They emphasize the importance of equality and successful work–life balance as a basis for and a main characteristic of their well-balanced career and partnership.

Non-power couples' narratives were in many respects the opposite of those of power couples. Partners of elite members who position themselves as a non-power couple discussed at length their partner's job and especially the career success of their spouses. They claimed that "the partner's career is more important". In contrast with elite members' narratives, narrators using this non-power couple narrative emphasized their partner's important role in family making. Attitudes and emotions that are expressed in this non-power couple narrative on the partner's career are ambivalent, unbalanced, and unequal. However, being a non-power couple was presented as an independent, rational personal decision. Non-power couple narrators discussed why they had chosen this type of partnership and what the possibilities of a different life are ("dreaming or not of a different life"). They rationalized the fact that in their family one partner has the leading and the other has the following career and that their specialization in breadwinning/caregiving with earning inequalities caused by external factors. This is especially true for the elite, where economic stakes can be very high, and our interviewees do not want to risk their high standard of living. Economic reasoning and gendered views on parenthood were often combined.

> Yes, there are two careers, and it is not easy to harmonize them. But to tell you the truth, when there is a hard conflict and someone has to compromise, it used to be Kriszti who compromised. Partly because of the rather prosaic reason that the financial existence of our family was always based on my earnings. She also earns well when she works, but she has never had such stable career prospects or a long-term contract so that we could rely entirely on her earnings. In my opinion, this was the reason why when we could not manage duality any more, she was the one who had to step back eventually… (Péter (M), 44, state secretary; his wife is a researcher)

In the non-power couple narrative, an elite career was presented as the result of the couple's mutual efforts. Career success and elite membership were perceived as common success. Unequal career structure (non-power couple situation) was perceived as a consequence of their individual choice of a "two-person show", where one is the member of the elite and the other is the invisible partner.

> I give her some stability. I do not want her to feel that her work endangers the well-being of any member of our family. For example, it is a weekend and the phone rings, within an hour she has to be on television. We do not make a fuss or feel upset, but instead we arrange everything so that she can leave calmly. Sacrifice? It is rather an agreement. I have spent a lot of time with family, certainly I had to take this time away from something and that was my work. So, that is why self-employment was good because I could work flexibly. And that is some kind of a sacrifice because I saw that if I could invest more energy, my firm could develop more rapidly, and I could make more money. (Daniel (M), 39, entrepreneur; his wife is a Member of Parliament)

However, in non-power couple's narratives, family roles and norms were discussed in a more egalitarian way than career structure. Narrators usually emphasized the importance of both partners' egalitarian position in the family, their independence, and their personal interests. The non-elite members of the couple usually highlighted their partner's involvement in family tasks (both in childcare and in domestic duties), even if they were the main organizers of family life. According to their narratives, inequalities in the career structure of spouses have not necessarily resulted in inequalities in family positions: traditional family values and modern family roles were simultaneously emphasized.

In the power couple and non-power couple narratives, career and partnership were discussed from the point of view of couples' career trajectories. Power couple narrators emphasize modern family norms and personal independence in the

context of work–life balance and elite lifestyle (such as domestic help, financial security), and they regard elite lifestyle as a helpful factor for it. On the other hand, non-power couple narrators emphasize the importance of compromise and common decisions, and they regard an elite life course as an external factor that complicates their otherwise egalitarian partnership. Nevertheless, the issue of family life results in a narrative tension in both cases.

Narrative tension is connected to gendered norms in both cases. In the case of power couples, mostly women in leading positions apologize for their partnership situation and their career decisions, while in the case of non-power couples mostly male narrators offer excuse about their non-egalitarian partnership structure.

Narratives of Men and Women

The third pair of identified narratives were the male and female ones. Some of our interviewees positioned themselves as a woman or man when they talked about career and partnership. Thus, we could identify clear male and female narrative positioning concerning career and partnership.

One of the topics that arose when the narrator talked from the position of a male involved fatherhood. They also discussed the importance of compromise in a partnership. Informants who discussed career and partnership from a male narrative also discussed and reflected on traditional family roles. Traditional attitudes were regarded as an aspect that could make everyday career commitments easier; however, they could cause conflicts between partners and interfere with the harmony of a partnership.

> You are looking for a modus vivendi, what is the best for the children and also for yourself. And I'd be a liar if I said that sometimes it would not be good if I had a different kind of woman beside me. A woman whom I could tell: go for a walk with the children, I am busy. And she would not ask any questions, just do what I asked. But actually I know well that it would not be good for me or for the kids. (Henrik (M), 46, communications consultant; his wife is a state secretary)

Equal partnership and work–life trade-offs were presented as crucial for partnership harmony in this narrative. Interestingly, a very cooperative attitude was constructed here through the involvement of "modern" male interests (such as fatherhood) in family life. It is important to say that interviewees who discussed their situation from a male narrative role emphasized modern gender attitudes.[5]

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5   Male interviewees expressing traditional gender attitudes did not use the narrative of a male, but they positioned themselves in different ways, mostly as elite members.
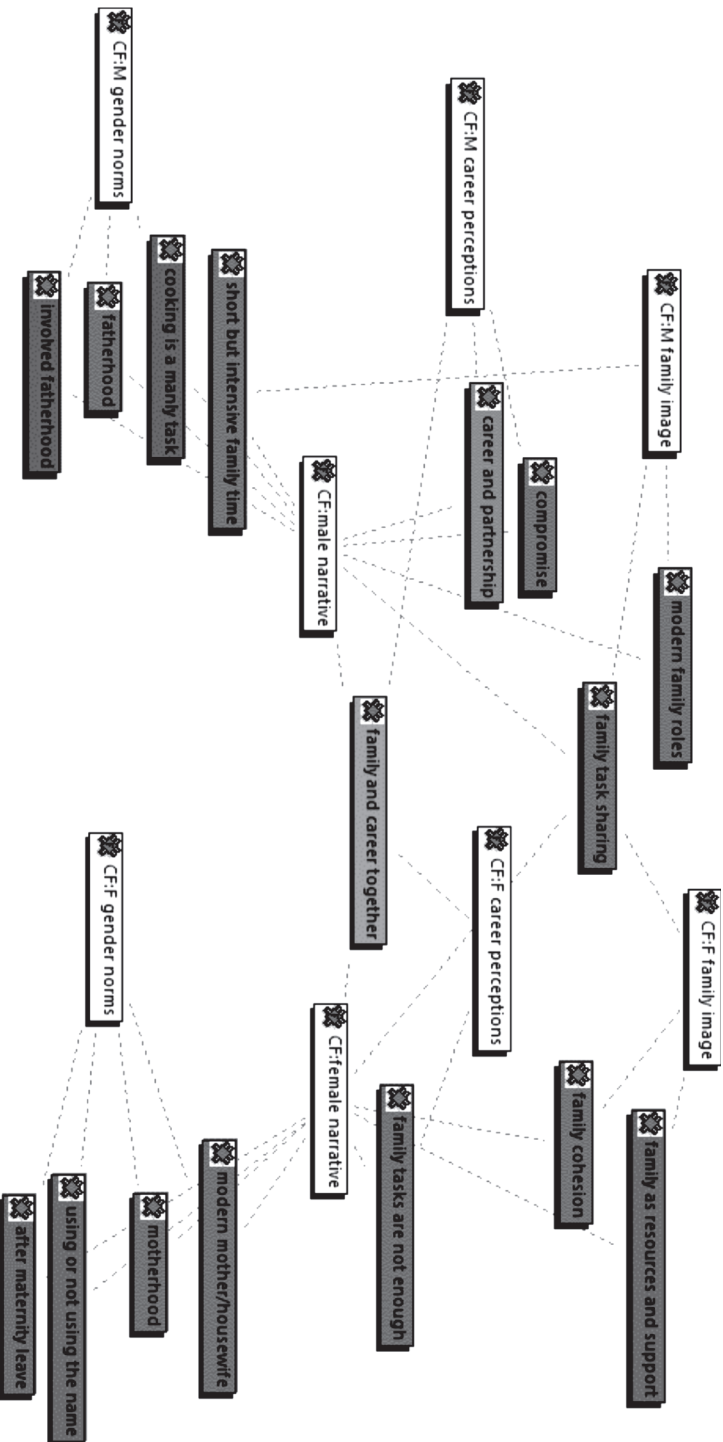
Graph 3. *Coded themes in male and female narratives*

Source: authors' results based on the content analysis of the interviews

A traditional family model is very unhealthy; I do not support it. It would be terribly frustrating if I came home to a housekeeper, who talked about what she bought in the supermarket. Sooner or later the horizon of these women gets so narrow that it becomes detrimental to marital relationships. I would be demotivated if I had to come home to a woman who spends the whole day at home. (Pál (M), 46, businessman; his wife is a CEO)

Some women in our sample discussed the topic of career and partnership using a female narrative (*Graph 3*). The themes discussed from the female narrative are "motherhood" in the context of career trajectories, "family and career together", and "family cohesion", which is realized with the help of the partners' work–life trade-offs. Female narrators presented themselves here as "modern mother and wife", and they emphasized that "family tasks are not enough for a woman".

If I am not using my brain, I feel awful. I feel I am wasting my time hunting for low-cost fruits and baby-soups. I feel I could do much more useful things. Somehow I am ashamed of this because it is not a nice thing to say, but for me the point of life is not based on how shiny the bloody nursing bottle is! (Réka (F), 45, state secretary; her husband is a communications consultant)

Female narratives consisted of a long discussion of "egalitarian family task sharing". In the case of young mother interviewees, female narratives involved the question of maternity leave and the career possibilities after it. Interviewees who talked about career and partnership from a female perspective emphasized the importance of cooperation between the partners.

My husband is not the type who wants me to stay at home. Moreover, he is definitely happier if I am really busy, just like him. There was never a moment when he told me not to work. I never cook or anything, or I am only willing to do basic stuff, but my husband is very good at cooking. Usually, he is the one who cooks. (Brigitta (F), 45, businesswoman; her husband is a businessman)

They presented themselves as modern women for whom balance between work and life is crucial. The value and experience of egalitarian partnership are very much emphasized here. Only women having modern family attitudes focused on female interests when they discussed career and partnership. The lack of female interests in the narratives seems to be related to traditional gender attitudes.

Gendered dynamics in the narratives were strongly connected to modern family norms. Both male and female narrative roles were expressed. Gendered

narrative roles reflect gender interests. This means that the different demands of men and women are negotiated and accepted. We suggest that here gender aspects are associated with modern, egalitarian family relations, and gender roles are no longer interpreted as only traditional family roles.

Discussion

During our analysis, three pairs of narratives were identified. Narratives show the positions from where narrators discuss the theme of career and partnership as elite member/partner, power couple/non-power couple, and male/female.

Table 1. *Narrative roles and perspectives linked to gender norms*

Perspectives/ Narrative roles	Gender norms	
Status-based	Elite member	-
	Elite partner	
Career-structure-based	–	Power couple
		Non-power couple
Gender-based	–	Female
		Male

Source: authors' results based on the content analysis of the interviews

Identified pairs of narrative roles represented three different points of view. The first is a status-based point of view, where the narrators perceive their career and partnership from the elite members' or from the elite partners' point of view. Elite partner narratives are exclusively female narratives. Status-based perceptions are strongly connected to traditional gender norms and separate sphere ideologies. The second perspective is based on the experienced career structure. Narrators perceive their career and partnership from the power couples' or from the non-power couples' points of view. Many of the male narrators without an elite career status position themselves in the non-power couple narrative role. Work–life balance is the focus of the discussion, career and partnership are presented as different ways and forms of work–life balance, but modern gender norms are significantly emphasized in both narratives. However, some narrative tension also emerges when narrators explain their modern family roles, especially in the case of male non-power couple narrators. The latter one is the gendered point of view – narrators who discuss their career and partnership from the man's or the woman's point of view show significant gender consciousness and sensitivity.

Narrative positioning is strongly determined by the actual situation and also by the attitudes and expectations of gender roles. Gender differences appeared strongly in the presented narratives. Male and female elite members discussed

career and partnership and their family roles in different ways. Male interviewees more frequently positioned themselves as elite members and presented their partners in a subordinate position, which was strongly connected to traditional family roles (Singh–Vinnicombe 2004). Partners in female elite member's narratives appeared as supporters and background, but markedly as equal ones.

These differences are deeply embedded in the traditional gender role system in general (Leuze–Rusconi 2009). Furthermore, gender differences were also shown in narrative positioning through the family's career-based form of life. When men positioned themselves as members of a power couple, they gave less emphasis to their spouse's career than women did. This is also connected to the general gendered role system where the career success of women has to be explained (Mayrhofer et al. 2008).

Non-power couple narratives showed similar gendered differences. Traditional family norms were more internalized (Thébaud et al. 2019) in women's narratives, while in male partners' narratives there was a stronger emphasis on their contribution to their partner's career and to privileged lifestyle. Men presented themselves as equal and cooperative members of their family.

Conclusions

Our findings show that narrative positioning is significantly gendered, and it is strongly connected to the traditional gendered role system. Having an elite position or pursuing a career calls for explanation only from women. In the meantime, a non-power couple position calls for explanation from men, which suggests the presence of the norm of equality.

Our findings also suggest that gendered perception and perspectives for career and partnership do not evidently result in traditional gender attitudes. These results show that a more open discussion on gender interests can be the base of egalitarian partnerships and more equal family commitment, which may strengthen women's career aspirations and their involvement in elite professions (Usdansky 2011). Further analyses are needed to understand the incoherence of attitudes and practices and the way that egalitarian norms have been experienced by elite spouses (Csurgó–Kristóf 2018).

The results may also show that narrative analysis – despite its limitations – provides information that is not accessible via other methods. This approach is more reflective of individuals' constructed and contextual organization of experiences. A new aspect of gender has arisen from the application of this narrative analysis approach, which shows that an open discussion of gender issues and interests may contribute to and help strengthen women's career aspirations and their motive to achieve elite positions.

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