

A FAMILY MEMBER OR A FAMILY SERVANT?

**WHY NORWEGIAN FAMILIES HIRE AU PAIRS
A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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Summary

The au pair programme is a scheme for cultural exchange that is meant to enable young people experience a new culture and increase their linguistic and professional abilities through participation in a foreign family's everyday life. In the official discourse, the au pairs are constructed as neither workers nor students, but as 'guests' of a 'host family' on a temporary visit. The au pairs are meant to live as members of a host family and as such they receive free board and lodging as well as pocket money. In return the au pairs help with childcare and housework. The au pair scheme has become very popular in Norway during the last decade and now an increasing number of Norwegian families hire au pairs. Couples with or without children – married as well as cohabiting, and single parents with children may hire au pairs through the au pair scheme. Single persons without children may not use the scheme. Given the availability of high-quality affordable public daycare for preschoolers as well as for children at school age, the generous parental leave legislation and the family-friendliness of the Norwegian labour market, the study asks why an increasing number of Norwegian families hire au pairs. Ten qualitative interviews with Norwegian families who used the au pair scheme were conducted for that objective.

The majority of the families who hire au pairs are middle-class, career-oriented, two-parent families with jobs in the knowledge-intensive post-industrial economy and a good income. However, thanks to the generous welfare transactions single parents may hire au pairs, too. Two of the families in my study are single-parent families. The results of the study indicate that it is not the need for childcare but rather the need for flexibility in their everyday and professional lives what motivates Norwegian families to hire au pair. The childcare package of the families using the au pair scheme is a public-private mix, where the public childcare institutions are responsible for the pedagogical upbringing of the children, while the au pairs are responsible for the well-being of the children at home. The au pair is seldom responsible for the daily care of the host family's children.

As the main responsibility for the daily care of children is delegated to the public childcare institutions, the au pairs' main duty is the conduct of the host family's housework. The employment of au pair, then, not only enables career-oriented parents to put in long hours at work, but also helps outsource housework and housework-related conflicts. The main argument of the study is that tanks to the flexibility enabled by the au pair, Norwegian parents achieve a particular kind of gender equality – *the Nordic model of gender equality*, which is based on equal contribution to the family income rather than on equal sharing of care and domestic work. The study argues that the ideology of cultural exchange obscures the process *housewifisation* of educated women from poor countries that takes place at affluent Norwegian homes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

I arrived at 9 in the morning. A big brown two-storey house with a roof-flat and a basement-flat. Anna opened the door for me.¹ I already knew Anna. I had met her at a Filipina Sunday meeting I was invited to. Anna looked very different from how I remember her from that meeting. A smiling and colourful Anna welcomed me at the Filipina Sunday meeting. A humble, shy and greyish Anna opened the door for me that morning. Barely looking at me, she took my coat and disappeared. She was obviously busy with something as she was wearing yellow plastic gloves reaching nearly her elbows. Later, during the interview, I learned that Anna was just finishing the house's three bathrooms when I came. It was only 9 o'clock in the morning. Linda, the host-mother, welcomed me, too, and while offering me a cup of coffee, started telling me how busy she was. Anna was cleaning the living-room at that time – with a cotton cloth she dusted the bookshelves, the pictures, the big living-room table and everything lying on it, the chairs. She then continued with the living-room's glass-door. Kneeling, Anna carefully dusted the living-room's glass-door from both sides.

Meanwhile, Linda had already started telling me why she needed an au pair – she wouldn't wait for me to ask her that. Linda had had five au pairs – two from the Philippines, one from Romania, one from Thailand and one from Russia, as well as two Norwegian childminders. Linda was eager to tell me the story of each of these girls. The Filipina girls worked in Denmark before coming to Norway. To reach potential au pairs, Linda had posted an advertisement on a popular website for au pairs and received more than two hundred applications. She chose the Filipina girls as they already were in Scandinavia and spoke some Danish. The Romanian girl was recruited privately; the Russian one came through an agency, but was substituted with the Thai girl after a short time, because the family was not satisfied with her morals. The Norwegian girls were interviewed at Linda's home. Jon, Linda's husband was invited to participate in the interview, too, but he would rather observe the whole situation from a distance. He was carefully listening to our conversation, but did not take the word until not directly asked by Linda.

¹ Pilot interview. All the names of the persons are fictive. See also Appendix III.

1.1. Research question

The objective of the present study is to get insight into the reasons why Norwegian families hire au pairs in addition to using public childcare arrangements. For that objective I have studied Norwegian families who have or have had au pairs. The main research question organizing the current study is *Why do Norwegian families hire au pairs?* To answer the main research question, I asked the following questions, *Who are the families employing au pairs and how do they recruit their au pairs? How do they view their au pairs – as family members, employees or servants? How do the host family members experience having an au pair? How do the au pairs influence the redistribution of domestic work within the nuclear family?*

Before introducing the developments in the au pair institution that inspired me to write this thesis, I would like to place the au pair institution in a historical perspective by presenting its historical background.

1.2. The au pair institution in a historical perspective

‘Au pair’ is a French word meaning ‘on equal terms’ (Griffith and Legg 1997). In its very origin, au pairing was seen as a road for self-improvement and had a solely cultural character. Au pair is a European phenomenon, which started at the end of the 19th century when large number of young Swiss women moved away from home to work in big cities. Concerned for the morals of these young women, the church encouraged them to live with local families where they could also acquire useful household skills. With placing German-speaking Swiss girls within French-speaking families, the language-learning element of the placement developed. Though cultural in its origin, au pairing shifted focus from language-learning to domestic duties and childcare. While being a guest-teacher implied a more egalitarian relationship between the au pair and the host family, this balance changed when the au pairing shifted focus from teaching to servicing the host family’s members.

In England the notion ‘au pair’ appeared first in 1897 and was used for English girls who taught English lessons in exchange for French ones (Griffith and Legg 1997). The UK began au pair exchanges with Switzerland in the 1920s and with Australia in the 1930s, but it was after WWII that the number of au pairs increased considerably. Also in Norway after WWII,

many Norwegian girls travelled as au pairs abroad to learn language and culture. However, it was not until the end of the 1990s that the au pair institution in Norway started changing rapidly. From being primarily a sending land, Norway turned into a receiving land for au pairs from all over the world. Especially for young women from Eastern Europe and Asia, Norway turned into an attractive cultural-exchange destination.

On a European basis, the number of au pairs is now estimated to be as high as hundreds of thousands au pairs (Griffith and Legg 1997). Because of the scope of this phenomenon and its continually growing popularity, the au pair institution and the whole apparatus serving it, has now been referred to as *au pair industry* (IAPA 2007).

1.3. Recent developments in the au pair institution in Norway

Having an au pair has grown popular during the last few years in Norway. While only 277 au pairs were registered in Norway in the year 2000, the number of registered au pairs for the period September 2006 to August 2007 was as high as 2391 (UDI 2008). It is important to note that these numbers represent the non-Nordic au pairs, that is, au pairs who need permit to work in Norway. Nordic nationals, in accordance with the Nordic convention, do not need a permit to work (as au pairs) in Norway and they are accordingly not present in the Immigration Authorities' au pair-statistics (Norden 2007).² However, according to Susanne Larson, a director of an au pair-agency specialized in placing Swedish au pairs in Norway, about hundred Swedish au pairs are placed in the Oslo district each year (Praktikantformidlingen 2007).³ These au pairs are not included in the au pair-statistics. Danish au pairs are also popular in Norway, but they are absent from the Immigration Authorities' statistics, too. This implies that the number of au pairs working in Norway might be much higher than the official statistics suggests. However, although the official statistics might not be representing the real number of au pairs in Norway, it does indicate the growing popularity of the au pair institution in Norway.

Together with the growing number of au pairs coming to Norway, Norwegian academia, media and politicians, started paying growing attention to the changes taking place within the

² In an e-mail from September 26th 2007, Paul Skoglund, advisor at the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) confirms that UDI does not have statistics over the total number of au pairs in Norway, but only an overview over those who need work permit to work as au pairs in Norway.

³ E-mail from Susanne Larsson, manager of 'Praktikantformidlingen'.

au pair institution. Newspaper headlines like *The new servants* (DN, 6/7.3.2004)⁴, *The family threatened me* (Klassekampen 3.11.2007), *We are dependent on Anna* (DB, 1.4.2004), signalled that the au pair institution has been undergoing major changes. Both media and academic debates focused on women's labour market participation and the difficulties of combining childcare with paid work as a possible reason for the increased popularity of the au pair institution. Especially career-oriented women in high-status jobs came in the public eye and were seen as outsourcing housework and childcare-related conflicts by hiring au pairs. At the same time newspaper articles like *Professional women's paradise* (BT, 28.10.2007) and *Norwegian mothers are on the top* (BT, 8.5.2008) communicate a clear message – Norway is the best country to be a mother in given the generous parental leave legislation, the availability of public daycare for children and the family-friendliness of the Norwegian labour market. Still, the number of Norwegian families turning to private solution has been growing.

To combine work outside the home and care for children, women have traditionally relied on their mothers, and more recently, on the state-subsidised childcare arrangements. However, with the increased life expectancy in Norway today, many grandmothers are still gainfully employed and hence not available for the daily care of their grandchildren. Many of these grandmothers have also parents of their own who need care themselves. As a result, the care resources in the contemporary nuclear family are much scarcer than they were some 50 years ago (Isaksen 2004). To compensate for the shortage of care resources, the Norwegian welfare state has made large investments in improving the kindergarten availability and in including the fathers in the care for children. For families with young children, and especially for the mothers, the high-quality affordable public daycare has been a strong incentive for increased labour market participation.⁵ However, for career-oriented parents with 'greedy'⁶ jobs, the public kindergartens, with their inflexible opening hours, have not been a viable solution.

With the objective to mobilize men as carers, a father's quota was introduced in 1993. The quota gave the fathers a legal right to withdraw from labour market and to care for their children. The quota was proclaimed success as fathers did increase their participation in the care for children – at least during the leave period (Brandh and Kvande 1999, 2003). But the

⁴ All translations of newspaper headlines are my translations. For original headlines see section 8.3.

⁵ Small children, also called young children, are children under school age. In the current thesis, families with small children will often be referred to as small-children families.

⁶ Greedy institutions are based on the voluntary commitment from their members and demand total loyalty (Cosser 1974).

quota did not have the desired effect on men's participation in housework. It is still women who have major responsibility for the care of children and it is still men who work longer hours.⁷

Linda and Jon's case presented in the introduction is indicative of the developments in the au pair institution in a several ways. It exemplifies the large *variety of ways* by which au pairs are recruited in Norway (agencies, friends, internet). It shows *who in the family* is responsible for the recruitment of the au pair, what *type of work* the au pair performs and *who is using* the au pair institution. With their big brown two-storey house with a roof-flat and a basement-flat, Linda and Jon may be seen as belonging to the more prosperous segments of the population – those who have a spare flat for the au pair, one for rent and two floors for the family's own needs. Linda and Jon's case reveals also a tendency among Norwegian host families to hire *girls and young women* as au pairs rather than men. Linda and Jon had seven childminders – two Norwegian and five of foreign origin, and all of them were girls. That Linda and Jon had five foreign and only two local childminders, shows yet another tendency among Norwegian families. While earlier it was common for Norwegian families to delegate the childcare to Norwegian youth (the so-called 'praktikant')⁸, today many Norwegian families *prefer foreign childminders*.

1.4. Local expression of a global tendency

The growing popularity of the au pair institution in Norway may be seen as a local expression of a global tendency. The explosion of the housework industry that has been taking place for the last decades internationally has now found its local expression in the au pair institution in Norway. While companies like the American *Merry Maids* have been popular on the international market already for decades, it has been only in the recent years that commercial home-cleaning and home-care services have begun gaining popularity on the Norwegian market. Companies like the Norwegian company *City Maids*, offer a variety of home-based services, including not only the traditional house-cleaning, but also a variety of services which the busy professionals do not have time to arrange by themselves – buying food, clothes, gifts,

⁷ Kitterød 2005, Vaage 2005, Holter, Svare and Egeland 2007. (Note that long references will be placed in a foot note in order not to disturb the general perception of the text).

⁸ Praktikants are Norwegian school-youth who look after children in private homes. The praktikants are often youth from the neighbourhood, who come to the family's home in the morning and leave in the evening, but might as well be living in other towns and live with the family during the week.

paying bills, visiting sick parents, bringing a child from the kindergarten or school and many others (City Maid 2008). These services are often too expensive to be purchased on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. For many, purchasing cleaning or care-services on the growing black market has been a solution. In Scandinavia, where the costs of the production of ‘white’ home-based services are much higher than in many other countries, the unregulated market has flourished. It has been estimated that in Sweden 3 billion Swedish krona are handled in the black home-service market annually. In Norway, too, the black home-service market handles over between 1.5 and 2 billion Norwegian krona annually (City Maid 2008). Although it is difficult to pin down how many and who those unregulated workers are, it is not unusual that migrant women or ‘tourists’ on temporary visas deliver cleaning and care services at lower prices. Studies of unofficial domestic workers from Poland, for example, show that Polish domestic workers form job-sharing communities, where several women share employer families by turn in a three-month cycle. This rotational practice enables them to make a living for their own families at home by delivering care and cleaning services to affluent families in other countries (Irek 1998, Morokvasic and Rudolph 1994, in Hess and Puckhaber 2004). As buying care and cleaning services on the black market is considered unethical, and as the ‘white’ market is too expensive to purchase from on a daily basis, the au pair institution, with the housework and care obligations of its participants, has turned into an attractive option for many families in Norway as elsewhere.

1.5. Organizing structure of the thesis

The introductory chapter has provided a brief introduction to the au pair institution and to its local developments. This theme is further developed in chapter two where I add an international perspective to changes in the Norwegian au pair institution by presenting the larger socio-political context of which it is part of. In addition, chapter two places the current study in a larger theoretical context by introducing related research as well as some of the prior research on the subject. Chapter three presents the major methodological choices influencing the current study. In chapters four and five the main findings of the current study are introduced and an attempt is made to link empirical findings to theoretical suggestions. Theoretical perspectives are further discussed in chapter six. Summary of the main findings, a conclusion and suggestions for further research are presented in chapter seven.

2. SOCIO-POLITICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this chapter I describe the larger socio-political context which the au pair institution is part of. For that objective I draw a picture of the different participants in the au pair institution – national and international bodies, placement agencies, host families and au pairs. In the first part of the chapter I elaborate on the regulation of the institution, focusing specifically on how the au pair placements are regulated in Norway. Then, drawing on the information available on the placement agencies' websites, I present some of the requirements that agencies put on au pair candidates and the way au pairs and host families present themselves to each other. In addition to giving a glimpse of how the industry functions, this presentation establishes an important background for further discussions on the way host families recruit and view their au pairs. Further, by presenting the way public childcare is organized in Norway, the current chapter opens for discussions on the reasons for Norwegian families to turn to private solutions in addition to using the public childcare arrangements. At last, by introducing prior research on the subject, the current study is situated in a theoretical context.

2.1. The au pair industry

As mentioned earlier, because of its scope and its continually growing popularity, the au pair institution and the apparatus serving it has turned into a global industry. A simple Google-search found twelve million and two hundred thousand (12.2 million) websites containing the term 'au pair'. This, in itself, is an indication of the scope and popularity of the au pair institution. In what follows, I will draw a picture of the different actors in the au pair industry based on the information posted on some of these millions of websites.

2.1.1. Regulation

The au pair industry is an intricate global network of agencies, au pairs, host-families, national and international authorities and regulative bodies. Recognizing the fact that the au pair institution is turning into a fast growing industry, leading au pair organizations founded The International Au Pair Association (IAPA) in 1994 with the objective to protect the rights of au pairs and host families, and to establish internationally approved guidelines for au pair exchange programmes. At present, IAPA has 143 members in 38 countries around the world.

Ascribed with international prestige and credibility because of their membership in IAPA, the member agencies are referred to as ‘trusted partners’ in the global au pair industry (IAPA 2007). Still, for those considering to become au pairs or to hire an au pair, finding a reliable agency might be an ambitious project.

There are hundreds of thousands au pair agencies all over the world claiming to provide professional and high quality assistance in matching families and au pairs. Some agencies offer assistance during the whole process – filling in the necessary application forms, establishing the contact between the family and the au pair, organizing language courses for the au pairs. Other agencies only help with the ‘match’, leaving the rest to the family and the au pair. The fees for providing assistance in the ‘matching process’ vary substantially from country to country.⁹ So does the practice of who is to be charged for that service – the au pair or the host family. As the majority of the au pair agencies in Europe and elsewhere are not members of the IAPA, it is difficult to monitor and regulate their placement procedures. Neither the local national immigration authorities, nor any other institutional body, have the responsibility for controlling the activities of the placement agencies. This creates good opportunities for commercialization and abuse of the au pair programme. In Norway only Atlantis is a member of IAPA though the number of the au pair agencies and private persons placing au pairs has increased considerably during the last few years.

The administrative body responsible for the control of the au pair-inflow to Norway is the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI). UDI follows the Council of Europe’s *Agreement on Au Pair Placements* from 1969 (Council of Europe 1969) which defines the purpose of the au pair placement as,

The temporary reception by families, in exchange for certain services, of young foreigners who come to improve their linguistic and possibly professional knowledge as well as their general culture by acquiring a better knowledge of the country where they are received (Explanatory Report 1969: 22).

The main objective of the au pair placement, according to the Council of Europe, is cultural exchange. UDI, however, defines the programme as “work arrangement” which aims at “facilitating” cultural exchange (UDI 2007a). Following the Council of Europe’s regulations,

⁹ Norwegian families who want to recruit an au pair through an agency may sometimes pay up to 5900 NOK (Atlantis 2007) or they may choose to recruit through internet – for free.

UDI defines the au pairs as neither students nor workers, but as 'guests' of a 'host family'. Still, because of being participants in work arrangement, the au pairs are subjected to taxation and to regulations of the holiday act. The au pairs may not work more than 5 hours a day and not more than 30 hours a week, even if additional payment is offered. They are entitled to 48 hours off each week and to a total of 25 weekdays' holiday per calendar year. The au pairs receive free lodge and boarding, as well as pocket money, in return to which they carry on light housework. As of October 2007, the minimum remuneration is 4000 NOK before taxes; prior to that it was 3000 NOK (UDI 2001, 2007b). This arrangement is now regulated through a standard contract that both the au pairs and the host families have to sign. Before October 2007 the standard contract was not obligatory and this largely enabled the host families to modify the regulations according to their own needs. The changes in the official au pair-regulations (regulated payment, taxation, entitlement to holiday), indicate that the au pair programme has become more similar to an ordinary work arrangement. However, although the programme is subjected to ordinary work regulations, there exists no institutional body that monitors whether the conditions of the work arrangement are followed. After a work permit is granted, it is solely up to the au pair and the host family to observe whether the conditions of the placement are adhered to. This potentially places the au pairs in a vulnerable position.

The eligibility criteria for au pairs and host families vary largely from country to country, though the Council of Europe's *Agreement* is the main point of reference for many national immigration authorities' regulations (Explanatory Report 1969). Candidates who want to be au pairs in Norway must be between 18 and 30 years of age, and it must be probable that they will return to their countries after the au pair stay (UDI 2007a). The Norwegian Immigration Authorities set no limitations to the candidates' marital status thus opening for both single and married candidates, as well as for mothers with children to work as au pairs in Norway. The Danish Immigration Service, on the other hand, does not accept au pair candidates who are married or have children, or who have previously worked as au pairs in Denmark (Utlændingetjenesten 2007a). According to the Danish authorities this restriction aims at preserving the original objective of the au pair programme and preventing it from turning into a channel for import of inexpensive labour. In addition, as a way to emphasize the cultural aspect of the programme, the Danish authorities require that au pair applicants should have a solid linguistic and cultural foundation prior to enrolling the au pair programme.

The foreign nationals applying for au pair positions in Sweden should be able to document a distinct interest in Swedish language and culture, and should be able to enclose to their application a certificate of admission to Swedish language courses in order to be granted an au pair permit (Migrationsverket 2008). No such requirement is set to candidates applying for au pair positions in Norway. The Swedish Migration Board does not set limitations to the marital status of au pair candidates. However, unlike the Norwegian Immigration Authorities, the Board does warn that a previous period spent as an au pair in another country reduces the candidate's chances for receiving an au pair permit in Sweden.

The eligibility criteria for the host families vary among countries, too. Norwegian families who want to be host families should speak Norwegian on a daily basis, but they are not required to be Norwegian by origin. Families with or without children, married as well as cohabiting, and single parents with children are allowed to be host families. Single persons without children may not be host families. Bearing in mind that the main duties of the au pair are supposed to be childcare and housework, placing au pairs in families without children leaves the au pair with the single task of doing the host family's housework. Allowing for families without children to host au pairs, then, the Norwegian Immigration Authorities legitimate and enable the employment of domestic workers.

The Danish authorities require that at least one of the parents is of Danish origin and that the family has at least one child living at home. The Danish and Swedish authorities do not place au pairs in families that have been punished with a 'waiting period' because of au pair-abuse (Utlændingesservice 2007a, Migrationsverket 2008). No such limitations are mentioned by the Norwegian Immigration Authority (UDI 2007a).

To protect the au pairs from abuse and exploitation, the Danish authorities do not allow that the candidates start working before the work permit is granted. The Norwegian authorities, on the other hand, facilitate the candidates' entry into the au pair role by granting them provisional permits while waiting for the regular work permit to be processed. The comparison of the Norwegian, Danish and Swedish legislation reveals that it is much easier for au pair candidates to receive an au pair permit in Norway than it is in Sweden and Denmark. The duration of the au pair programme is also longer in Norway (2 years) than in Sweden (12 months) and Denmark (18 months). That might be the reason why many foreign

nationals work first as au pairs in Denmark or Sweden and thereafter come for another au pair-period in Norway (Ungihuset 2007).

2.1.2. Exit prohibition for au pairs from the Philippines

Both the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration and the Swedish Migration Board define special circumstances for au pairs from the Philippines. As the Filipino authorities do not recognise the au pair scheme and do not want their citizens to be granted permits to work as au pairs in Europe, Filipino nationals are not advised to apply for au pair positions in Scandinavia.¹⁰ Still, as the Norwegian Immigration Authorities comply with the Norwegian legislation, they cannot refuse to process applications for au pair permits on the basis of another country's legislation. As a result, 1103 permits, or 63 % of all au pair permits in Norway in 2007, were granted to Filipino nationals (UDI 2008). In Denmark, too, the majority of au pairs (955 of 1793) are from the Philippines (Utlændingetjenesten 2007b). In 2006, the Swedish Migration Board granted 473 permits to Filipino citizens. These are registered in the Board's official statistics as visiting students, workers or close relatives. (Migrationsverket 2007). It is difficult to estimate whether the Filipino citizens coming to Sweden work as au pairs, but Filipino citizens are seldom granted permits on other grounds than as au pairs or for family reunification. These numbers indicate that despite the deployment ban, Filipino nationals are still coming to Scandinavia. The reasons for this tendency will be discussed in chapter six (sections 6.4 and 6.5). In the sections that follow, I would like to introduce another actor in the au pair industry – the placement agencies and their role in the au pair placements.

2.2. Feeding the industry – agencies' role in the au pair placements

Not simply being part of the au pair industry, but virtually feeding the industry with au pairs and host families, the agencies need to provide highly qualified au pairs and reliable families in order to survive in the global competition.

¹⁰ As of 5th November 1997, The Republic of the Philippines enforced a ban on the deployment of Filipino female migrant workers under the Au-Pair scheme (Norway 2007)

2.2.1. The au pair Industry vis-à-vis au pair candidates

The placement requirements vary largely according to the country of placement. For placements in USA, for example, documented experience in childcare (sometimes up to 200 hours childcare) is required, as well as driving licence, basic knowledge of English and a good mental and physical health (Atlantis 2007, AuPair America 2007). After arriving in the USA, the au pairs are trained in American history and culture, and provided with detailed information of what they are expected to do at the host family's home. For placements in Germany, basic knowledge of the German language is required, in addition to at least three childcare references, two character references and a detailed medical report (Atlantis 2007). For placement in Scandinavia both childcare and cleaning experience is required (AuPair International 2007). The age limitations vary according to the receiving country's regulations, but generally the au pair candidates are not supposed to be older than 30 years of age. The candidate's marital status is seldom taken into consideration. Few agencies do not place candidates who are married or have children (Atlantis 2007). The au pair candidates are screened by being asked to briefly describe their motivation for working as au pairs in a letter to the prospective family.

Placement agencies' fees vary largely from country to country. For placements in USA, the au pair candidates might sometimes pay up to 800 USD (approximately 4000 NOK) plus the flight surcharge (AuPair America 2007). For placement in Norway, agencies charge the candidates with 300 EUR (approximately 2400 NOK) (GTCE 2008). However, given the large wage level difference between countries in Eastern and Northern Europe, the application fees, especially for candidates from the post-communist countries where the wage level is still very low, might be a serious investment. For candidates from Bulgaria, for example, where the minimum monthly salary is 110 EUR as of January 2008, the registration fee is a three-month's salary (Dnevnik 2008). Adding the flight tickets to this, which may cost up to 500 EUR (Usit Colours 2008), exceeds the sending family's half year's income. To avoid the expensive registration fees, many au pair candidates publish their profiles on the internet where they are visible for potential employers.

In the sections that follow, based on information posted on placement agencies' websites and on information from *virtual* agencies, i.e. internet sites where candidates publish their

profiles, I illustrate how au pair candidates present themselves to potential employers. As this presentation takes place largely through the internet, I have chosen to call both the virtual and the physical agencies' websites *the au pair gallery*.

2.2.2. The au pair gallery – presentation of self to the others

Most au pair galleries contain pictures of smiling young girls, dressed in white or light-coloured clothes, often with a child in their arms on the background of colourful toys or flowers. The pictures are usually shot at daylight and illuminate purity, whiteness and happiness. Experience from childcare is mentioned in all profiles since childcare is supposed to be the au pairs' prime duty. Many au pair candidates (especially those from the Philippines) mention their nurse skills, a completion of childcare, elderly care and/or emergency help course, as well as cleaning and cooking abilities. These courses are often taken with the objective to work as care workers in rich countries and are administered by the local authorities and by a large body of commercial actors thus turning the female migration into a local industry (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002). The way au pair candidates present themselves to prospective employers is largely influenced by the recommendations of the placement agencies (Cox 2007, Pratt 1997, 1999). That is why some au pair candidates even provide a list of duties they are ready to carry out, "My objectives are to carry on all instructions of the employer, to do the assigned tasks, follow rules and regulations, to work on time and be responsible in daily tasks, to observe cleanliness and good quality job" (Filipina au pair candidate, 25 year-old with a polytechnic education) (Filipino Au Pair 2008). These presentations create certain expectations at the receiving families.

Besides the profiles of Filipina au pair candidates, a lot of male candidates are to be found in the virtual au pair gallery. These are often young men who have a sister or another family member who is already working as an au pair abroad and whom they want to reunite with. Many of the male candidates are university graduates searching for new challenges. The male au pair candidates offer the same services as the female ones – childcare, cleaning, washing, ironing, cooking, but also "fixing your garden, or may be you have a small farm, I can also help you with your stable..." (Filipino au pair-candidate, 22 year's old) (Ungihuset 2007). The male candidates describe themselves as reasonable, hard-working and god-fearing men

who apply for au pair jobs in order to “earn some money for my son’s future, it’s so difficult to find job here” (Filipino au pair-candidate, 22 year’s old) (Ungihuset 2007) and “to help my family and because I’m willing back to school again” (Filipino au pair-candidate, 26 year’s old) (SAPC 2007, *grammatical errors in original*).

Candidates from different nationalities may often have different motivations for applying for au pair jobs. Presenting themselves to prospective employers, Russian and Ukrainian girls, for example, often emphasise their cultural curiosity and their ability to adapt to new cultures, pointing out that for them the au pair programme is “a chance to live abroad for a while, to meet people, to enjoy different culture, to learn foreign language” (Ukraine au pair-candidate, 26 year’s old) (SAPC 2007). For Scandinavian candidates, au pairing is just a way “to see more than just my hometown” (Swedish female au pair-candidate, 20 year’s old) and “a fun job and I really want to try it” (Swedish female au pair-candidate, 19 year’s old).

Based on the au pairs’ national characteristics and the way they present themselves to future employers, some agencies offer formal classifications of au pair candidates. According to Adequate Assistance AS, an agency specialized in placing au pairs in Norwegian families, the English-speaking au pairs (from USA, Canada, England, Ireland, Australia) do not function well in Norwegian homes as they are not independent enough to manage the work. German-speaking and Baltic au pairs are easily adaptable and have similar views on childcare as Norwegian parents. Au pairs from Latin countries are not recommended as they need long time to adjust to the Norwegian way of life and because they have different views on childcare. Girls from Russia and Ukraine are known for their bad morals and poor work ethics. Polish, Hungarian and Romanian girls are described as not strict enough in carrying out housework duties. Au pairs from other Nordic countries are said not to be motivated for the au pair work and therefore not suited for the au pair job. Adequate Assistance does not place au pairs from western-oriented Muslim countries like Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco as long as the candidates wear head scarf (Adequate Assistance 2007).

Guided by the information and recommendations of the placement agencies, but also by their own national, ethnic and religious preferences, the host families select the au pair they consider most suitable for their needs. This in practice implies that the host family chooses the au pair. Though not so common, the selection process may be initiated by the au pair, too. The

au pairs may also choose the family out of the family's geographical position, number of children and the amount of work the au pair is expected to perform. The way prospective families present themselves to future au pairs might be an indication of why they need an au pair and what expectations they have towards future au pairs.

2.2.3. "We need you to take care of us"¹¹

The way Norwegian families present themselves to their future au pairs creates an impression of busy and active but very social families who enjoy spending time with friends and family members. Often, both parents work full-time or are away due to work-related travels. Most of the families whose profiles I visited had more than two children, often three or four. The families need help with bringing the kids to and from kindergarten, helping the kids get dressed and eat breakfast in the morning, playing with them after school or kindergarten, preparing dinner for the family, helping clean up after dinner and putting children to bed. Most of the families require also that the au pair does some housework. For these duties, the families require a female candidate with a long experience in childcare and housework, who is in addition light-hearted, reasonable and smiling. The au pair is also expected to be mature, independent and patient, and be able to cope with stress (SAPC 2007, Ungihuset 2007). Addressing their future au pairs, prospective families often declare that "if you are the right person for us, we can guarantee that you will be pleased with the wages" and "we promise that you will not be overworked" (AuPair World 2007). In order to find out more about Norwegian families' childcare needs, it might be useful to look at the way childcare provision is organized in Norway.

2.3. The childcare 'going public' and private again

The childcare in Norway has 'gone public' in the sense that it is now largely produced outside the home by the public childcare institutions. The collectivisation of childcare also involves an increasing state support for parental leave legislation and cash transfers for childcare at home. The parental leave legislation institutes legal rights for working parents to give priority to childcare over paid work by offering 44 weeks leave with full income compensation, or 54 weeks with 80 percent income compensation. The parental leave scheme may be combined with a time-account scheme that opens for prolonging the leave period up to three years and

¹¹ A host family's message to future au pairs (SAPC 2007).

enables the combination of childcare and paid work outside the home (Arbeidstilsynet 2007; NAV 2008).

Families with children below school age are offered state-subsidised childcare services in form of different types of kindergartens – full-time kindergartens, part-time kindergartens, children's parks.¹² Though the state's provision of public kindergartens has been slow to respond to parents' needs for public childcare, the provision has improved considerably during the last few years and as of December 2007, 84 per cent of children aged 1-5 were offered kindergarten places. In total 249 500 children had kindergarten place in 2007, which is an increase of more than 14 500 children in comparison to 2006 (SSB 2007). Families with children under the age of three, whose children do not attend public childcare, are entitled to cash benefit for childcare, the amount of which corresponds to the sum the government would have subsidised if the child attended kindergarten. Parents may receive the benefit even if the child is looked after by a private childminders like day mothers ('dagmamma')¹³ or au pairs, or if the child attends public daycare only some days of the week (NAV 2008).¹⁴ Parents with children at school age are offered after-school care service (SFO) as a way of combining work with care for children. Despite the different opportunities for combining childcare and paid work, a growing number of Norwegian families are turning to private solutions to manage the work-family balance.

2.4. Research on the au pair institution

Because of its scope, rapid development and controversial nature, the au pair institution has attracted a lot of international attention. Still, the research on the au pair institution in Norway is scarce. In what follows, I will briefly review some of Scandinavian and international contributions to the subject.

Gry-Anita Hemsing (2003), Marianne Hovdan (2005) and Marte Bertelsen (2007) have studied the way the institution has developed in Norway during recent years. Hemsing (2003), who has worked as an au pair in London in the early 1990s, conducted a study of Norwegian

¹² Full-time kindergartens provide full-time care for children under school age and are usually open from 7 a.m. to 16 p.m. Part-time kindergartens have shorter opening hours (8 a.m. to 14 p.m.). Children's parks ('barnepark') are open playgrounds with a shelter to have meals under, usually on a part-time basis (SSB 2003).

¹³ Day mothers ('dagmamma') are state-subsidised private persons who provide childcare in their private homes.

¹⁴ In such cases the size of the cash benefit is reduced according to the number of hours the child spends at the public daycare (NAV 2008).

au pairs in London. Hemsing approached the au pair institution from a cultural and communicative perspective, implying that she viewed the institution not as a static phenomenon, but as a dynamic field, where meaning and content were negotiated by its participants. London as a research site was selected because of being one of the most popular destinations for Norwegian au pairs in the 1990s. Hemsing's research is based on qualitative interviews. Theoretically, her analysis is influenced by Biddle's (1979) role theory and Goffman's (1967) dramaturgical perspective. Central in her analysis is the concept of stereotypes as "the collection of attributes believed to define or characterize the members of a social group" (Oakes, Haslam and Turner 1994: 1, cited in Hemsing 2003: 22), as well as the concepts of experience and expectations related to approving and evaluating human characteristics (Biddle 1979). Hemsing's main findings are that the Norwegian au pairs negotiate the content of their roles through the deployment of different 'requisites', that the au pairs adjust their future expectations in accordance with current experiences and that they resist established stereotypes of Scandinavian women as sexually liberated by good performance at the host families' homes.

Hovdan (2005), who has au pair experience from the USA, studied what is like to be an au pair in Norway. Hovdan's research is based on qualitative interviews with eleven au pairs working for Norwegian families. Hovdan describes the relation between the au pairs and the host families as a capital-labour relation. According to Hovdan, the au pairs are proletariat producing childcare and domestic services that are further appropriated by the host families. Hovdan's perspective is clearly inspired by Marx's classical theory of appropriation by dispossession, where the main conflict is between those who own the capital and those who produce it. In addition, Hovdan takes a feminist standpoint by viewing the au pairs as part of global care chains, or a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring (Hochschild 2000).

The most recent research on the au pair institution in Norway is conducted by Bertelsen (2007), who studied the au pair institution from the perspective of sociology of law. Bertelsen, who has au pair experience from Switzerland, studied how the formal au pair-regulation functions in practice and what knowledge the au pairs and host families have of it. Bertelsen found that au pairs and host families have very different attitude to and understanding of the au pair-programme's formal regulation. While the au pairs saw a practical value of applying

the au pair regulation, the host families had a more idealistic and distanced attitude to it. Bertelsen claims that because of their economic motivation, au pairs from poor countries are more vulnerable to overworking and exploitation, compared to those from better-off countries. Bertelsen concludes that the au pair programme functions intentionally for those coming for the cultural experience, but not for those driven by economic motives.

Another Scandinavian contribution is the work of Ellinor Platzer (2007) who has studied Swedish middle-class families using the au pair programme. According to Platzer, Swedish women's active labour market participation, the unreconstructed gender relations at home and at the labour market, as well as the cutbacks in the state provision of childcare, leave the women with the main responsibility for children and housework, and contribute to the increasing demand for reconciliation policies and domestic services. To solve these problems, affluent women hire au pairs. Platzer argues that the au pair system in Sweden is the only legal way for the Swedish state to provide middle-class dual-career families with cheap domestic services. The au pair system is, according to Platzer, a domestic-service system that is hidden behind formal regulations.

What is common for all these studies is that both Hemsing (2003), Hovdan (2005), Bertelsen (2007) and Platzer (2007) found out that the au pairs spend much more time doing housework than with the host families' children. Few of Hemsing's informants spent the whole day with the children, as the children were either attending school or being cared for by their mothers. The au pairs in Hovdan's study, too, report that many host families' children spend most of the day in the kindergarten or school. Bertelsen who has interviewed both au pairs and Norwegian host families found similar patterns – Norwegian families use both private and public childcare. This pattern is present also among the Swedish families in Platzer's study.

Drawing parallels between live-in domestic workers and the au pairs, international research – Anderson (2000, 2002), Cox (2006, 2007), Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2002), Hess and Puckhaber (2004), Rotkirch (2001) view the au pair system as part of the transnational redistribution of care work where women from poorer regions of the world migrate to care for the children and households of professional women in the West in order to support their own families in the country of origin. Research on the care chains in Europe has explored the highly oppressive nature of the domestic and care work and the way migration renders women

vulnerable.¹⁵ Qualitative research with employers of migrant care-workers in UK, Spain and Sweden shows that the most common types of migrant domestic and care workers in London are au pairs from Central and Eastern Europe, domestic workers from India, the Philippines and Sri Lanka and nannies from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (Lister et al. 2007: 142). Among the reasons for hiring au pairs, nannies and domestic workers the interviewees in the international studies point the concern to give their children and husbands ‘quality time’, the need of minimizing the stress of the everyday life and the recognition of own needs for quality time (ibid.).

The Scandinavian and international contributions briefly outlined here will be used as a reference point and a comparative benchmark in the discussion of the current study’s empirical findings. However, it is important to note that although there are substantial differences in the official purpose for employing au pairs and live-in domestic workers (au pairs are visiting young people for the purpose of cultural exchange, while the live-in domestic workers are employed for the purpose of conducting the domestic work), a lot of similarities in the working conditions and the type of work these two groups carry out are to be found. Both groups live in their employers’ homes and both of them are responsible for the conduct of the domestic and care work. Based on these similarities and supported by the findings of prior studies, parallels between domestic workers and au pairs will be drawn further in this thesis, especially in discussions of the type of work au pairs conduct and the way the employing family responds to the presence of the au pair in their everyday lives.

2.5. Chapter summary

The objective of the current chapter has been to establish a connection to the existing body of knowledge on the au pair institution by presenting the larger socio-political and academic context of which the current study is part of. The chapter introduced the main parties in the au pair industry – national and international regulative bodies, agencies, families and au pairs and their role in the industry. As the comparison between the placement regulations in Norway, Sweden and Denmark revealed, becoming au pair in Norway is still easier than in the other Scandinavian countries. The number of au pairs in Norway is also higher than elsewhere in Scandinavia. The participation in the au pair programme is an expensive

¹⁵ Phizacklea 1998, Anderson 2000, Kofman et al. 2000, Lutz 2002, Cox 2006 (in Lister, Williams, Anttonen, Bussemaker, Gerhard, Heinen, Johansson, Leira, Siim, Tobio, Gavanas 2007: 137).

investment especially for the au pairs and a profitable business for the placement agencies and local industries. At the same time the Norwegian welfare state offers flexible parental leave legislation and a variety of state-subsidised childcare arrangements to families with children. Still, the number of Norwegian families turning to private solutions is growing. To find out more about Norwegian families' reasons for hiring au pairs, I have conducted ten qualitative interviews with parents who have or had au pair. In the next chapter, I elaborate on the current study's research strategy, or the way I proceeded in order to answer the research question(s).

3. METHODS

The objective of the current chapter is to present the methodological choices that have influenced and formed the current study. I first outline some general thoughts leading to the choice of qualitative research interview as my main method of data collection and discuss the epistemological implications of that decision. I then elaborate on the process of access to the field and recruitment of informants and discuss some of the challenges I met during that process. Some of the more formalized takes, such as informed consent and interview guide, as well as the epistemological aspects of the processes of transcription and interpretation are briefly outlined. I then elaborate on my choice of techniques for analysis of the empirical material and at last point to some of the limitations of this research.

3.1. Qualitative research interview - methodological considerations

The objective of this research is to find out why an increasing number of Norwegian families hire au pairs. As Kvale (1996: 1) puts it, “If you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk with them?” Following Kvale’s suggestion, I decided to talk to families who have or had au pairs in order to ‘understand their world’ and their reasons for hiring au pairs. The qualitative research interview with the closeness to the field and the flexibility it provides is suitable for that objective. Closeness to the informants enables the researcher to not only listen to their accounts, but also ask follow-up questions when necessary and in that process confirm or alter the interpretations made during the course of the interview. The qualitative research interview is also a flexible research design in that it enables the informants to put an emphasis on the themes that are important to them, thus letting the research develop in accordance with the field.

The flexibility of letting my informants elaborate on the themes that they considered important had a great impact on the course of the study, as the informants brought to the fore a number of issues I had originally not thought about, but which, as Hammersly and Atkinson (in Silvermann 2001) point out, ‘help realize what the research is really about’. Thus the flexibility and the closeness to the field led to the development and refinement of the study’s research question.

The methodological question of conducting qualitative research interviews, leads to methodical and theoretical issues involving alternative conceptions of social knowledge, meaning, social reality and the truth in social research (Kvale 1996: 10-11). Kvale introduces *the miner* and *the traveller* metaphor as two contrasting approaches to social knowledge. A positivist view of the social knowledge as pure, objective and 'lying out there' is expressed through the miner metaphor. The traveller metaphor, on the other hand, introduces a post-modern constructivist view to social knowledge as co-authored and co-constructed in the process of the traveller's journey through the field and her conversation with the local inhabitants (ibid: 3-4). Following the direction in which my research developed, I became a traveller, who, while wandering through the social landscape of my informants' life-worlds not simply gathered, but also co-authored the stories that the informants told. The methodological decisions made before, during and after my encounter with the field might come to be seen as largely influenced by this post-modern and constructivist approach to the social knowledge.

My encounter with the field is also influenced by Mills' (1967) classical work *The Sociological Imagination*. The epistemology that Mills' text represents, implies alternative notions of objectivity, where social knowledge is not necessary pure, objective and 'given', but rather influenced by the researcher's and interviewees' values, history and experience. Recognizing the importance of the researcher's previous life-experiences, Mills claims that,

To say that you can 'have experience', means for one thing that your past plays into and affects your present, and that it defines your capacity for future experience. As a social scientist you have to control this rather elaborate interplay, to capture what you experience and sort it out; only in this way can you hope to use it and to guide and test your reflection, and in the process shape yourself as an intellectual craftsman (ibid: 196).

This implies that the personal experience of the researcher is integrated into her professional work. Being conscious of and actively using one's own background in the encounter with the field is also what Wadel (1991) calls 'being a sociologist on one's self'. This implies trusting to, but also being sceptical to one's own experiences when using oneself in the research, because as the German sociologist Max Weber has pointed out, all research is contaminated to some extent by the values of the researcher and all the conclusions drawn from a study are grounded in the moral and political beliefs of the researcher (Weber 1946, in Silverman 2001:

54). However, it is only through those values that certain problems get identified and studied in particular ways. In this line, it is clear that my personal background as an au pair in Norway, as well as my personal values and beliefs have had an impact on this study.

3.2. Access to the field and recruitment of informants

My first attempts to gain access to the field started early in 2007. To come into contact with potential informants I deployed different strategies. Having been an au pair myself, I had a large personal network of au pairs and host families that I mobilized for this research. I first contacted the au pairs with whom I had occasional contact at the time I started the project. Most of the au pairs from my network had left Norway after the end of their au pair stay; very few were still in Norway. I contacted the girls by e-mail telling them about my project and asking for assistance to come in contact with their host families. My request was met with different reactions. Some of the girls responded positively and facilitated my contact with their host families, while others were reluctant to even contact their host families. Reflecting on these contradictory reactions, I realized that it was the fact that the girls had to contact their ex-host families what provoked their reactions. From talking to the girls I knew that some of them had a nice time as au pairs in Norway, but most of them did not. Asking them to contact the host families whom they probably left on not so friendly terms, might have revoked some bad memories. Though reluctant to directly contact their host families, the girls were helpful with telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of other au pairs they knew. The girls who had a 'happy ending' with their host families, on the other hand, did not have difficulties contacting them and telling them about my study. I also realized that it was only the 'happy ending' au pairs who were still in Norway. My personal network of au pairs provided the addresses and telephone numbers of eight host families. I randomly picked five of them. All of them accepted the interview invitation.

Being one of those 'happy ending' au pairs, I had no difficulties contacting my host family and asking them for assistance to come in contact with other host families. Positive and enthusiastic about my research, they readily provided me with a couple of addresses and telephone numbers of some of their acquaintances who had au pairs. Only one of the three families I contacted through my host-family's network responded to my request, but that family led me to another one, which in turn, helped me come in contact with yet another.

Through my host-parents' network and through snowball or chain-referral sampling, I eventually recruited three host families who accepted the interview invitation.

I also recruited through a local language school for foreigners, where I knew that au pairs were taking Norwegian classes. I contacted a teacher at that school and asked for permission to present my project, but instead, the teacher took the initiative of communicating my telephone number to some au pairs at the school. The response was weak. Still, the only au pair who contacted me, turned into 'a door opener', who not only helped me come into contact with a couple of host families, but also opened the door for the local Philippine society for me. As a result, I was invited to several informal Sunday meetings where I had the opportunity to introduce myself and my project. The response from these meetings was weak. Later, reflecting on the lack of response, I found myself facing an ethical problem. These meetings served as a preparation for the Sunday church. Although informal and very social in their character, they hold a clear religious tone – the girls read from the Bible and sang psalms, followed by prayers and blessings. After the prayers they prepared some food and left for the church. Although an easy way to meet the Philippine au pair society, the Sunday's meetings appeared to be a highly inappropriate place to talk about my research. This may explain the lack of response from the Philippine au pair society. Still, through that network I received the addresses of two host families, whom I contacted and later interviewed. One of these families led me to yet another, which I also contacted and interviewed.

Finally, I contacted agencies placing au pairs in Norway. Knowing that the agencies might be unwilling to cooperate with me of concern for the privacy of their clients, I turned to them as my last resort. I sent an information letter to several agencies asking them for assistance to come in contact with host families (Appendix I). Only one agency – Atlantis, provided the address of a host family, whom I later contacted and interviewed. I was also prepared to publish announcements at the local and national newspapers in case I had difficulties gaining access to the field. This turned unnecessary as I received the addresses of 16 host families through the four recruitment channels described above. I interviewed twelve of these sixteen families, but as two of the tapes were destroyed by the voice recorder, the current study is based on ten interviews. In the rest of the thesis only the ten interviews will be referred to.¹⁶

¹⁶ After a distressful encounter between me and my voice recorder, I learned a valuable lesson about the importance of not relying solely on technology. This in turn led me to taking frequent back ups of my thesis while I was writing it and thereby became a worthwhile life lesson.

3.3. Conducting the interviews

Having received the e-mail address or telephone number of a host family, I contacted them in order to provide information about the project and invite them to participate in it. All the families were contacted by mail, except for three, whom I contacted by phone. I had prepared an information letter containing the theme and objectives of my research, issues of anonymity, contact information and informed consent (Appendix 1). The three families I contacted by phone received a short version of the information letter by phone. The two of them who accepted the interview-invitation, received a written version of the letter before the interview started. All but one of all the families I contacted responded positively to my interview-request. The only family that declined the invitation was also the only family with a male au pair. That family also declined my suggestion to conduct the interview by phone or by e-mail. The rest of the families responded positively to the interview-request. They found the theme of the research interesting and were eager to contribute to new knowledge about the au pair institution by sharing their experiences with me. All families were informed of the opportunity to withdraw from the project at any time without having to provide an explanation for this. They were also informed that their anonymity will be preserved both during and after the research has been completed. Sending my participation-request by e-mail, rather than contacting all informants personally by phone, might have made it much easier for them to decline the invitation if they did not feel comfortable with the theme. None of the families contacted by e-mail declined the interview-invitation. Still, because of their tight time budgets many of them could hardly find time to meet me. When a family finally found time for an interview, they would prefer to meet me at their homes in the evenings or after the children had gone to bed.

All interviews except for one were conducted at the host families' private homes.¹⁷ The fact that the interviews were conducted at host families' homes has largely influenced the interview material. As the researcher is the one who steers the course of the conversation, the balance of power between the interviewer and the interviewee is uneven and usually in favour of the interviewer (Kvale 1996). Conducting the interviews at the host families' homes, where they were in control of the surroundings, helped minimize this disparity and contributed to a friendly and relaxed interview atmosphere. Conducting the interviews at the informants'

¹⁷ The only interview that was not conducted at host family's home is one of the two interviews that were destroyed by the voice recorder. This interview was conducted at the university where the informant worked. 25

homes was important also for practical reasons – the parents could still keep an eye on the kids while talking to me. In some cases, in order for the parents to liberate some time for the interview, I was involved in the family's daily routines, as for example, helping a child get dressed, or holding a baby. That is why many of the interviews, though not primarily intended, bear signs of participant observation.

I had prepared an interview guide containing the themes that I wanted insight into (Appendix 2). I used an open guide that was meant to guide the conversation, letting the informants talk freely about their everyday lives and their experience with the au pair institution. Being aware that a lot of the interview's visual aspects (the physical setting of the interview site, the informants' bodily and facial expressions) would get lost in the recording, I made notes during the interview. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews were also recorded through what Kvale calls "a reflected use of the researcher's subjectivity and *remembering* (emphasis in original)" (Kvale 1996: 161). After each interview, I used to describe the physical setting of the interview site as well as the social atmosphere of the interview situation. These field notes constitute an important part of my material as they largely compensate for the information 'lost' in the audiotape recording.

3.4. General description of the informants

Having the opportunity to observe the families in the physical settings of their homes, I could draw some inferences about their material status. On the basis of the material standard of their homes and the professions they occupied, most of my informants may be seen as belonging to the middle and upper-middle class, except for the two single-parent families who had somewhat modest material standards. These two families clearly stood out from the rest of my informants. Though one of the single-mothers had recently moved into a new-built house, this family's living standard was remarkably lower and more basic than that of the two-parent families. The other single-mother was occupying a student-lodging at the time the interview was conducted. One of the single mothers was a student; the other had recently started work in the education sector. The rest of the informants may be described as two-parent two-career families. The informants are aged 30-45; all of them have university or post-graduate higher education. In the analytical chapters of the current thesis the families are given random numbers from one to ten (Appendix 3).

My primary idea was to interview both parents (where there were two parents). I assumed that interviewing couples would reveal how they negotiate on the division of domestic labour and care responsibilities, and how they manage to combine work and family life. However, I soon realized that interviewing both parents was an ambitious project, namely because of the difficulties they experienced in combining work and family life. Often, only one of the parents was at home, usually the mother. But even in the cases when both parents were at home, it was the host mother who was my main informant. The host fathers would often complement the answers of their wives rather than taking the word themselves. This is coherent with larger pattern in masculinity studies showing that the fathers often function as assistants to the mothers on domestic chores (Brandth and Kvande 1999, 2003). This pattern, as it will be argued further in this study, is reproduced in fathers' attitude towards the au pairs. Only one of the interviews was conducted solely with the host father. In this particular case, the host mother was at work, while the host father was staying at home with their second child.

3.5. Transcription and interpretation – epistemological aspects

Rather than being a simple clerical task, the transcription of oral conversations into written texts is itself an interpretative process. In fact, the first step in the analysis of the empirical material begins already with its transcription. Transcripts are hence not simply copies of the original reality but interpretative constructions. At the same time, transcriptions are decontextualized and detemporalized versions of the interview situation as most of the visual aspects of the interview situation are lost in the transcription (Kvale 1996). To bring the life back to the decontextualized and detemporalized transcripts, I engaged in a dialogue with the text by deploying the methods of hermeneutics and phenomenology. During the entire research process, the researcher goes back to certain themes and expressions in the material in order to develop and deepen their meaning. She then returns to the more global meaning of the interview but this time in the light of the parts that have just been clarified. In my encounter with the field and the material, I largely followed this hermeneutical framework of analysis, but in addition, I approached the field with a phenomenological awareness for the views and experiences of my interviewees. Approaching the field with a phenomenological perspective implies that the important reality is what the informants perceive it to be (ibid: 47-

52). Hence, the knowledge about the au pair institution presented in this study is not to be seen as simply a mirror of the reality, but rather as an interpretation and negotiation of the meaning my informants attached to their life worlds; this knowledge is co-authored and 'socially co-constructed' (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

3.6. Analysis of the empirical material – methods

There are different methods of organizing interview texts, condensing their meaning into shorter units and sorting out the implicit meaning of what has been said. However, it is the theoretical basis of the investigation that provides the context for the decision of how the interviews will be analysed. Kvale (1996) differentiates between five main approaches of interview analysis: meaning condensation, categorization, structuring of meaning through narratives, meaning interpretation and ad hoc methods for generating meaning. In what follows, I briefly outline these methods and discuss which of them I consider appropriate for the objectives of the current study.

Meaning condensation entails compression of the meaning expressed by the interviewees into shorter formulations of more essential meanings by the identification of natural meaning units. The essential non-redundant themes are tied together into descriptive statements. Meaning categorization implies coding the interview into categories that enable the structuring of the interview. The categories may be developed in advance, taken from the theory or emerge from the material. An interview analysis may also be treated as a form of narration – as a continuation of the story told by the interview subject. Narratives focus on the stories told during the interviews and works out their structures and their plots. Inspired by the hermeneutical philosophy, the method of meaning interpretation goes beyond what is directly said and works out structures and relations of meaning that are not immediately apparent in the text. This requires a certain distance from what is said, which is achieved by methodical or theoretical stance and by a re-contextualization of the statements within a broader frame of reference. Meaning may as well be gathered through an ad hoc approach, which is an eclectic method combining different approaches and techniques to bring meanings out of the empirical material. As already mentioned, it is the theoretical basis of the investigation that provides the context for making decisions about how the interviews are to be analysed. In line with the traveller role that I adopted early in this study, the methods of meaning condensation and

meaning interpretation appeared appropriate for bringing out meanings from the empirical. Travelling through the field, I collected and co-authored, condensed and interpreted the meanings of the stories told by my informants.

3.7. Limitations of the current study

The current study has limitations that are important to take into consideration when analysing and evaluating the findings.

3.7.1. Impression management

The host families' readiness to share their experiences with me made me curious about the reasons for that readiness. Why, despite the controversial media debates on the au pair institution only one of the families refused to participate in my research? Or was it exactly because of the controversial media coverage that these families were eager to get their stories told? Did the families put on a *performance* for me? Reflecting on these questions, I found out that the families might have wanted to present themselves in a 'good light', but also that my personal background as an au pair might have provoked an even stronger wish to appear as 'good families'. This influence is known as *biasing effect* or *researcher reactivity* in the literature.¹⁸ As an attempt to counteract the reactivity effect and in order to build a friendly interview atmosphere, I openly answered all questions that the families had about my background, au pair-experience and my current studies at the university. The very fact that the interviews were conducted at host families' homes where they felt confident and secure, might have diminished the reactivity effect. Still, knowing that I had a first-hand experience from the au pair institution and that I was a young researcher well-equipped with analytical and theoretical tools, the host families might have made an attempt to leave me with a positive impression of themselves (Goffman 1967). Although the way my informants presented themselves to me is important part of the empirical material, it is the meaning of what they said that has been a subject of analysis.

3.7.2. Validity, reliability, generalizability

That the knowledge generated in this research is co-constructed and co-authored has certain implications for the validity, reliability and generalizability of the research findings. While

¹⁸ Babbie 1995, Chadwick et.al., 1984, in Berg 1998; Grønmo 2004: 151; Kvale 1996; Silverman 2001: 58. 29

reliability refers to the consistency of the research findings, validity is associated with the truthworthiness of the generated knowledge (Kvale 1996: 235-7; Silverman 2001: 225, 232). From a positivist, or *miner* perspective, valid knowledge is objective and quantifiable knowledge that allows universal generalizations. From a postmodern, or *traveller* perspective, however, true knowledge is constituted in a dialogue with the field, where the quest for universal knowledge is replaced by an emphasis on the contextuality of knowledge (Kvale 1996: 232; 239). The question of whether the knowledge generated through this research is valid, reliable and generalizable, then, has to be seen as related to the epistemological considerations of conducting qualitative research interview presented earlier in this chapter as well as to the role of the researcher as suggested by Weber and Mills.

3.8. Chapter summary

The aim of this chapter was to introduce some of the leading theoretical thoughts that have inspired the processes of data collection and data analysis. For that objective, I have elaborated on my choice of qualitative research interview as a method of data collection and on the epistemological issues of objectivity of the knowledge related to this choice. I have also discussed the ethical dilemmas I faced while ‘travelling’ through the field. I have further discussed issues of interpretation of the empirical material and have pointed to methods of analysis I consider useful for the analysis of the empirical material. In the next two chapters the main findings of the current research will be presented and an initial attempt will be made to establish a link between empirical findings and theoretical suggestions. This will be made by discussing the results of relevant studies and then identifying recurring patterns in my empirical material.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this and the next chapter I present the current study's empirical findings. Though the processes of reporting and analysing research findings are referred to as two separate processes, it is in practice often difficult to draw a clear dividing line between them. That being said, the report of the findings will be accompanied by initial analytical inputs, which will be further discussed in chapter six. Research findings will be presented through selected quotes from the interviews and an attempt will be made to link empirical findings to theoretical suggestions.¹⁹ The presentation of the findings starts with a description of the host families who participated in my research. Drawing on the interview material, I provide a picture of these families' way of life, occupations and childcare solutions. I then illustrate the ways they learned about the au pair institution and the channels they deployed to recruit their au pairs. The main argument of the current chapter is that the families' decisions to hire au pairs is closely related to their work arrangements and the availability of adequate childcare services as well as to the changing cultural norms of what makes good parenthood and ideal childhood.

4.1. Who are my informants?

In order to find out more about my informants' everyday lives and their motivation for hiring au pairs important sociological variables were considered. The host parents' occupations, number of children, childcare solutions and the family's spare time activities are sociological variables with a major impact on my informants' everyday lives. As mentioned in chapter two, the majority of my informants could be described as two-parent dual-breadwinner families, except for two families who were represented by a single parent (section 3.4). The informants are aged 30-45, all of them are highly-educated (with university or college degree) and many of them occupy prestigious and well-paid positions in the oil-industry, financial sector, research and communication. Others are employed in the service sector, mainly health and education. In the sections that follow I describe how the parents working in different labour market sectors cope with the work-family balance.

¹⁹ The interviews were conducted in Norwegian. Selected quotes are translated into English. All translations are my translations.

4.1.1. *The oil-industry*

For the informants working in the oil-industry, the main difficulties of combining work and family life are related to the way the offshore jobs are organized – an offshore worker is 2 weeks offshore and 4 weeks at home, and to the fact that the top administrative positions in the oil-industry which some of my informants occupy, require a lot of travelling to other cities and abroad (Families 4, 7, 8). As a mother of three tells,

I have a husband who commutes; he goes to work [...] ²⁰ on Monday and comes back on Tuesday. I work full-time in the oil-industry, too. It's a terrible rush – travels, offshore work and meetings in other towns. With a husband who is not at home and if I am to work, I am dependent on having help in the household (Host mother, family 8).

Even when only one of the parents works in the oil-industry, balancing between work and family life becomes an ambitious project for the other parent. A mother of three, whose husband works offshore, quickly discovered the impossibility of managing the everyday life when she decided to quit her eight-to-four job in order to start studying again,

I started a study that required a lot of practice. The practice often started at 7 in the morning and sometimes lasted from 15 to 22 [o'clock] in the evening and the weekends, too. And there was nobody at home (Host mother, family 4).

Because of the inflexible opening hours of the public daycare, this host mother had to find somebody to bring the children to and from kindergarten and to be at home with them while she was at school if she were to continue her studies. Involving the host father in the daily care of the children was not possible because of his off-shore work. As this informant's parents were gainfully employed and could not help with the daily care of their grandchildren, the only option that was flexible enough to enable the mother's full-time studies was the au pair (Host mother, family 4).

Even though hiring au pair to assist them in their daily routines, my informants are strongly in favour of the public childcare. In fact, eight of the ten families in my selection used both au pair and kindergarten. The public childcare in Norway is a high-quality and low-price service that provides children with good opportunities for development and activity in close

²⁰ The square bracket symbol [...] indicates that the original name of a person is omitted in order to preserve the anonymity of the informant. If necessary, a pronoun or other word is inserted in the bracket to preserve the overall meaning of the linguistic unit.

collaboration with children's homes (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2008). As a mother of two shares,

Yes, we have had kindergarten all the time. We did not have au pair to look after the children. But we had au pair to make our everyday life more flexible. (...) ²¹ We don't think that the au pairs could satisfy ... they could not be an alternative to the kindergarten. But they help to bring to and from [the kindergarten], prepare lunch packets so that we get a more relaxed morning and afternoon (...) (Family 7).

Recognizing the pedagogical advantages of the kindergarten and the pressures of the professional life, these parents both of whom work in the oil-industry, hired an au pair to help them reduce the stress of the everyday life, but delegated the care and upbringing of children to the qualified personal in the kindergarten.

4.1.2. The health sector

Also for the parents working in the health sector, the main difficulty of combining paid employment outside the home and childcare originates from the way the work is organized. The work in the health sector often starts very early in the morning, much earlier than the opening hours of the day mothers or the kindergartens. In addition, there are many evening's, night's and weekend's shifts. For one of my informants managing three children and two careers in the health sector was a hard work,

She leaves between quarter past six and half past. And then it's only me who has to prepare children's lunch packets and pack their things and find clothes ... I am a doctor. I work shifts in the evenings and at night, and have a lot of working hours outside the normal working time. It is not possible to reduce my work time at my position (Host father, family 6).

Abrahamsen and Storvik (2002, in Ellingsæter 2004), who have studied parents' experience of squeeze between work and family life, found out that mothers working in the health sector do work longer hours compared to mothers with other professions. Fathers working in the health sector work even longer than their female partners, but are not willing to reduce their working time as this often implies loss of advancement opportunities. This is coherent with what my informant reported. Although having three small children, he would not reduce his

²¹ The oval bracket symbol (...) indicates that part of the utterance is missing. The three points without bracket '...' indicate a natural pause in the interviewee's utterance.

working hours, because this would influence his advancement at work (Host father, family 6). Since his wife was full-time health worker too, they needed a flexible childcare solution, which the public sector could not provide. The au pair on the other hand, could deliver the wanted flexibility. Still, my informants were very satisfied with the pedagogical content of the public daycare,

We are very satisfied with the kindergarten and we think that ... we can't just cut away the whole pedagogical side of the kindergarten. But ... (thinking for a moment) ... we are very satisfied ... we could probably use [the au pair] for more childcare. (...) Maybe if my parents were living nearby, probably they could be a substitution ... but we get so much more with an au pair (...) and if I am to make a dinner, it's in a way too difficult (Host mother, family 6).

Taking over the domestic responsibilities and part of the care responsibilities, the au pair is a great relief for the parents. Only with an au pair who brings the kids to and from the kindergarten and takes care of them while the parents are at work could this couple advance in their careers while at the same time continue being responsible parents. In terms of contributions to the family budget, then, these parents were equal thanks to the au pair who took over the household and part of the care duties

4.1.3. The financial sector

For the parents working in the financial sector, long and unregulated working hours are not unusual. A father with a central position in the financial sector and two small children shares that,

I have had several jobs at the time we used an au pair; these are jobs within finance and management. (...) At certain periods, it has been an extremely high work press and I have worked more than 60 hours [a week]; and it is often difficult to predict when these periods will come (Host father, family 9).

This informant's work requires a lot of flexibility in terms of business travels, availability (he often works in the evenings) and initiative. That it is not possible to predict when the intensive work periods will come, makes his work a very stressful one. The time available for family life is often disturbed by the requirements of the work. The informant has parents who helped a lot with the first child, but not so much with the second. This informant's wife is a

researcher. She works between 55 and 60 hours a week and just like her husband experiences many stressful periods at work. Both of them are highly-educated and interested in career-advancement. In order for them to be able to take use of the opportunities at work, while not ignoring their obligations as parents, they hired an au pair to help them in their daily routines.

The accounts of the parents working in different labour market sectors show that in spite of their intensive work lives and although many of them have young children, they often choose not to reduce their working time, but rather hire an au pair to take over the domestic and part of the care duties. As one of my informants points out,

If we were to reduce our working time, we would loose income (...). It's more profitable to be a full-time worker and to hire an au pair ... and your employer is more satisfied, too (Host father, family 6).

Arlie Hochschild (1997) in her study of the American company called *Amerco* found similar attitudes among *Amerco's* employees. Despite the existing work-family-balance opportunities (flexi-time, work from home, company-driven kindergarten), few employees with care responsibilities took advantage of these opportunities. Instead of reducing their working hours, many small-children parents spent even longer hours at work. The reason for this, according to Hochschild (1997), is that employees who were not physically at work were considered not loyal to the company and hence not worth investing in. The fear of loosing income and career-opportunities might be what keeps my informants at work, too.

4.1.4. Single-parent families

Though reconciling work and family life is not an easy task for the two-career two-parent families, it is even more difficult for the single parents. Two of the families in my study are single mothers – one of them with three children and the other with a new born baby and a daughter at twelve. At the time the interview was conducted (March 2007), one of the single mothers was a full-time student (Family 5) and the other had just completed her higher education and started to work full time (Family 1). The working mother (Family 1) is employed in the educational sector and her workday starts at 7 in the morning. Delivering the children to the kindergarten before work was a hard job both for her and her children,

(...) we tried a kindergarten for a whole year. It was from August till May. It didn't work. I didn't manage to meet the opening hours...I start work at 7 and then I have [her] who has to be delivered to school. I can't put her at school half past six ... and then deliver the other kids to the kindergarten. It's a lot of organization (Family 1).

For the other single mother who was a full-time student at the time the interview was conducted, the everyday life is even harder. Because she could afford neither an au pair nor a day mother, and because the child was too young to be put in kindergarten, she attended lectures with the baby in her arms often spending six or seven hours at school. Having neither partner nor parents living nearby, she had the single responsibility for the care of the newborn. Still, she could sometimes 'borrow' an au pair from a friend of hers. This is how she found out that an au pair might be a solution for her. With the childcare benefits ('barnetrygd') and the transitional benefit she received as a single mother ('overgangsstønad') she hired an au pair. This was the only way for her to finance the private childminder. The other single mother had to persuade the local tax authorities that having an au pair was the only way for her to combine work and family life and that it was much cheaper than paying for two kindergarten places and an after-school care institution. The local authorities agreed to finance the au pair.

4.1.5. Active grandparents

Most of my informants are in a very intensive phase of their careers where flexibility, availability and visibility at work are crucial for their career advancement. At the same time many of them are small-children parents for whom the public childcare does not provide the needed flexibility. A couple of decades ago, the families with younger children would have received help from their parents, but today many grandparents are gainfully employed themselves. According to recent report by Statistics Norway, 65 percent of the elderly people aged 55 to 64 years were active on the labour market in 2004. The percentage is highest for highly-educated women aged 58 and above (SSB 2006/9). Although the percentage of gainfully employed elderly people is already very high, the objective of the Norwegian senior politics is to include even more elderly in the labour market as a solution to the demand for work power in different labour market sectors and as an escape from the so-called elderly wave ('eldrebølgen'), which is expected to hit Norway around 2010 (Bråthen 2007). According to the director of the *Centre for Senior Politics* Åsmund Lunde, the Norwegian

labour market has never been so inclusive for elderly people as it is today (BT, 4.11.2007). These developments might be among the reason why the families in my study did not receive much help from their parents. As one of my informants shares,

There was nobody who could help me to look after... no kindergarten, no day mother would accept children so early or so late in the evenings.

No parents who could help?

No, they work full-time themselves (Host mother, family 4)

Besides being full-time workers, many of the grandparents in my study are busy with a variety of cultural and sport activities. An informant points out that her parents, “[...] are very busy with the kind of activities that the modern grandparents are interested in – they play golf, they learn French, do Pilates, meet friends, so if we want to visit them for a dinner, this has to be planned a week before” (Family 6). The grandparents who helped the young families with childcare did so in the evenings or during the weekends, but could seldom be responsible for the daily care of their grandchildren (Families 6, 9). In addition, a growing number of Norwegian grandparents live outside Norway for the whole or most of the year. It has now become common for Norwegian pensioners to inhabit retirement communities in Spain or other warmer countries as a part of the larger international retirement migration (Hovland and Aagedal 2003; Martinsen 2007). This is a new trend in the Norwegian senior culture that restricts grandparents’ time with their grandchildren.

4.1.6. Spare time activities

What makes the everyday life of my informants even busier are their own and their children’s spare time activities. Both the host parents and the children are actively participating in sport and cultural activities. The children of family 8, for example, train football and handball, despite the fact that both parents are working in the oil-industry and are often absent from home. In family 4, where the father is an offshore worker and the mother a health worker, all three children train a combat sport in addition to sailing.

The whole range of activities the host families are engaged with and the stress of their organization might be described with what Weymann (1989, in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 7) refers to as the “tyranny of possibilities”. At the same time, this ‘tyranny’ seems to

be a prescribed and even desirable part of the Norwegian culture and everyday life. “Sport and physical activity for all” is the overriding vision for the national sport policy (NIF 2004). The national authorities view especially children and youths as important target groups. As the family researcher Ivar Frønes (1989) points out in his book *Den norske barndommen* (The Norwegian childhood), the one aspect of Norwegian childrearing that has remained intact through the years, is the importance of the outdoor life and sport activities.

At the same time, the ideological changes in the content and practice of contemporary parenthood and childhood do not allow for parents to simply send their children out playing – children have to be looked after, supervised and coached. Free, unorganized and ‘empty’ play is not considered stimulating enough. All activities should have educational content that stimulates children’s physical and social development (Frønes 1989: 42-44). That is why Norwegian parents invest a lot of time in the organization of their children’s activities, but also why they favour the public childcare arrangements. All the aspects of the outdoor physical and pedagogical activities for children are administered by the public kindergartens. The au pairs on the other hand, are not always enthusiastic about the cold and wet Norwegian weather and are not always willing to go out with the children in that weather. As one of my informants mentioned, “(...) going out, especially in the winter is a problem, because she finds it awful to go out when it rains or when its minus degrees, but she has to – with the children, right?” (Host mother, family 6).

4.1.7. Outsourcing quarrels

The parents’ experience of squeeze between work and family life is a strong incentive for hiring an au pair. But hiring an au pair is also a way for them to prevent discussions of how to divide the housework and the care for the children. It is now documented that quarrels related to the division of housework may cause divorces and that housecleaning help may prevent such occasions.²² The majority of my female informants expressed an opinion that finding a way to combine paid work and domestic work was their own rather than their husband’s responsibility. The pattern that emerged in my material is that after the parental leave period was over, the mother would prefer to return to work, but in order to do so, she had to find an adequate surrogate first,

²² Haraldsen and Schjerve 2004; Magnus 2003; Egeberg 2003, in Fjell 2006: 77.

I was at home for a year and a half. And then he would be away for three weeks, and I was alone at home, without any help for anything... But the kids could get ill, or...It was when my father came to visit us once, he came from [...] that I started thinking, 'How am I going to manage this when I start work again, if... How shall I make this work?' (Host mother, family 2).

My female interviewees see childcare as their responsibility. Hence, finding an au pair is their responsibility, too. It is also the woman who considered quitting job if unable to find an au pair, "Well, it was me who ... found out that if I am to work then I have to find an au pair. If I can't [find an au pair] then I have to quit my job as long as I have a husband who is not at home" (Host mother, family 8). This host mother is one of the informants who holds a full-time position in the oil-industry and who, as her spacious, newly-built designer-house signals, has a decent income. Still, it was she rather than her husband, who considered quitting job and staying at home with the children in case she did not manage to find an au pair. Anna Rotkirch's (2001) study of Finnish women employing domestic workers and private childminders (au pairs) reveals similar patterns – it is the woman in the family who is responsible for the care and domestic work and hence for the au pair. Ellinor Platzner (2007) who has interviewed six Swedish two-career host families has similar findings – it is always the host mother who takes the initiative of finding and hiring an au pair.

However, although the initiative of finding an au pair is taken by the woman, the decision of hiring one, as my informants claim, is taken by both parents, "Yes, we agreed on this. This was the solution for us" (Host mother, family 4). The financial responsibility for the au pair is shared, too – the pocket money is paid by the parents' joint bank account.

That the decision of hiring au pair and the financial responsibility for the au pair is shared between the host parents is an indication for their financial equality. However, when it comes to the division of the domestic chores, the parents are very traditional – the woman is still responsible for the care and domestic work, only that she is now responsible for its delegation rather than for its delivery.

Only one of the host parents who took the initiative of finding an au pair was male (Family 9). This informant described his job as stressful and very busy and he often worked 60 hours a week. Still, it was only when the family was expecting their second child that he decided to

hire an au pair. The decision was taken not out of necessity for childcare, as their older child was attending a daycare institution at that time, but rather of concern for his pregnant wife, who had a hard time being alone at home while he was working in the evenings,

For me it was important also of social reasons; to have one more person [at home] was important, because I like having people around, but also for her sake, because then I could go to work in the evenings without feeling guilty that she is alone in the house (Host father, family 9).

Platzer (2007) found similar attitudes among the Swedish host families she interviewed. The au pair is often hired to remedy the bad consciousness of professional parents who often work longer hours or travelled a lot. Since leaving children alone at home is today socially and culturally unacceptable, by hiring a surrogate for their own presence at home affluent parents may be seen as answering the cultural norms of responsible parenthood. Finding a good au pair is part of the construction of involved parenthood. The recruitment of au pair is what I will elaborate on in the sections that follow.

4.2. Recruitment incentives and channels

Asking my informants how they learned about the au pair programme one of them put it, “Everybody has heard about au pair” (Host father, family 3). The families in my study had heard about the programme from friends, colleagues, family members and media. Namely because ‘everybody has heard’ different stories about au pairs, having one is often met with scepticism. As mentioned in chapter one, the debates about au pair programme are very controversial (section 1.3). Because of the controversial media coverage, some of my informants felt they had to justify the hiring of an au pair before their friends and family, and to explain what duties the au pair actually has at their homes. That is why the formal approval of family and friends, or the recommendations of colleagues and acquaintances, work as incentives for hiring au pair, “I was inspired by somebody at work who had an au pair and who claimed that the programme was a success. I can’t remember having friends who had au pair, but my boss had” (Host father, family 9).

The older generations, however, represented by my informants’ parents are often sceptical to foreign childminders,

My parents were very sceptical to our decision to hire au pair.

Why is that?

It has to do with ... I think there are two things. The first is 'Why don't we work less so that we can take care of children by ourselves', and the other is ... we don't have a tradition of hiring au pairs in our family (Host father, family 9).

Other grandparents, however, realizing that outsourcing childcare would mean more free time for them too, openly recommend it, "Yes, my mother suggested that we should hire an au pair or at least try" (Host father, family 3). Grandparents' scepticism, as it will be demonstrated in the next chapter, is also related to letting a foreign woman conduct the traditional care and housework. Yet, although sceptical to delegating traditional work to younger foreign women, the grandparents are seldom available for the daily care of their grandchildren.

My informants deployed different recruitment channels. Five of the ten families I interviewed used a placement agency at least the first time they hired an au pair. The other five families recruited through internet, newspaper articles, their own networks or the au pair's network. The families who used placement agency did so because they needed help with the formalities around the recruitment process and because they believed that the agency could help them find the best qualified candidates. Many agencies guarantee a new au pair if the family is not satisfied with the one they have chosen. This is the so-called 'satisfaction-guarantee', which makes the use of an agency a safe recruitment-method for the host families. Au pairs placed through an agency have the formal right to being re-placed if unhappy with the family, but the agencies usually do not give guarantee for this. One of my informants told about an au pair who was thrown out of the house and whom the responsible agency could not place in another family (Family 4).

Some of my informants chose not to use placement agency because of the fees that agencies require for their services (Families 1, 2, 3, 9).²³ The agencies' fees have been growing together with the growing popularity of the au pair institution and are now close to unaffordable for many families who want to hire au pair. One of my informants shares that,

²³ The placement agencies' fees vary largely. Atlantis, for example, charges the host family with 5900 NOK for the first placement and 5400 NOK for the second (Atlantis 2008). Eastern Au Pair charges the family with 3500 NOK and Energy Au Pair with 4000 NOK (Eastern Au Pair 2008, Energy Au Pair 2008).

When I started with an au pair, I paid 2500 NOK to the agency ... and now it costs between 12 500 and 15 000 NOK. That's why we cut off the agency. And when you have had au pair once, you know what to look after (Family 1).

This informant, who is one of the two single mothers in my study, points out that the agencies exclude many potentially good host families with their high placement fees and that, "They give the au pairs to the rich people" (Family 1). Families who are unwilling or unable to pay for the agencies' services recruit directly from the au pair's network, "we contacted her through a friend of hers who was here in Norway" (Family 4). Friends, sisters and cousins of the current au pair often take over when the current au pair's mandate is over, "The first [au pair] worked for friends of ours, but they didn't need her anymore, so we took over – second-hand (laughing). And then we used a friend of hers to find for us another au pair..." (Host father, family 9). According to migration researchers, most migration takes place through personal contacts with the networks of the migrants (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002). Recruiting from the au pairs' networks, the host families are establishing transnational social relations with distant cultures, but also participating in a global process of care and brain-drain.²⁴ The way the au pair is referred to by this informant – as a 'second-hand' commodity that may be purchased on the market, reveals also the objective with establishing these transnational relations – both new and used 'commodities' are delivered through the au pairs' own networks.

Having been host parents once, some of my informants felt they could manage the job by themselves. Finding an au pair is not difficult because of the big supply of young people aspiring for au pair jobs. As a host father put it, "There is a jungle out there" (Family 3). Finding the 'right' au pair, however, might be a difficult task. Still, my interviewees seem happy with the work they have done, "(...) well, we could actually choose between recruiting privately or using an agency, but we were so satisfied with those whom we managed to find by ourselves that we believed we could do a better job" (Host father, family 9). This family believed that steering the recruitment process by themselves results in 'better quality au pairing'. The notion of 'quality' that was mentioned by my informants in relation to their requirements to the au pair and to the way the 'work is done' is what I am going to discuss in the rest of this chapter.

²⁴ The issue of care and brain drain will be discussed in chapter six.

4.3. What makes ‘a quality’ au pair?

4.3.1. Background and motivation

The host families in my study have au pairs from Russia, Belarus, Estonia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, the Philippines, Thailand, Peru and Germany. Only one family had experience with Norwegian childminders, the so-called ‘praktikant’, but the ‘praktikant’ was later substituted with an au pair. None of the host families had a Scandinavian au pair. While for some of my informants the au pair’s country of origin is not of importance when choosing the au pair, for others it is a decisive factor. Many of the host families in my study have au pairs from the post-communist countries in Eastern Europe. They believe that because of the lower wage level in Eastern Europe, candidates from the prior communist countries have stronger motivation for taking au pair jobs and hence deliver ‘a better quality’ au pairing,

Our considerations were related to the fact that the wage level is different and that it is easier to find someone who is more ... stable, maybe. But it also possible that ... I personally was surprised by Norwegian girls who choose to be au pairs instead of going to school or starting at work a year earlier. Maybe that is the reason why I was a little sceptical to Western girls who took up au pair jobs; it is more natural for Eastern girls to come in contact with the Western culture. (...) That is why I thought that there will be more quality and more motivation and more ... compared to girls from Germany (Host father, Family 9).

In addition, some of my informants have heard positive stories about au pairs from the post-communist countries, “(...) Poland, Estonia and Lithuania had a good reputation of being au pairs” (Host mother, family 10). Girls from Eastern Europe are also known for their education ambitions. Because of that motivation, they are believed to be obedient, flexible and ready to do anything to please their host families. However, not all au pairs from the post-communist countries have a good reputation. A host mother was warned by a placement agency against hiring girls from Ukraine and Belarus as the girls from these countries often demonstrated poor morals (Family 9). This is coherent with the classification of au pair nationalities I found on the website of an agency placing au pairs in Norway (section 2.2.2), but also with what the British researcher Bridget Anderson points out, namely that certain nationalities are believed to be more suitable for care and domestic work than others (Anderson 2000, 2002).

Some families made a clear connection between the au pairs' country of origin and their motivation for taking up the au pair jobs. A host mother had occasionally heard some Thai au pairs talking about their plans of finding Norwegian husbands (Family 1). Another host mother even experienced her au pair quitting job in order to marry a Norwegian guy,

Well, may be she had other reasons for being here, other plans. She wasn't here to be with our family. She was here to ... find a husband (laughing) (Host mother, family 2).

Though only two of the host families I interviewed had Filipina au pairs, several families shared an opinion that Filipinas do au pairing to sustain their families,

They travel abroad to work and earn money. It is completely natural. If one has a chance to do so, they want to earn some money for a better life (Host mother, family 5).

It comes clearly from the interviews that my informants are aware of the fact that it is the difficult economic situation of the au pairs what motivates them to take au pair jobs. Some of the families are even convinced that leaving one's country and taking up an au pair job is a well-considered life changing decision,

Honestly speaking, going around and working in a house is not the most exciting job for an educated person, for someone who is a teacher, or who has a profession and a university degree. But it's actually ... it is a way to move on. And I think it is very positive. (...) They are here in these two years to continue their studies not to live with a family. It is just a phase to go through and they have to accomplish it as well as possible, so that it is at least two nice years. But we actually know that for those who had lived with us, this is not what they wanted to do. It's just a way to learn the language, to get to know the society and do something else after that (Host father, family 7).

This quotation illustrates that the families choosing to hire an au pair are often well aware of the au pairs' motivation for taking up au pair job and. Having the right motivation for the au pair job, the au pairs are also going to deliver 'quality au pairing'.

4.3.2. Native culture

Not only the motivation for taking up an au pair job, but also the au pair's personal qualities and ability to provide childcare are associated with the au pair's country of origin. One of my informants was impressed by the natural way a Kenyan au pair candidate communicated with

her children despite the obvious language barrier, “There, they have it built in their bodies. The most natural thing for them is to take care of others” (Family 1). Another host mother observed that the au pair had established a very good contact with the baby and interpreted this as a result of the tradition of childcare they had at the Philippines (Family 5). Women outside Europe are, according to another family, socialized in a tradition with a stronger focus on childcare than Western women, which makes them well-equipped for the au pair work (Family 6). The same informant points out that they needed “somebody to create the relaxed atmosphere at home which we ourselves didn’t manage to create” (Host father, family 6). Despite emphasizing the importance of the native culture and the in-built care qualities, only two of the families delegated the childcare solely to the au pair. One of them is the single mother whose baby was too young to be placed in public daycare institution (Family 5) and the other is a family whose boy had not received kindergarten place as of his mother return to work (Family 3). All the other families in my study used both public and private childcare.

Not all ‘native cultures’ are considered equally suited for care work. Neither the motivation nor the personal qualities of the Norwegian childminders suited the needs and requirements of the families in my study. As mentioned earlier, the Norwegian praktikants are young people in their eighteens or nineteen’s who have just completed secondary school. Some of them are tired of school and need time off; others want to try something new before going to university or taking up a job. This implies that they have very different motivation for taking up a childminder job than the foreign childminders. The different motivation results in a different attitude towards the work tasks. As one of my informants points out, “They were not motivated. It was completely clear that they only wanted a year off” (Host mother, family 10). Being themselves true followers to the normative system Weber called “the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism” (1904/05, 1958, in Ritzer 2003: 144-147), some of my informants expect their au pairs to behave as economic men and be “industrious”, “frugal” and “punctual” in their attitude towards the au pair duties, while at the same time staying true to their native cultures. Unlike the foreign childminders, many of whom have adopted “that particular ethos” and have therefore a very materialist orientation towards the au pair job, the Norwegian praktikants are often driven by hedonistic needs to relax, enjoy and consume what they have earned through the au pair job (Hemsing 2003).

The results from the research project *Norway 2030* showed that Norwegian and Swedish youth are growing increasingly alike in their values and priorities (DB, 12.6.2005). This may explain why none of my informants had a Scandinavian au pair. Having another Scandinavian teenager at home who watches TV and eats pop-corn does not solve the problem with childcare and housework. Still, according to an agency specialized in placing Swedish au pairs in Norway, it is exactly the cultural similarities between Norway and Sweden why Norwegian families hire Swedish au pairs (Praktikantformidlingen 2007). The Swedish girls are much easier to integrate into Norwegian families. In addition, they don't need Norwegian language course as the communication between Swedes and Norwegians is largely unproblematic. The foreign au pairs, on the other hand, often come from very different cultures and need therefore time to adapt and to understand the Norwegian way of thinking. The foreign au pairs need also a language course that the family is now obliged to finance (UDI 2007b).

4.3.3. Proper age, right embodiment, higher education

Irrespective of the country of origin, the families in my study prefer au pairs who are healthy, mature and responsible. Most of the families want an au pair who is above 20 years, as the teenagers are considered immature, impulsive, too emotional and unable to see what needs to be done at home, "The first au pair we had ... we chose her because she was ... nearly an adult", says a host mother who had a 29-year old au pair (Family 2). Some of the families who had both younger and more mature au pairs, report that the teenage au pairs are more often home-sick than those in their late twenties and that the teenagers often have 'improper male friends', "It was often foreigners who took contact with them in the town. And she had several boyfriends ... they were from Jordan, Palestine and Iran ... (laughing) (Host mother, family 10). Another host mother hosting a teenage au pair shares that, "We had some problems at the end. Well, I don't know what it really was about, but I think she was homesick" (Host mother, family 4). According to this informant, it was the young age and the immaturity of the au pair that was the reason for their conflicts.

Those of my informants who have late-twenties au pairs often describe the au pairs as 'another adult at home', 'a bigger sister' or a 'mommy' (Families 2, 4, 6, 7). The late-twenties au pairs are considered responsible, reliable, mature and most importantly able to see 'what

needs to be done', "I think there was more maturity. She sees [things] and she is very orderly girl; she sees what is to be done and at the same time she is wonderful with the girls", comments a host mother on the performance of her 29-years old au pair (Family 4). Privileging 'maturity' and promoting the idea that the later-twenties' au pairs have essential abilities to 'see what needs to be done', the families in my study do in fact perceive of these qualities as primordial rather than as acquired through education and life experience. This essentialisation of maturity devaluates the competence that 'maturity' implies.

In addition to age, the au pair's embodiment and health condition are important to the receiving family. While some of my informants mention that the au pair should have a good health (Families 6, 7), others recruit directly from sport clubs where they know they will find healthy and physically fit girls, "Well, the most important are her personal qualities, but in addition to maturity, likeness for children and other [qualities], it is an advantage if she is interested in sport (Family 9). Rosie Cox (2007) in her research on British host families has found that employers do not want au pairs who are unfit and unhealthy, but neither do they want girls who are too 'healthy' and too pretty. As in all cultures much of the choreography of authority is expressed through the body, the au pairs are expected to fit a narrowly defined type of attractiveness – they should be fit enough to do the (physically demanding) au pair job, but they should not to be overtly physically attractive (Connerton 1989, in Hantzaroula 2004: 386; Cox 2007). A very tall or very beautiful au pair might have more authority over the children than their biological mother. Being a powerful purveyor of messages, the shape and appearance of the au pair's body is of great importance for the employing family. So does the au pair's education.

Many of my informants prefer au pairs with higher education. The highly-educated au pairs are considered more intelligent, more adaptable and better equipped to quickly acquire new languages. They are also believed to be good at establishing their own social networks outside the host-family's home, which the host families see as important prerequisite for the au pair's and the family's well-being (Families 1, 2, 6, 7). As a host mother shares, "It's easier for them to find friends and to have some interests outside the house and I think it is important that they have their own network while being here. And they get bigger advantage of the language course ..." (Family 7). The Swedish host families in Platzer's study preferred highly-educated au pairs too, claiming that they need somebody like them, somebody who understands their

reasoning and way of thinking (Platzer 2007). At the same time, the idea of hosting educated young persons who are simply ‘on cultural exchange’ and who participate in the family life ‘on equal terms’ makes it easier to accept the kind of help the au pairs provide – childcare and housework. The use of au pair is unproblematic when the purpose for the stay is educational. However, by delegating care and domestic work to educated women, Norwegian families participate in a global process of housewifisation of educated women, which, as it will be argued in chapter six, results in waste of qualified work force.

4.3.4. Flexibility and initiative

Talking about the requirements towards the au pairs, the families in my study often mentioned flexibility and initiative as two much desired qualities. Flexibility is mentioned in relation to the work hours and more particularly to the readiness to work outside the usual working time, “They don’t live at a hotel when they are finished for the day” (Family 1), while initiative is associated with the ability to do things without being explicitly asked to and “without being told what to do every single time” (Host mother, family 2). Although the official discourse defines the au pairs as ‘guests’ of a host family, the host families do not want a guest who checks in the ‘hotel’ in the morning and checks out when the workday is over. The families want somebody who is available even after the workday is over. A host mother was impressed by her au pair, who instead of leaving the house when friends dropped for a visit (as other au pairs did), asked whether she could be of some help. The au pair was described as possessing “a fantastic tact and tone” (Family 1). Another host mother, however, wanted her au pair to be more flexible and to show more initiative,

It is very important that when you have many children [around] you can see that there may be someone who needs help to lace up their shoes and that you are not just saying, ‘Well, I’m done for today, I don’t want to lace up shoes’ (...). I think it is important that you are flexible when you are at work (Family 2).

In line with the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, the au pairs are required to be industrious, sober and devoted to their work even outside the regular working hours. As this work ethic might be difficult to follow especially for the younger au pairs, the requirements for flexibility and initiative might come to be seen as closely related to ‘maturity’ discussed in the previous section. And just like ‘maturity’ is essentialised and devaluated, the

organizational and household competence associated with the notions of flexibility and initiative, are defined as primordial and hence devaluated, too.

To briefly sum up, the desired qualities for an au pair are flexibility, responsibility, educatedness and maturity. However, the quality that stood out as most important for my informants is that the au pair is female.

4.4. Gender as qualification

Although I had not originally planned asking the host families whether they had considered hiring a male au pair, this theme often came up in conversations about the au pair's desired qualities. Having noticed that the question of male au pairs is important to my informants, I started explicitly asking them whether they would hire a male au pair. What I found out is that my informants brought this issue to the fore not because they were interested in having a male au pair, but because they needed to justify why they did not want to have one.

4.4.1. Sexual predators or fear of the patriarchal masculinity?

One of the reasons for not hiring male au pairs was families' scepticism towards male candidates' motivation for taking up au pair jobs. The male candidates are suspected of using the programme as a way to receive a legal admission to the country for so to find "something else",

It's just...to me it appeared as they wanted to come into the country and to find another job, to find something else. It was just a stepping stone, just a way to explore the opportunities. And I did not want to support this (Host father, family 7).

Although my informants are aware that au pairing is 'a stepping stone' for the female au pairs, too, they are not willing to support the potential migration of the male au pairs. Up until 1993 it was illegal for men to become au pairs in the UK (Griffith and Legg 1997). Men may now apply for au pair positions and as presented in chapter two (section 2.2.2), the number of male applicants is constantly growing. Some of the male au pair candidates are students who are eager to explore the world, while others are family fathers who openly declare that they want the au pair job to support their families. The agencies do not directly refuse to place male candidates, but they warn potential host families that the male au pairs seldom stay for the

whole period of their contract (Adequate Assistance 2007). Hence, male candidates are met with mistrust. In addition, male au pairs are often seen as potentially dangerous for young children,

Well, no ... (thinking for a while), I think it might be some kind of conservatism in this. But we had small children and ... (hesitating for a while) one hears things. There have been some episodes ... so I didn't want to take that choice ... because of this (Host father, family 7).

What my informant reports for is coherent with recent media debates focusing on an occasion when a male au pair was accused of having abused the host family's children (Aftenposten, 26.11.2007). Related to the image of the male au pair as a potential abuser is also the next explanation for not hiring male au pairs, which one of my informants formulated as 'what are people going to say?' and 'people talk anyway' (Family 1). What people might come to say is especially problematic for the single mothers and for those host mothers whose husbands are not at home during the week (Families 1, 5, 8). As one of the single mothers shares, "It might have functioned for us, but the whole society around us would not have accepted it and there would be a lot of comments ..." (Family 1). The single mothers are concerned for the security of their children, but also for the way people might react knowing that a single woman is hosting a young male at her home. The host mothers whose husbands are not at home during the week are unwilling to hire male au pairs claiming that it is improper having another male at home while the husband is away,

Could you consider a male au pair?

No. *Why not?*

No, I don't think..., I don't know. I don't think I want to have [male au pair]. I wouldn't consider one. (...) It wouldn't be right for me since my husband is not here, so to say (laughing) (Host mother, family 8)

Though not explicitly mentioned, it is the fear of sexual abuse that both the single mothers and those with absent husbands are talking about. By not hiring a male au pair, these mothers are signalling their conformity with the local gender ideology, but also protecting their sexual purity. Keeping the male au pairs away from their private homes, the host mothers do in fact keep away people's comments on their sexuality just like the hijab keeps the Muslim woman's body away from the male gaze. To protect the purity of the conjugal relationship, my female informants even take the decision of not hiring male au pair without

having discussed this with their husbands, “I actually think that my husband wouldn’t really want to choose a male [au pair]” (Host mother, family 7). That is how the male au pairs are automatically disqualified from the au pair job.

4.4.2. Natural gender roles?

Being conservative and practicing traditional gender roles are among the ‘excuses’ for not considering male au pair. Asking my informants what that conservatism implies, I received a standard answer, “In my opinion men are more oriented towards repairing [things] and earning money, while women are more oriented towards household and children” (Host father, family 9). Women are believed to be biologically better caregivers than men, “girls are more interested in children and it’s natural for them” (Host father, family 9). Men, on the other hand, are seen as unable to provide good enough caring, because they lack ‘these natural abilities’. This was especially the case when the au pair was supposed to care for very young children. While the female au pairs were believed to have an in-built ability to provide tender, close and personal type of care, the male au pairs were seen as unable to that. Still, male assistants in the public kindergartens are generally accepted and highly favoured by many of my informants. A host father shares that, “The men in the kindergarten have actually better contact with our boys than the women” (Family 9), while a host mother openly declares her preferences for male kindergarten assistants,

I am very much for male assistants in the kindergartens. And I want him to attend a kindergarten with male [assistants].

Why do you want that?

Well, because I think that children have often much more fun with men than with women (laughing); because they play and guide (Host mother, family 3).

Parents’ positive attitudes towards male kindergarten assistants might be an intended consequence of the national politics for enhancing gender equality in kindergartens through increasing the percentage of male employees in the kindergartens (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2007a). It is a political aim that the equality of genders is reflected in the education provided by the kindergartens so that kindergartens bring up children who are able to relate to and create an equal society. For that objective, the kindergarten staff must represent the ‘right’ role models. Host parents’ scepticism to foreign male au pairs might be an expression of their

concern with the gender roles the male au pairs might be communicating to Norwegian children. In line with the national objectives of achieving greater gender equality in the kindergartens and in society at large, Norwegian families prefer that their children are tended by male assistants whose pedagogical philosophy centres on equality, democracy and solidarity, rather than by foreign male au pairs socialised in the tradition of male dominance and patriarchy. Drawing on the traditional colonial distinctions between 'us' and 'the other', Norwegian families define the gender roles practiced by foreign male au pair as culturally inferior and as socially and pedagogically improper for the socialisation and upbringing of the local children. In addition, the intimate atmosphere of the private home makes it difficult to control how male au pairs interact with the host family's children. The male kindergarten assistants, on the other hand, being in the open public space of the kindergarten and under the constant supervision of their female colleagues are considered harmless.

In the few cases where the option of inviting a male au pair was existent, the duties that my informants could consider ascribing to the male au pair were playing football with the kids and driving them to training (Family 2). This is coherent with what Griffith and Legg (1997: 13) have noticed, "Persistent sexism means that any men who do manage to find a family willing to take them on, will probably find that they are not expected to do those domestic chores which their female counterparts would unthinkingly be given. Instead they will be sent to the local park with the kids and a football". Sending the male au pair to play out with the kids, the families are in fact sending him in the open public space, so that he can be under the control of the public eye. In fact, being employers for men and instructing men in household chores, is something my informants find unnatural, "I think, may be, it's even more difficult being employer for typical household chores for a man and instruct him in different things, as for example how to use that thing ..., and when it comes to childcare and the usual housework (...)" (Host father, family 6). The discomfort my informants feel in instructing men in household chores is also a signal for their acceptance of the traditional division of labour.

4.5. Chapter summary

Small-children families in different sectors of the knowledge-intensive new economy are experiencing squeeze between the requirements of work and the family life. The need of flexibility and availability at work, combined with changing cultural norms of what makes

good parenthood and stimulating childhood are exerting pressure on working parents either they are dual-earners or single families. High-quality affordable public childcare largely enables working parents and especially the mothers to combine paid employment outside the home with care for children. However, with its restricted opening hours, the public childcare is not always the best solution for career-oriented parents. Recognizing the pedagogical advantages of the public care, Norwegian families prefer that their children attend public kindergartens. Bringing the children to and from kindergarten is often problematic, especially for parents with unregulated working hours. It is here that hiring an au pair to help the family in its daily routines appears a perfect solution for families who can afford having one.

With an a pair at home, the parents can continue pursuing their careers and at the same time maintain the image of good parents who provide ‘quality’ care for their children even while at work. This quality originates from the au pair’s native culture, background and motivation, but also from the au pair’s gender. The ‘right’ au pair is a female au pair. For the single mothers, too, hiring an au pair represents a good opportunity to manage the everyday life at the lack of flexible enough public daycare or partners to help them around. As the children are cared for in the public kindergartens, the au pair spends most of her time doing housework thus helping the employing family to outsource housework-related discussions. Even though financially equal Norwegian parents remain gender conservative when it comes to redistribution of domestic work. In the next chapter, I illustrate what the normal workday of the au pair is like and how the host family’s members respond to the au pair.

5. THE WORK TASKS OF A ‘FAMILY MEMBER’

In this chapter I continue the presentation and analysis of the research findings. As in the previous chapter, I will illustrate my findings with quotations from the interviews and discuss these in light of findings from prior studies. In the current chapter, I describe what the normal day of my informants’ au pairs is like, how the host family members perceive of the au pair and to what extent the au pairs and the host families experience cultural exchange. In the last part of the chapter, the host families’ comments on the existing au pair regulations are presented as a background for a discussion on how they view the au pair institution.

5.1. Work tasks – enthusiasm, conflicts and negotiations

According to the formal regulations of the au pair programme the main duties of an au pair are restricted to childcare and light housework. The au pair should not be engaged in childcare and housework for more than 5 hours a day 6 days a week so that the weekly work time does not exceed 30 hours a week (section 2.1.1). According to the regulations, the au pair is supposed to only help with childcare and housework and not to be responsible for the daily care of the children or for the daily running of the household. Although all of my informants reported being aware of these restrictions, the conduct and amount of the housework was often a reason for conflicts and negotiations. Yet, for some of my informants’ au pairs the conduct of the housework was a reason for enthusiasm.

5.1.1. Enthusiasm

The work day of my informants’ au pairs starts between 6.30 and 7 in the morning. Often, at least one of the parents has left the house at that time. The au pair helps the children to get dressed and eat breakfast, prepares their lunch packets, cleans up after breakfast and brings the children to the kindergarten. Back at home, there is housework waiting to be done. Washing clothes, vacuum cleaning, dusting, emptying the dishwasher and the washing machine is what most of the au pairs do before bringing the kids home from the kindergarten. Then the au pair prepares food for the children, cooks dinner for the family and plays with the kids waiting for the parents to come home from work. Other domestic duties like washing floors

and bathrooms are usually done only certain weekdays. If the children are not attending a daycare institution, or if attending only certain days of the week, the au pair spends most of the day with the kids. After the parents have come home and the family has eaten dinner, the au pair helps cleaning up the dinner table and either leaves the house or spends the rest of the evening in her room. This is how one of my informants described the usual working day her au pair,

She takes care of the kids in the morning, makes breakfast for them, delivers them in the children's park and is finished with this at 10 o'clock. Then she does some housework, [washing] clothes and cleaning. Yes, she tidies up the house every day. Then she brings [her] from the park at 3 o'clock and makes dinner. She usually makes dinner every day. And then she is finished when we have eaten dinner at 4 or 5 o'clock.

Is she supposed to clean the whole house?

Yes, but she does it without any problem. She is ok with this (Host mother, family 8).

As this quotation indicates, for some au pairs the housework routines are not a question of discussion. Some au pairs do even more than they are expected to, "I soon noticed that she did much more than I originally expected, so she was in a way ... the kitchen was always tidy when I came home, the living-room was always cleaned up, the clothes were folded (...)" (Host mother, family 3). Another host mother even had to restrain her au pair from doing too much housework,

It was the intention that she wouldn't wash, neither the bathrooms nor the floors, because it is ... I define this as a heavy housework (laughing), because we hate doing it, so I thought that she didn't need to do that. But she did it anyway.

Did she take everything?

She took everything. I came home and I was, [...] what have you done? (laughing). It is fantastic but ... "No, no, I want, I want", she answers. "You are so kind to me, that is why I want to do it" (Family 4).

Later in the interview this host mother mentioned that the au pair demonstrated deep gratitude towards the family without any obvious reason for that. Still, the host mother assumed that this had to do with the au pair's difficult economic situation at home. The au pairs are officially placed within a family for the purpose of cultural exchange. They are not supposed to have the status of domestic workers. Yet, both au pairs and domestic workers are dependent on the employing family for a 'successful' stay. If not satisfied with the au pair, the receiving family may choose to send her back. For au pairs from poorer countries who have invested a

considerable amount of money into the au pair stay, being sent back home is a serious financial loss (section 2.2.1). Referring to her research on the migrant Filipina domestic workers in Italy and USA, Parreñas (2001) claims that migrant workers' legal dependency on their employers is what prompts these workers' loyalty, servitude and obedience. This might be the case for the au pairs, too.

Deploying Hochschild's (1983) notion of 'emotional labour', Parreñas (2001) argues that domestic work often requires the emotional labour of smiling. Domestic workers are expected to disregard their own feelings and carry an attitude that reflects the pleasant environment of the home. Bearing a smiling mask helps them play 'satisfaction' with the work. The au pairs' expression of enthusiasm with the domestic work, then, might be a performance they put on for the receiving family in order to please them. However, this play may also be interpreted as a manifestation of the employer's authority over the domestic worker, as the employer's control penetrates into the bodily functions of the worker, including her patterns of speech, gestures and spatial movements (Rollins 1985, in Parreñas 2001).

5.1.2. Conflicts and negotiations

Not all of my informants' au pairs are so enthusiastic with the housework. Often, the host family has to negotiate the work tasks with the au pair, "So we had a little ... yes, we had a lot of discussions, because we considered the quality very unsatisfactory. And then she said it wasn't her primary duty to do so much housework" (Host mother, family 6). This host family knew that the au pair could only be ascribed 'light housework', but they were unsure of what 'light housework' implied. They were further confused by the media debates criticizing the amount of housework au pairs in Norway were said to be doing. As a result the family decided to minimize the au pair's household duties and do part of the housework by themselves, but they wanted her to compensate this by delivering 'a better quality' housework,

It's a lot of work (laughing). This is something we notice now. It's difficult to do all that by ourselves, but ... But then we said 'we expect you to deliver better quality than it had been for a period' (Host mother, family 6).

'A better quality' in this particular case refers to the way the cleaning is done,

We had told her that she must wash the bathroom floor with ... When you wash the bathroom floor you have to use a cloth and stand on all four and wash everything. But she just took the mop and did it very quickly and there was a lot of [dirt] left. And we told her that we don't mop the bathroom floor, but she did it again ... But she is good with the kids, she is very good with the kids. And the washing ... she is not a maid (Host mother, family 6).

Though recognizing the fact that the au pair is not a maid, this host mother complains about the quality of the cleaning. The discussions of how the washing is to be done, signals that the au pair is in fact expected to behave like a maid. That the au pair and the host family have different visions of what 'light housework' is might have to do with the fact that neither the Council of Europe nor the International Au Pair Association has any clear definition of what light housework implies. As demonstrated in the previous section, one of my informants defined washing floors and bathrooms as a heavy work (Family 4), while for the family quoted above, the same duties are defined as light housework. To avoid conflicts and misunderstandings, some of my informants chose to 'help' the au pair with her housework,

We do things together, just like an old married couple (laughing). We do things in a team, right. She stands and folds clothes and I iron them, or vice versa (Family 1).

This is an interesting change of roles, having in mind that according to the Council of Europe's regulations, it is the au pair who is helping the host family with the housework not vice versa. In this particular case, however, the host family seems to have alienated itself from its own housework offering the worker a help with *her duties* as a demonstration of charity and concern. In fact, this division of labour is nothing new in the history of the Norwegian housemaids and may even be seen as a part of what constitutes the *Nordic equality ideology*. As the history Professor Sølvi Sogner and the ethnologist Kari Telste point out, up until the 1900's it was socially accepted that the mistresses ('matmora') worked together with the housemaids (Sogner and Telste 2005). Having a maid and working as a maid was socially accepted, too. Being a maid was a kind of education – a preparation for a future life as a competent housewife. The mistress functioned as respected teacher and a role model. With the growth of the middle class this relation changed. For the middleclass women having a maid became a status symbol. The new relationship between the mistress and the maid turned into one of subordination as the mistress only supervised and instructed the maid, who in turn,

carried out all the domestic work. Helping the au pair with her duties may be seen as a reconstruction of the old order described by Sogner and Telste (2005). However, bearing in mind that the au pair is the one supposed to help her employer with the housework, what my informant describes might rather be interpreted as a manifestation of the employer's power over the worker. Still, I believe that the intentions of the host mother when helping her au pair managing the housework were nothing else but good.

5.2. The au pair –‘like one of the family’

Talking about the au pair's household duties, my informants often emphasized that their au pairs are not maids. Asking them whether they considered the au pairs ‘family members’ revealed a lot of controversial attitudes to the expectation that the au pair should be seen a family member. Entering somebody's home is always an intimate thing. In what follows, I would like to illustrate how the host families and the au pairs negotiated that intimacy.

5.2.1. Spatial regulation of intimacy

All of the families in my study knew that ‘au pair’ is a cultural exchange that should give young people an opportunity to learn language and culture by participating in their everyday lives and that these young people should be treated as family members. However, to what extent these formal requirements could be put in practice was another question. While some of the host families claim viewing their au pairs as family members “Yes, it's like having another daughter at home” (Family 1), other informants are convinced that,

I don't think they can ever be a part of the family, because you are kind of in a wrong age and you are in a way, an adult. So you can never be a part of the family, but you can be a part of the big family. But we have never considered them ... they have never been, we have never thought of them as of housemaids or something else. No. It is simply a person who lives in the house and whom we cooperate with, who has an independent life here in Norway (Host mother, family 7).

Focusing on cooperation and the independence, this informant recalls the local equality ideals, according to which family members are equal. At the same time, by placing the au pair in the ‘big family’ rather than in the small nuclear family, this informant defines the au pair as a *not family member*. According to the social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad (1981), the family

is defined by the biological bonds between its members, while the household includes all the persons occupying the same dwelling – parents, children, domestic workers. Bakan and Stasiulis (1997), in their work on the foreign domestic workers in Canada also mention the importance to conceptually distinguish between family and household in order to better understand the unequal relations between employers and live-in domestic workers. It is not the need of extending the nuclear family why many Norwegian families invite au pairs to their homes, but rather the need for someone to help them in their everyday routines. Hence, it is the household where the au pair belongs to, not the family.

Yet, according to the Council of Europe's (1969) formal regulations, the au pair is supposed to be treated 'like one of the family' and to be included in the receiving family's day-to-day activities. This implies not only delegation of domestic and care responsibilities, but also inclusion in other everyday practices such as watching TV with the family, doing things together at the weekends, attending family gatherings etc. My informants report that very few au pairs would prefer to sit on the sofa and watch TV with the rest of the family after their work time is over. Most of them would usually leave the house or spend the evening in their rooms. According to the domestic work researcher Pothiti Hantzaroula, worker's refraining from spending time with the employers is as a manifestation of "knowing her place in the world" (2004: 396). This self-censorship is a mechanism of obedience and part of the emotional labour that the au pairs conduct to please their employers.

Some au pairs are directly unwanted during the weekends or when the whole family is gathered together, "She has her private life when we have our private life. I think that if [she] would sit between me and [my husband] during the weekends and watch TV I wouldn't like it. So it is" (Host mother, family 8). This, according to Sølvi and Telste (2005), is nothing new in the history of the Norwegian housemaids. After having completed all their daily duties, the maids were required to be available, but invisible. They were not supposed to share the same rooms as their employers. Deploying a Marxist perspective Rivas (2002: 79) claims that, "To be made invisible is the first step towards being considered nonhuman [...]." As the home has become a work place, the boundaries between the public and the private have become unclear, too. This, in turn, requires a redefinition of what the intimacy of the private home is and who may enjoy that intimacy. The employing family's house and the physical space accorded to the domestic worker's body becomes a space where class distinction is

made concrete and where the worker's identity is recognized as different and inferior to that of the employers (Hantzaroula 2004: 385-6; 395). The fact that au pairs in line with maids, house-cleaners and other types of domestic workers are spatially segregated from the rest of the family only emphasizes their status as not family members.

5.2.2. Purchased intimacy

Having someone at home who sees everything is sometimes described as an intrusion into the host family's private life, "Suddenly, you got somebody who is everywhere around and ... this influences our private life, it does" (Host mother, family 7). Another host mother felt unable to talk freely with her husband because the au pair was always around, "We had no private life" (Family 2). For other informants, however, having someone else in the house is not a problem, but simply a question of tolerance, "Yes, for the whole family it was a question of getting used to it during the first 3-4 months" (Family 8). Still, talking about the process of getting used to the au pair, some of my informants referred to their au pairs as 'strangers',

I remember telling her, "You are a stranger who comes into our house, but you will also experience me as a stranger; as completely strange to each other". And then suddenly we are going to live very close to each other (...) (Family 5).

What this informant accounts for is that the au pair coming to her home is both socially and emotionally distant to her. Yet, the service that the au pair delivers is necessary to the host family. The stranger, according to Simmel's theory of social forms, arrives to a market that is in shortage of certain services or goods. In the whole history of economic activity the stranger makes his appearance as a trader and the trader makes his appearance as a stranger (Simmel, in Levine 1971). The service that the local market is in shortage of is the housework, which though traditionally conducted by local women, is now a burden for these same women as they are gainfully employed outside the home. But even though poorly paid and unwanted by local women, the domestic work presents a good opportunity for strangers coming from countries with devaluated currencies. The au pairs, then, are delivering a service that the local market is no longer willing to produce itself.

While for many of the two-parent families having another person at home was a matter of tolerance and ‘getting used to it’, the single-parent families were happy to have another person at home who ‘sees everything and knows everything’ (Families 1, 5). For them having an au pair was “buying a piece of family” and thus compensating for the family members they were in shortage of (Family 1). The au pairs are even encouraged to get to know the house better by looking at intimate places as for example the family members’ closets and drawers. However, that the single parents do not see the au pair as an intrusion in the private lives, might have to do with the fact that these parents do not really have much private life,

Actually, you don’t have any private life when you have 3 children and you are a single parent. Of course you have your bedroom-door, so that you can close it. But you can not lock it (Family 1).

Still, because of compensating for the shortage of family members, the single parents seem to take good care of their au pairs. One of the single mothers claimed that she would do everything for the au pair that she normally does for her own children and gave an example with serving hot chocolate to her au pair when she was sick,

Yes, it’s like having another daughter at home. You do everything you can for your children. So if you are going to have [au pair] it’s important that they like it here (...). (Family 1).

The other single mother devoid her own daughter from a room in order to provide a room for the au pair (Family 5). However, even in the single-parent families who made special attempts to shorten the distance between them and the au pair, the figure of the stranger stands out. For the single-mother families, the stranger is “the man who comes today and stays tomorrow” (Simmel in Levine 1971: 143) to compensate for the lacking family members and whose position is fundamentally affected by the fact that he or she does not initially belong to the group but is simply fixed within its spatial boundaries because of delivering the wanted service. What is delivered in this particular case is the presence of a young person who functions as a substitute for one of the parents or as a bigger sister. In order for a stranger to function purposively, however, he or she has to be included in the host families’ daily lives and routines.

5.2.3. Shared intimacy?

Both the single-parent families and the two-parent families mention that they have made explicit attempts to include the au pair in the family's social life. The au pairs were invited to join family gatherings, family holidays and national celebrations. One of the families even bought a 7-seat car so that the au pair can join them for holidays and weekends (Family 10). The families consider including the au pair in their social life important in order to help the au pair feel part of the family and to show her the Norwegian culture. Inclusion in the Norwegian way of celebrating Christmas and Easter and an invitation to the national day celebration (May 17th) is considered a cultural exchange. The au pairs, however, do not always respond to these initiatives,

She was supposed to be with us at Christmas and we had planned that she would join us to the mountains with [my husband], but when the day came ... No, she wouldn't go; she wanted to stay in the house. So ... then I thought – ok, it's her choice. Still, I found it strange ... so many times she had, in a way, chosen to be away from us (Family 10).

What this informant accounts for is that the au pair defined herself out of the family. Other informants, too, noticed that the au pair would often choose to spend her spare time and the official holidays with own friends rather than with the host family,

We invited her to spend the national day with us, but she ended up with a friend of hers. We met her at the town. She spends a lot of time with her friends. She is never at home at our birthdays, because she makes other plans. We have invited her, but she had other things to do (...). Yes, we do very little together, but we feel it's not our choice, it's her choice in a way ... she has chosen to be with her friends (Host mother, family 6).

Whether an au pair participates in the host family's social life might have to do with how she views herself – as a family member or employee. Hemsing (2003) and Hovdan (2005), who have studied au pairs working for Norwegian families, found out that many au pairs preferred to view themselves as employees rather than as family members, because the employee status gave them more freedom to choose how and with whom to spend their time off. There is now a consensus in the literature that the perception of the live-in workers as 'one of the family' perpetuates unequal power relations between the workers and their employers. As the family ideology conflates domestic-work duties with family obligations, employers extract even

more labour from their workers.²⁵ Avoiding the family's social life, my informants' au pairs define themselves as employees rather than as family members and thus avoid being overworked.

5.2.4. A threat to the family intimacy

While some of my informants consider their au pairs as not integrated in the family, others feel that the au pairs are too well integrated, "Yes, related to [family gatherings] number one was too much integrated and we did not have enough time for ourselves, while with number two ... it was problematic that she often was unavailable" (Host father, family 9). In some cases, the too well-integrated au pair is even considered a threat to the host family's intimacy. One of the host mothers saw her au pair as a rival,

We run orienteering. And she often joined us for a run, but she was much better than me, so at the end ... It turned that ... she and [my husband] would go for a run and I had to stay [at home] and look after the kids. Then I thought, well no (laughing), now it's enough ... it's enough (Host mother, family 2).

Though telling the story through laughter, it is obvious that this host mother does not approve that the au pair is spending time with her husband. The au pair is seen as threatening the mother's status in the family, because in addition to being sporty and good at orienteering, the au pair was also described as good at housework and very good with the children. The fear of being overshadowed by the au pair is not a Scandinavian phenomenon. Hemsing (2003) found that many of the English women hosting Norwegian au pairs felt threatened by the vitality and youthful beauty of their au pairs. Some of the English host mothers even accused their au pairs of having sexual affairs with their husbands. According to Hantzaroula (2004), the mistress' feelings of jealousy are part of their fear of having their sexuality undermined and are typical for the mistress-servant relationship. Hence the age, embodiment and appearance of the au pair are carefully controlled under recruitment process so that the au pair does not overshadow the host mother. However, that the au pairs are required to be inferior to the receiving family members only emphasizes the fact that the host families do not view them as family members.

²⁵Anderson 1991, Childress 1986, Enloe 1989, Radcliffe, in Bakan and Stasiulis 1997; Cock 1980, Gregson and Lowe 1994, Romero 1992, Wrigley 1995, Young 1987, in Parreñas 2001: 179; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002: 67. 63

Although some of my female informants consider the au pair a threat to the family intimacy, they also claim that they feel responsible for the health and well-being of the au pairs. In order to protect their au pairs, the host mothers coined rules, imposed curfews or required the au pair to report where she is going and when she is intending to return home,

To start with, we had to make strict rules for what she was allowed to do and what she wasn't. *What did these rules imply?*

Well, among other things, at what time she was supposed to come home at night; that she shouldn't hitchhike, that she shouldn't be driven home by strangers (...) (Host mother, family 7).

This host mother explained that she felt responsible for the au pair and that it was important to tell her what behaviour was accepted in Norway and what was not. Many of my female informants share that it is difficult to find the balance between protecting and insulting the au pair because "the girls are actually adults who should be responsible for their own actions, but you still feel responsible for them" (Host mother, family 10). Having learned that her au pair had found a boyfriend, one of the host mothers required the au pair to bring him home in order for her to "check" him. She explained that, "It was mother's responsibility that I felt. It's my girl he has to take care of, and he has to be kind to her" (Family 1). Rollins (1985, in Anderson 2000) refers to the benevolent and patronizing attitude employers demonstrate towards the domestic workers as 'maternalism' and argues that this attitude permits them to exercise control over the autonomy of their workers and to reproduce their own employer's status. The host mothers' patronizing attitudes, then, even though not intended, might function as a mechanism through which they enhance their power over the au pairs.

5.3. The au pair and the other family members

The way the other family members respond to the au pair might be an indication to what extent they view the au pairs as 'one of the family'.

5.3.1. Host fathers

Unlike the host mothers, the host fathers in my study are far less concerned with how the au pair is doing. As discussed earlier, it is the host mother who has the main responsibility for the au pair. Many of my female informants mention that their husbands seldom has contact with

the au pairs and that they are more ‘like friends’ with the au pair rather than employers,

It was me who had to give a message if something was to be done in another way or if it wasn’t done, or ... when they were supposed to have free. It was me who had to negotiate with them. So he could be a friend with them ... (Host mother, family 2)

This quotation clearly shows that it is the host mother who is the main employer for the au pair. The host fathers are simply assistants to the mothers and mainly on financial matters concerning the au pairs (section 4.1.7), but they are seldom actively involved with the au pairs. Only two of the host fathers in my study shared some common interests with the au pair. These are the families where the au pairs were recruited from sport clubs in Eastern Europe, namely because the families wanted someone who could not only look after the children and carry out the domestic work, but is also interested in sports (Families 2, 9). The fathers in these two families needed someone to do ‘side-by-side’ activities with,

Our objective was to find somebody I could also train with (laughing).

(Laughing) So it was not simply childcare, but also ‘daddycare’?

Yes ... (laughing)...that’s the reason why when we recruited the third [au pair] we sent e-mails to sport clubs in several Eastern European countries (...) (Host father, family 9).

The way these host fathers are involved in the ‘care’ for their au pairs is coherent with a larger pattern in masculinity studies, showing that fathers construct themselves as involved fathers not on the basis of participation in routine care tasks, but on the basis of their involvement in play and fun activities with the children.²⁶ This side-by-side practice is reproduced in the fathers’ relation to the ‘new family members’ – the au pairs. While the host mothers are responsible for the work to be done, the father is just a friend to the au pair.

5.3.2. Grandparents

As mentioned in section 4.2, some of my informants’ parents are sceptical to the au pairs (Families 9, 10). In some cases, this is a general scepticism related to letting a foreign woman conduct the traditional care and housework. One of my informants points out that,

²⁶ Brandth and Kvande 1999, 2003; Forsberg 2007: 110; Knudsen and Wærness 2006.

The au pair was afraid of my mother, because my mother is so ... She wants everything to be well-done, ordered and clean. So she left when my mother came (Host mother, family 10).

The tension in the relationship between the au pair and the grandmother is reminiscent of the tension that once existed between the mothers-in-law and the daughters-in-law about how the cleaning, cooking and raising of children were to be done (Constable 2002). As contemporary daughters-in-law are gainfully employed outside the home, this criticism is transferred to those who are left at home – the domestic workers and the au pairs. Still, some of the grandparents are positive to the idea of outsourcing childcare. Recognizing the fact that an au pair means more time for their own activities, too, some grandparents see the au pairs as ‘great success’, “Yes, they found her completely ok, especially the first [au pair] she was a great success” (Family 9), points a host father whose parents were very satisfied with the family’s first au pair.

5.3.3. Children

As demonstrated above, the family members react and respond differently to the au pair. However, it is the host-family’s children who spend most time with the au pair. It is also in relation to the children that the au pair is often described as a family member and more particularly as ‘a bigger sister’ or ‘a mother’. Host-families’ accounts of how children respond to the au pairs are often organized around the notion of ‘chemistry’. For the host families it is important that there is chemistry between the au pair and the kids. Chemistry is described as something nearly physical, something that can be seen and felt. According to my informants, chemistry refers to the communication and interaction between the au pair and the children, where communication is not necessarily verbal communication, “You don’t need language to show care” (Family 1), claims a mother of three. Watching how her little boy stretches his arms towards the au pair and how he smiles in her presence, another host mother declares, “They have chemistry together” (Family 3).

Some children develop a very close relation to the au pair. A host father described his little boy’s obsession with the au pair as a ‘possession relation’ quoting laughingly his son’s “she is mine” declaration (Family 9). Another host mother shares that the au pair has become an important person in her daughter’s life, “My daughter talks much about her. She has become

an important person in her life” (Family 4). The host family’s children accept the au pair as ‘another one of the family’ in a much higher degree than the parents do. This might have to do with the fact that while for the children the au pair is safety, for the parents she is often a rival or a threat to parents’ authority. However, not all children are enthusiastic about the au pair.

A host mother mentioned that her daughter was explicitly hostile to the au pair and made everything possible to avoid her, “It was the chemistry that was difficult at times”, my informant claims (Family 8). Although according to the host mother it was the language barrier that caused the conflicts between her daughter and the au pair, it might have been the attention that the au pair attracted with her rebellious behaviour what provoked the host family’s daughter hostility. By the end of the interview, the host mother mentioned that after the au pair had ‘converted’, she has been accepted by the children. Asking what that ‘conversion’ implies, I was told that the au pair had become ‘Norwegian’ in the way she dressed up, behaved and acted,

In the beginning she wore high-heel shoes, had a very red hair, black make-up, was a little bit funky and a little bit hardy. And when she followed the kids to the kindergarten, she wore lady shoes and was really dressed up. And now she wears sweaters and jeans and jogging shoes ... kind of casual. Totally changed. Even our neighbours have noticed this [change] and were wondering whether this is the same girl (laughing) (Host mother, family 8).

The au pair had also become more obedient and respectful after the conversion. This conversion, according to the host-mother, was a result of cultural exchange. For Hantzaroula (2004), however, employers’ attempts to strip the domestic workers of all the characteristics that constitute the person’s identity, here the au pair’s clothes, make-up and manners, is a technology of defacement aimed at producing a subaltern subjectivity. This plastic modelling²⁷ of a new appearance is, according to the employing family, necessary for the au pair to be able to carry out her duties – taking the kids to and from kindergarten while wearing high-heel shoes is not simply uncomfortable, but also inappropriate. For the upper-middle class households, the servant’s body has always been an extension of the middle-class

²⁷ Inspired by Giddens’ (1991, 1992) notions of “pure relationships” and “plastic sexuality” characterizing the intimate family life in the reflexive modernity, I use the notion of ‘plastic modelling’ to indicate that the relationship between the au pair and the host family is a kind of ‘pure relationship’ which is “sought for only what it can bring to the partners involved” (Giddens 1991: 88-89) and in which, because of the power discrepancy between the au pair and the host family, the au pair is the one expected to be plastic enough to answer the host family’s requirements.

respectability and a mirror of the neatness, order and cleanliness of the household (Hantzaroula 2004). Having an au pair who is improperly dressed and who wears provocative make up, undermines the employing family's middle-class respectability. Still, according to my informant, the conversion was a result of cultural exchange and that cultural exchange was mutual. But what about the other informants in my study? Did they experience cultural exchange and did their au pairs become 'Norwegian'? In the sections that follow, I discuss to what extent my informants and their au pairs experience cultural exchange and the mechanisms through which this happens.

5.4. Making chemistry works

5.4.1. Cultural exchange through food

Asking my informants whether they have experienced cultural exchange through being host families, I got the impression that for most of them cultural exchange implied tasting national food prepared by the au pair and looking at pictures from the au pair's home country, "When she came back, she had some presents for us, some brochures and pictures from Russia, and she had prepared Russian soup and salads" (Host mother, family 8). Another family was invited to a Thai-evening, where they could taste Thai food and see Thai dances (Family 2). However, it is not often that the au pairs may present her culture through their national food as in their everyday lives the host families want the au pair to prepare Norwegian food. It is only on special occasions, as for example, at the au pair's birthday that she is encouraged to prepare a national meal.

Only one host family had adopted a habit to eat the au pair's national food once a week, "(...) at Friday we eat Philippine food" (Family 5). The same family used to talk very often with the au pair about her way of life, culture and traditions, "We talk about how they do things at the Philippines and how we do it in Norway" and expressed deep satisfaction with the opportunity to get to know a person from another culture. This family even encouraged the au pair to talk her native language to the baby, believing that this is an enriching cultural experience for the baby. Still, it was mainly through the food that the families get to know the au pair's culture.

5.4.2. Naïve expectations for cultural exchange

As mentioned previously, for most of the host families, including the au pair in the family's social life is a cultural exchange. At the same time, my informants are aware that they do not provide the cultural experience that the au pairs might be expecting, "Actually, we do very little together with her" (Host mother, family 6). This is explained with the way the Norwegian everyday life, and hence the au pair's work day is organized, but also with the inflexible regulations of the au pair programme, "Often, when the weekend comes I need some time for private family life since I have a husband who is not at home during the week. We could have been better at taking her for a mountain trip or something else, but we haven't been good at that" (Host mother, family 8).

Some of my informants recognize that it might be difficult for the au pair to experience Norwegian culture being in the house from 7 in the morning to 5 in the evening and having free only during the weekend(s), "Well, I think that if you are au pair and you if you are going to enjoy it, as it is supposed to be, you can't manage very much if you work 5 hours a day and have free the rest of the day" (Family 1). To enable the au pairs liberate time for more cultural experiences, some families offer the au pair to work longer hours. As the informant puts it,

I think the regulations could have been more flexible in terms of ... the number of hours per month, or per year. To work 5 hours a day, 6 days a week, how fun is that? You only have a day and a half to go to a cabin or to travel in Norway. You can't manage this in a day and a half (...). If the idea is that they are to be integrated, to learn language and culture, they can't manage it in a day and a half (Family 1).

Here a parallel may be drawn between the traditional housemaids that existed in Norway up until WWII and the au pairs. The young Norwegian girls working as maids in private homes had free only two afternoons in the week – Wednesday afternoon and Sunday afternoon. But in order for the maids to be able to use their free time, they had to finish the domestic work first (Sogner and Telste 2005). The au pairs, too, may get free for the whole weekend if they work longer hours during the week. This might have to do with the families' reasons for hiring au pairs. Some of my informants state clearly that it is not the cultural exchange but the need for extra help why they hire au pairs.

My informants are also aware that many au pairs are confronted with a different reality from what they have originally expected,

Yes, I think they are a little bit naïve in terms of ... that it is going to be a fantastic year and that they only are going to experience Norwegian culture, learn the language, and that they are having maximum 30 working hours a week. I believe that most of the families have problems with limiting themselves to the 30 hours (Host mother, family 10)

That the au pairs meet another reality than expected might also have to do with the way the programme is presented to them by the recruitment agencies or the private persons placing au pairs. The placement agencies present the au pair programme as a wonderful opportunity for learning a language and experiencing a new culture (Atlantis 2007). To the families, on the other hand, the agencies promise flexible and obedient domestic workers. This creates a disparity between expectations and reality. Still, many of the au pair candidates are well aware what the nature of the work they apply for is. This comes clearly from the way they present themselves to future employers at the 'au pair gallery' (section 2.2.2). They are also aware that it's not the cultural exchange what they should focus on if they want to be recruited.

Knowing that cultural exchange is not families' first priority, many au pairs organize their own cultural activities, "Yes, I think they've been good at meeting both Norwegian culture and Norwegian traditions and the very fact that they live in a house with Norwegian culture is in itself ... " (Host mother, family 7). Cultural exchange, as this informant implies, happens *per se* only because the au pairs live with a Norwegian family. Some of my informants, however, made explicit attempts to help the au pair understand the local culture. As argued in the current chapter, whether cultural exchange has taken place or not is often measured with how 'Norwegian' the au pair has become. Deploying the concept of *Norwegianization* ('norskifisering') which crystallized from my interviewees' accounts and which has been used in the literature especially in relation to integration of Sámi minorities into the Norwegian society (Skotvedt 1993), I would like to describe the mechanisms through which the au pairs get to know the local culture and become 'Norwegian'.

5.5. Norwegianization

5.5.1. ...through proper behaviour

As shown in previous sections, the cultural influence may be so strong that the au pair gets converted. This was mentioned especially in relation to proper behaviour and proper clothing and was seen as a technology of defacement aimed at producing a serving subjectivity. Other au pairs, however, are not so easily convertible. As one host family shares, not only did the au pair decline their invitations to join them for family gatherings, but she also avoided all ‘unnecessary’ meetings with Norwegian culture,

No, she hasn't been interested in organized Norwegian activities. She stayed with us at our cabin at the mountains once and tried skiing ... It was nice experience for her, but she wouldn't repeat it (Host father, family 6)

This au pair did not like Norwegian food. She did not like Norwegian TV either and was not motivated learning the Norwegian language. After nearly two years with the same family, this au pair had not become Norwegian at all. She seemed to have won the symbolic battle of staying true to her own culture and system of meanings. But by winning that battle, she remained a stranger to whom the local culture did not make any sense. The practical consequences of her *improper cultural behaviour* made the everyday life of the host family very difficult. The host family tried desperately to explain the au pair how to dress the baby before putting it to bed, how to wash the floors or how to do the laundry, but she did not seem to get it (Family 6). The communication might have been easier if the au pair had some basic understanding of the local culture's core concepts and meanings. However, the host family did not encourage her to continue with Norwegian classes when she decided to drop them. Neither did they have time to help her learn the language. Instead, the au pair enrolled an English language course, which she financed herself, as the family was only supposed to pay for the Norwegian classes.

5.5.2. ...through language

Other families are very persistent with the au pair's language acquisition. One of my informants shares that she started teaching the au pair Norwegian already at the airport (Family 1). This host mother had even developed her own teaching system, which consisted

of substituting English words with Norwegian ones when talking to the au pair as well as encouraging the au pair to 'talk' with the kids. This system, the informant claims, was making miracles, as only after a couple of months in Norway, the au pair could speak Norwegian fluently. For this informant, who is one of the two single mothers, it was important that the au pair learns the language as soon as possible so that she is better able to understand the children's needs (Family 1). For Hantzaroula (2004: 385), however, "the immediate allocation of tasks to the newly arrived servant is the initiation ritual for the new identity, that of the worker for the family". This ritual is part of what she calls 'technologies of entering', or, the rituals that set the rules for the communication between the domestic workers and their employers. Already at the airport, by teaching the au pair words like 'nappies' and 'milk', the newly arrived au pair is allocated the role of a worker for the family.

This family's au pairs attended also Norwegian language course, but only as long as it was free of charge. The last au pair who was recruited after a fee for the language course was introduced did not attend the course (Family 1). Many au pairs were left without language courses after a fee was introduced in 2003 (Bertelsen 2007). Although it is now established that the family is to pay for the au pair's Norwegian language course, this was not specified until October 2007 (UDI 2007b). Some of my informants consider the courses expensive and not worth their price. As a host father explains,

The first two attended language courses [...]. But number three, she had to pay for it herself as there were some changes in the rules. So we found out that we'd rather pay her a little bit more and that she could borrow a language course from the library. She had studied Scandinavian languages at the university so she had certain foundation for this. If we were to do this again, we would have chosen the same solution, because we think the language courses are unnecessary, or unreasonable expensive in relation to what they are worth for us and for the au pair. So we'd rather give her some extra money for her to do it on her own (Family 9).

As it comes from this informant's account, the au pair was left on her own to learn the language. Because of the host-family's busy everyday life, they did not have enough time to work with her on her language. At the same time, this au pair was described as distant and difficult to communicate with. The reason for this might have been her uneasiness with the language. Still, according to my informant, the communication difficulties lay in the au pair's personal character (Family 9).

5.5.3. ...through charity

Other families do not only provide their au pairs with an opportunity to attend Norwegian language courses by paying the fee and the books, but are personally satisfied with the achievements of their au pairs. A host mother proudly announces that her au pair enrolled a Norwegian higher education institution after successfully passing all language tests, “After finishing all modules she hoped to enrol the Bergen University College and to study Norwegian. And she did!” (Family1). Another family openly declares that they are willing to support young persons, who want to continue their studies in Norway,

One makes a conscious decision when choosing to leave one’s home country and work as au pair. It’s only a way to come here. (...) And if this person wants to continue her studies, it’s positive, because these are educated, very educated and skilful persons (Host father, family 7).

The reason for families’ willingness to support their au pairs is articulated as follows,

I know that she likes it here and that I can give her something to make it even better. Because I know that where she comes from they are not doing well in terms of social environment, safety, money ... all this (Host mother, family 8).

As true representatives of the protestant religion, the families in my study view hiring an au pair as an act of charity motivated by desire to help. For Anderson (2002) however, rather than an act of sisterhood toward a woman, the employment of a domestic worker, or, here of an au pair, is a discriminatory practice through which female employers assert their status as affluent women. Emphasizing the differences between the poor East and the affluent West as well as their desire to help, the employing families only reproduce their status as affluent families. In the last part of this chapter, I would like to elaborate on my informants’ general satisfaction with the au pair programme as an expression of their reasons for enrolling the programme.

5.6. Satisfied with the solution

All of my informants expressed general satisfaction with the au pair programme and the opportunities for combining work and family life it offers, “Of course, it’s very comfortable to come home and to know that the dinner is prepared four times a week and ... you avoid the

stress of knowing that you have to leave for a meeting or a committee” (Host father, family 8). Being experienced hosts many of my informants had some advices to give to future host-families. My informants would recommend to potential host families to find out more about the au pair’s motivation for taking up an au pair job before the au pair manages to surprise them with quitting the job in order to get married or do something else,

It’s important to find out more about the au pairs’ expectations, because they hear many different stories ... And I think that both of our au pairs wanted to stay in Norway. So one of the reasons why they came here was to try to find a way to stay here and not simply to come and go back home (Family 2).

According to other informants, it is important to set strict rules for how the housework is to be done, in order to avoid conflicts and discussions during the au pair’s stay,

Yes, it works, but I think it’s important to have clearly defined rules; there is also an adaptation period. (...) And if she does not recognize the rules you have to bring this for a discussion as soon as possible to avoid conflicts ... (Host mother, family 8)

In addition, behaviour rules are mentioned by a couple of informants. The potential of finding improper friends is always there, especially for the younger girls and some host mothers recommend talking with the au pair about the proper behaviour, “I had a conversation with her about that” (Host mother, family 10).

Though largely satisfied with the solution, my informants express dissatisfaction with the formal regulations of the programme. This concerns especially the total number of hours the au pairs are allowed to work and the practical procedures of obtaining an au pair visa. Some families express an opinion that the au pairs should be allowed to work longer hours, so that the au pair’s work time could ‘cover’ that of the host parents. As one of my informants points out, “The rules should be more flexible rather than stating these 5 hours [a day]. Nobody manages to follow this rule anyway” (Family 1). Longer working hours during the week, according to the same informant, could legitimize more time off in the weekends or even a day off during the week so that the au pairs had more time for their own activities. A legal permission to work longer hours is believed to be a good solution for both au pairs and host families, especially having in mind that the majority of the au pairs do in fact work more than the regulated 30 hours a week even though it is officially illegal.

The Immigration Authorities' procedures for processing and renewing au pairs visas are also a reason for dissatisfaction as the process often takes several months. Some of my informants even chose to neglect Immigration Authorities' rules because of the long waiting period, "it took four months in our case" (Family 5). This in practice implies that many au pairs might have resided and worked in the country illegally, while waiting for their visas to be processed, something which the local authorities are aware of,²⁸

I called the police and told them about this problem. They answered that this was a usual practice. And I think that the police shuts their eyes for something which is actually illegal (Family 5).

Renewing the visa may take even longer than issuing the first-time permit, "It took them five months to renew it" (Family 6). Despite their dissatisfaction with the Immigration Authorities' rules and procedures, all of my informants claim they would consider hiring an au pair again mainly because of the great flexibility the programme opens for.

5.7. Chapter summary

Illustrating how the au pairs and the host families negotiate on the amount and conduct of the housework, on the inclusion in the family's everyday life and on the integration into the Norwegian culture, I have in this chapter demonstrated that the au pairs are seldom viewed as family members. Though knowing that the au pairs are young people 'on cultural exchange', some of my informants expect them to behave and 'deliver' as maids. Conflicts and negotiations on the quality of the cleaning indicate the families' reasons for hiring au pair. Sometimes these conflicts are obscured by the ideology of cooperation and equality. In fact, the au pairs' servitude, obedience and enthusiasm with the work only emphasize the power discrepancy between them and their employers. The spatial segregation the au pairs are subjected to further confirms their non-belonging to the host family. The au pairs are even viewed as 'strangers' who deliver a wanted service to the host family's home.

Even though spatially segregated, the presence of the stranger, especially when that stranger is a young woman, is a threat to the family intimacy and to the husband-wife relationship.

²⁸ The Immigration Authorities issue now provisional visas while the actual visa is under procession. This means that the au pair may now start working for a family even before an official visa is granted (UDI 2007a). 75

Jealousy and fear of being overshadowed by the au pair is what often characterizes the au pair/host-mother relationship. But that relationship is even more complicated. Deploying the analytical notion of 'maternalism' I argued that the host mothers' patronizing attitudes towards the au pairs serve to enhance their power over the au pair and to reproduce their status as affluent women. The employer's status is further reproduced through the different mechanisms of cultural integration – conversion, defacement, Norwegianization, which, following Hantzaroula's (2004) argument, serve to produce subaltern subjectivity. In the next chapter, some of the main themes and patterns identified in chapters 4 and 5 will be discussed by placing them in a larger theoretical framework.

6. DISCUSSING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The objective of the current chapter is to elaborate on some of the main themes deriving from previous chapters by establishing a connection between empirical findings and theoretical perspectives. The current analysis started at micro or agency level with the descriptions provided by my informants of how the au pair institution functions for their families and how they view the young people working as au pairs at their homes. Deploying Mills' (1967) notion of *sociological imagination*, or, the ability to see the innate connections between public issues and private troubles, I will in the current chapter try to show how biography and history intersects in society, or, how the personal troubles of, for example, combining career and care for children are connected to public issues as gender roles, gender inequality and the relation between countries in East and these in West. The notions of time-squeeze, involved parenthood and gender roles crystallized as especially important for my informants. These are the notions that I will continue discussing in the current chapter, but in addition to the micro perspective, a macro perspective of analysis will be provided. This implies a discussion of the implications that the above-mentioned phenomena have not only for the individuals directly participating in and creating them, but also for the societies these individuals belong to. I first discuss theory related to some of the themes suggested by informants that may come to be seen as personal troubles. The discussion is then lifted on a structural level by looking at how the informants' *personal troubles* give rise to glocal²⁹ *public issues*.

6.1. Knowledge-intensive work vis-à-vis middle-class self-biographers

My informants are two-parent dual-breadwinner families except for two of the families who are single-parent families. The informants are aged 30-45, all of them are highly-educated and the majority of them occupy prestigious and well-paid positions. The informants describe their jobs as interesting but craving. Some of them hold positions that require them to leave early in the morning, much earlier than the kindergartens' or day mothers' opening hours, or to work in the evenings and at nights. Other interviewees have occupations that require a lot of travelling. All informants are occupying positions in the so-called knowledge-intensive post-industrial economy where the main production 'units' are knowledge and services rather than

²⁹ The term 'glocal', which includes and combines the local, regional and global, or the micro, meso and macro in one dimension (Robertson 1995) is deployed here to describe the micro-meso-macro implications of western families' personal troubles.

material goods. Work, as it comes from the interviews, means a lot to my informants. The work is interesting, rewarding and it gives opportunities for career-advancement and self-growth. Parts of the 'new' or post-industrial economy, and especially the knowledge-intensive middleclass professions, which my informants occupy, give workers good opportunities for skill-utilisation, self-realisation and personal-growth. Involved in interesting and meaningful work projects and delegated with great responsibility for the completion of these projects, the workers are invited to not simply do the job but utilise their best professional skills and create themselves in that process (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The work, following Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) individualization thesis, becomes a main arena for utilisation of opportunities for self-creation. Some workers even willingly put in longer hours as they feel appreciated, honoured and liked at work. The work becomes pleasant and rewarding just like home, while the home, with its endless requirements and deadlines acquires the taylorised organization of the work. The work becomes home and home becomes work (Hochschild 1997). But the work is also a greedy and seductive institution as it steals from employees' time for private life (Coser 1974).

At the same time, the ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in contemporary society. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001: 22-23) point out, "The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of individual identity, is the central character of our time". Having children is an important part of the ethic of self-fulfilment and relates to the hope of discovering oneself through one's children (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). However, in order for the choosing, deciding and aspiring parents to be able to coin their own biographies and develop their professional identities, they first need to liberate themselves from some of the care and housework duties. For those of the parents who willingly put in longer hours at work, or, who are expected to, the Norwegian public childcare institutions with their restricted opening hours are not always the best solution. However, with the help of an au pair who brings the kids to and from kindergarten, career-oriented parents can still place their children in public daycare and continue working longer hours when the work requires it.

The positions some of my informants occupy, require their physical presence at work, especially those working in the health and education sector. For other parents, face-time is not required but still preferable. Though the Norwegian collective work-culture is recognized for

its family-friendliness, it shares a lot of similarities with the individualistic and competitive American work-culture described by Hochschild (1997) in her study of the American company *Amerco*, especially when it comes to norms and rules for career-advancement (Halrynjo 2007). Many of my informants, and particularly the fathers, described themselves as overworked and squeezed between work and family obligations. Still, they wouldn't reduce their working time as this would imply a loss of career-opportunities.

In the 'new' economy, employees with 'zero drag', or, those with few family obligations (Hochschild 1997: xviii-xx) are more attractive than those with a high drag-coefficient.³⁰ A recent study of the family-friendly Norwegian company called *Norco*, revealed that despite the company's strong emphasis on flexibility, innovation and openness for career-growth, *Norco*'s career-paths followed a traditional hierarchical ladder, where those with fewer family obligations and long face-time were the ones who climbed the career-ladder (Halrynjo 2007). Long hours, work during the weekends, flexibility, visibility and availability were necessary conditions for career-advancement. In fact, visibility appeared to be the most important prerequisite for promotion and career-advancement. To be seen by the right persons at the right moment was absolutely necessary if one were to progress at work. Availability and visibility are, according to Halrynjo (2007), the employees' symbolic capital. And as in *Amerco*, it was persons at the company's key positions who functioned as door-keepers for aspiring employees. These career-advancement patterns might imply that for aspiring employees with high 'drag-coefficient' the inflexible state-subsidised childcare arrangements might not always be an adequate solution to the 'drag-problem'.

Though the places in public daycare have long been scarce in Norway, the availability has improved substantially during the last few years and as of December 2007 it was close to universal (SSB 2007, Kunnskapsdepartementet 2007b). The families in my study faced the problem of combining work and care for children long before the Norwegian government took measures for increasing the number of state-subsidised kindergarten places. Still, the majority of the families had kindergarten places at the time their children were small, but in addition to the public care they had private solutions in form of au pairs or praktikants. This implies that the childcare package my informants used is a public-private mix, in which the public sector is responsible for the social and pedagogical upbringing of the children, while

³⁰ Crompton and Birkelund 2000, Halford, Savage and Witz 1997, Kanter 1986, Rasmussen 2002, in Halrynjo 2007: 86.

the private childminders are responsible for the children's well-being at home. Especially for the single mothers who had no partners to help them with the household and children, the public-private mix seems to be a good opportunity to combine work or studies with care for children. But what about the mothers who had husbands and partners to help them around? How is the husbands' participation in care and housework related to the decision of hiring an au pair?

6.2. Changing cultural ideals of good parenthood

6.2.1. Involved fathers?

Norwegian fathers are internationally appraised for their involvement in the care for children. The paternal scheme introduced in 1993 with the objective to enhance fathers' participation in childcare is considered a great success. The number of fathers taking up the quota increased radically after the introduction of the quota which signals that Norwegian fathers do participate in the care for their small children.³¹ Being a father has always been an important part of masculinity and male identity (Brandth and Kvande 1992). Brandth and Kvande (1999, 2003) in their extensive research on fathers taking up parental leave, found out that fathers did not view staying at home with a child as a threat to their masculine identity, but rather as an attribute to it. In addition, being at home and having the main responsibility for the child represents a radical break with the traditional bread-winning role of the father.

The 'new' father is both a bread-winner and a care-giver, one who actively participates in the nurturance and care for his children. For the 'new' fathers, being at home with the child is also a great opportunity for personal growth – an opportunity 'to work on himself' (Brandth 2007). Fathers, who have stayed at home with the child, claim to have benefited greatly from the parental leave by not only developing a close relationship with the child, but also building competence they could use at work (Holter 2007). Reshaped by structural and cultural forces, the institution of fatherhood gives new opportunities to men. Rather than being distant and instrumental breadwinners, men are invited to be involved, meek and flexible caregivers. Through the institution of parental leave, men are invited to take their share of domestic and care work for the purpose of achieving the desired work-family balance.

³¹ While only 4 % of all men took parental leave in 1993, today 85 % of eligible fathers (or 70 % of all fathers), use the daddy quota (Brandth and Kvande 2003, SSB 2006).

However, despite the fact that many Norwegian fathers took up the quota and used the opportunity to spend time with their children, the quota did not have substantial effects on fathers' working time after the leave period was over. Fathers did not reduce their working hours during the child's early years (Brandth and Kvande 1999; 2003; Kitterød 2002, in Brandth 2007: 275). Fathers still work longer hours than the mothers (Kitterød 2007; Holter, Svare and Egeland 2007). Fathers did not increase their share of housework either. Fathers who took paternal leave did more housework than those who did not take the leave. Still, the fathers on leave did exactly as much (or as little) housework as they did before the birth of the child (Brandth and Kvande 1999, 2003). This, according to Brandth and Kvande, might be an indication that housework, unlike childcare, is not compatible with masculinity and that childcare is given higher status than housework. The fathers in my study, too, took the paternal leave, but did not reduce their working hours after the leave period was over. Neither did they increase their share of housework. It was the mother who had the main responsibility for carework and housework and for its delegation.

6.2.2. The winners of the gender equality politics?

It's not only the fathers who face new cultural norms of what makes good parenthood. Mothers face new requirements, too. While in the past being a good economic provider was not considered a part of the moral identity of the good mother, mothers today are expected to take responsibility for meeting the costs of raising their children (Cheal 2002; Rappe and Sjögren 2003). Norwegian women today are not only highly educated, but also actively participating in the labour market, where they compete on men's terms for recognition and promotion. As most careers are still based on male patterns – being competitive, available and flexible, the work exerts great pressure on women who 'want to have it all' – career, balanced family-life and managed home, impeccable appearance, active spare time, rich social life with family and friends (Rappe and Sjögren 2003). The strive for recognition at work combined with the cultural norms that a good mother is one who spends enough time with her children and her husband or partner puts a lot of pressure on contemporary women.

For the middle-class affluent women, buying home-based services like housecleaning or childcare might be a way out of the squeeze. Ellingsæter, Noack and Rønsen (1994) argue that well-educated women with a good income have stronger positions in negotiations on the

domestic division of labour than their lower-educated and not so affluent counterparts. This might imply that the well-educated affluent women have better chances to experience gender equality at home compared to their less well-off sisters. A recent study of highly-educated Norwegian couples with care responsibilities proclaimed the highly-educated parents as “the winners of the Norwegian gender equality policies” (Aarseth 2007). The majority of my female informants may come to be seen as representing the well-off group of women. However, as it comes from the interviews, the so-desired gender equality has yet not been achieved, as instead of negotiating the housework with their husbands and partners, the middle-class women in my study simply outsourced it by hiring an au pair. Thus the traditional division of labour in the family is reproduced and cemented.

6.3. Answering cultural norms

For the career-oriented middle-class mothers in my study, hiring an au pair is more than a way of compensating for their husbands’ weak participation in the care for children and the domestic work. Finding a reliable au pair, who successfully takes over the household chores and part of the care of children is also a way of answering the cultural norms of what makes good motherhood. Through the au pair, the mothers in my study could continue being good mothers by paying another woman to perform part of their duties. That is why finding the ‘right’ au pair becomes an important job for which professional agents, friends, family and sometimes the au pair’s own networks are mobilized. In addition, racial, ethnical and bodily classifications are drawn upon in the selection of the ‘right’ au pair. Once recruited, the ‘right’ au pair is subjected to a number of technologies, aimed at modelling her in a way that best suits the receiving family’s needs. In order to produce a subjectivity that understands the Norwegian way of doing things, the au pair undergoes a process of Norwegianization that corrects her behaviour, appearance and attitudes.

The au ‘right’ au pair is one whose background, age and motivation enable her ‘to see what needs to be done’ and to do it without being explicitly asked for this. The ‘right’ au pair is fit and healthy enough to carry out the physically demanding au pair duties, but not overtly physically attractive to overshadow the host mother. The ‘right’ au pair is plastic enough to respond to the host family’s needs for flexibility and availability, but also to answer their requirements of ‘having someone like us’ – someone who is educated, intelligent, reasonable

and reliable. The 'right' au pair is a foreign au pair coming from a poorer country and socialized in a culture with a strong focus on childcare and domestic work. The 'right' au pair is someone who has the proper motivation and background to deliver 'quality au pairing'. But most importantly, the 'right' au pair is a *female* au pair.

For the families in my study, gender is the most important qualification for the au pair job. None of my informants have a male au pair neither would they consider hiring one. Though positive to the male assistants in the public kindergartens, none of the families is willing to let unknown men from a foreign culture take care of their children in the private, invisible and intimate sphere of the home. Stereotype pictures of women as biologically better caregivers and of foreign men as sexual predators are invoked to legitimate my informants' scepticism to male au pairs. It appears that the notion of good motherhood is incompatible with the idea of hiring a male au pair. Host parents' unwillingness to delegate the care for children to men from foreign cultures is an indication of what kind of masculinity they consider correct role-models for their children. The patriarchal masculinity that men from foreign cultures are automatically associated with is unwelcomed by the families in my study. The meek Scandinavian masculinity as represented by the friendly and playing male kindergarten assistant, even though the assistant is not ethnical Norwegian, is the type of masculinity which parents consider appropriate for their children to observe.

The employment of au pair enables the career-oriented middle-class parents to conform with yet another cultural norm – the strong Scandinavian norm that the family should meet its needs supported by the welfare state and relying on its own resources is not violated when the person assisting the family in its daily routines is defined as someone being 'on cultural exchange'. The ideology of cultural exchange obscures the fact that the majority of au pairs are hired to help the family in its household chores rather than in its care work. The care for children is delegated to professional pedagogues in the public kindergartens. It is the housework most families need help with. Having someone who is 'on cultural exchange', who is 'more like us' – educated and intelligent and whom 'we cooperate with' creates the impression of the au pairs and host families as equal parties with common interests and conceals the power and status discrepancy in their relationship. In fact, hiring educated women from poorer countries to conduct the housework, Norwegian families participate in a

global process of *housewifisation*³² of women from East (Mies, Thomson and Werlhof 1988). In the process of housewifisation these women's labour is devaluated and their professional qualifications wasted.

In the last part of this chapter, deploying Mills' (1967) notions of *personal troubles* and *public issues* and putting at work my *sociological imagination*, I would like to discuss how affluent western families' personal troubles of combining work and family life give rise to glocal structural inequalities.

6.4. Local troubles glocal issues

The impact of the affluent women's personal troubles of 'managing it all', might be traced on a larger social level, when we look at how the purchase of cleaning and childcare services influences not only the relations between men and women, but also between women at large. Survey data shows that it's not the size and the composition of the household, but the women's level of education, income and the number of hours spent on paid work that are decisive for the use of private domestic services (Kitterød 2002). Kitterød found that women with higher education, long working hours and good income are the group that most often pays for domestic services. These findings are coherent with the results of previous research on women's use of home-based services (Kitterød 1998a, 1998b, 1966 in Kitterød 2002). In my material, too, the women who employ private childminders and houseworkers are highly educated women with long working hours and income beyond the average.

It has been claimed that the increased use of home-based services will strengthen the social inequality between the well-off and the not-so-well-off women.³³ The introduction of state-subsidized domestic services like house-cleaning, childminding, gardening etc., has been discussed as a possible solution to the 1990s' unemployment crisis in Denmark, Sweden and Norway (Platzer 2002). It has been argued that engagement of weaker societal segments (unemployed working-class women and migrant women) in the delivery of home-based services will not only help reduce the unemployment figures, but also improve the daily

³² The term housewifisation which incorporates several aspects of women's paid and unpaid work (unskilled, unregulated, low-paid, occupationally segregated) is used here to describe the process by which educated women from East are brought back to affluent families' kitchens and there defined as 'cheap labour' because of the type of work they conduct (Mies, Thomson and Werlhof 1988).

³³ Holtsmark 1994, Cappelen et. al 1995, Selvaag 1995, Isaksen 1995, Ruud 1996, in Kitterød 1998: 188. 84

welfare of many households and transform the illegal purchase of domestic services into legal (Platzer 2002; Kitterød 2002). The home-service scheme was made permanent in Denmark in 1997, but the strong egalitarian norms in Sweden did not allow for its introduction until 2007 (Platzer 2007). The experience from Denmark shows that it is the well off two-career families who consume most of the state-subsidised home-based services, despite the fact that they can afford buying such services even at market price (Platzer 2002). Being mainly delivered by working class and migrant women and consumed by affluent women, the home-based services might come to be seen as enhancing the inequality between the well-off and the not-so-well-off women in the local society. In Norway, because of the strong equality norms postulating that weaker social groups should not be used as cheap labour, the home-service scheme has yet not been introduced though right-oriented political parties are already working on this proposition (BT, 1.4.2008). Still, similar services are delivered by some of the Norwegian society's weakest groups – the au pairs, who, because of being defined as neither students nor workers are paid pocket money for the same services that the middle-class families would be able to afford even at a market price.

The purchase of au pair services, then, may be seen as exasperating the status and class discrepancy between women from the West and those from the East, while at the same time widening the gap between the local women who can afford having an au pair and those who cannot. This is what feminists like Einstein and Lorde (1994, 1984 in Ritzer 2003: 458) call oppressive practices within the community of women itself. According to oppression theorists, the relationship in which one party (individual or collective) succeeds in making the other party an instrument of the dominant party's needs is a relation of oppression. For socialist feminists, oppression is a large-scale structural agreement between groups or categories of social actors where women's location and experience of the world is an essential vantage point on domination in all its forms (ibid: 458). The structural adjustment policies that international financial institutions as IMF and the World Bank impose on developing (and other) countries as a condition for granting of loans, often have detrimental effects on the local economies (Hochschild and Ehrenreich 2002: 8). Unemployment and low wages pushes citizens from poor countries into involuntary migration. The hard currencies of the industrialized countries pull them. That is how the advantageous economic position of affluent women in industrialized countries and the *personal troubles* of combining work and family life this position entails, places women from poorer countries into the disadvantaged

position of carrying out the work that affluent women no longer have time to conduct. These arrangements of inequality which may be described as vectors of oppression and domination include not only gender but also class, race, global location, sexual preference and age (Collins 1990, in Ritzer 2003: 461). It is the pattern of intersection that produces a particular experience of oppression and qualitatively alters the experience of being a woman. The structural inequalities emerging from the intersection of women's age, race, class and location in the global economy, give rise to a number of ethical and political issues that industrialized societies need to face.

6.5. Ethical and political dilemmas

The young foreign women working as au pairs in Norwegian homes provide the flexibility that many professional women need to freely pursue their careers. Professional women's labour market participation adds substantially to the host family's budget and increases its purchase power. The work of the au pairs, then, has a positive effect on the local economy. In addition, as the au pairs may only work for one employer and as they pay taxes in the receiving country, they impose little costs to the host country. The economic benefits for Norway are huge. As mentioned in the previous section, the international monetary politics makes the currency of the industrialised countries in West more valuable than local currencies. As a result, millions of women (and men) from poorer countries, travel to industrialized countries in hope of better opportunities and higher pay. So do many of the young women working as au pairs in Norwegian families. Many of these young women are university graduates and promising professionals. This outflow of highly-qualified labour power referred to as 'brain-drain' in the literature often creates a shortage of qualified professionals in the migrants' countries of origin (Hochschild 2002; Parreñas 2002). In addition, the outflow of qualified labour causes waste of professional abilities ('brain-waste') as the migrant workers seldom have opportunity to utilise their formal training in the receiving country. Several of my informants' au pairs had university degrees or other professional training. Taking up low-paid and low-skilled au pair jobs, these women have 'voluntarily' returned back to the kitchen, but as housewives rather than as qualified professionals. Still, for many au pairs the financial gains of this housewifisation are too important to leave the kitchen. This is an important political and ethical issue that the international society needs to face.

Another dimension of the political and ethical problems related to the outflow of labour from poorer countries is the care deficit that this outflow creates in the workers' countries of origin. When affluent families in West solve their 'absent father' problems by hiring au pairs from poorer countries, a new problem emerges – that of the absent mothers/daughters in the cultures where the au pairs come from. Though only one of my informants' au pairs had children of her own, it is now well documented that many migrant women are mothers.³⁴ As much as 30 percent of Filipino children live in households where at least one parent is an overseas worker. These children have counterparts in the former Soviet Union, Latin America, India, Africa, Sri Lanka (Hochschild 2002). As argued earlier, by hiring female domestic and care workers, traditional gender roles are reproduced in the receiving affluent families in the West. At the same time, male gender roles in sending countries with often strong patriarchal norms are sometimes reconstructed in an uncomfortable way as the left-behind husbands often have to take over their wives' domestic duties (Gamburd 2002). Still, as my interviews with Norwegian families revealed, affluent families in developed countries are not willing to hire male care workers even when they have the necessary qualifications.

At the same time, when migrant women leave their own children in the care of mothers, sisters and aunts to provide care for developed countries' family members, global care chains are activated (Hochschild 2000). These series of links between people across the globe that are based on the paid or unpaid work of caring, express the invisible human ecology of caring. Leaving her two-year old son in the care of her mother in order to work as au pair in Norway, Ahibelle, a twenty-six year old university graduate from the Philippines, activates a global care chain that transports care, labour power and resources between the Philippines and Norway (Liane 2008). This international transfer of caretaking is also a distinct form of international division of labour with far reaching consequences for both sending and receiving countries. Brain-drain, brain-waste, housewifisation of educated women, restructuring of gender roles in the sending countries and reproduction of traditional gender roles in the receiving country are only some of the glocal issues related to the international division of labour, of which, the au pair institution is a small, but still an important part.

³⁴ Isaksen, Devi and Hochschild 2008; Parreñas 2001; Ehenreich and Hochschild 2002.

6.6. Chapter summary

The objective of this chapter has been to discuss some of the main themes deriving from previous chapters by linking empirical findings to theoretical suggestions. To understand parents' experiences of squeeze between work and family life, in the first part of the chapter I have pointed to some of the features of the new economy, to some of the changing cultural norms of ideal parenthood, as well as to theoretical perspectives deriving from Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) individualization thesis. It was argued that the ethic of individual self-fulfilment being the most powerful current in modern society has a great impact on my informants' career-ambitions and their desire 'to have it all'. Then drawing on recent welfare research on fathers' involvement in childcare and housework, on women's use of private housecleaning services and on the state's provision of subsidised kindergarten places, I argued that men's weak participation in domestic work, the inflexible opening hours of the public childcare institutions and the requirements of work are strong incentives for hiring au pair. Hiring au pair was seen as a way of answering the cultural norms of involved parenthood and a way to comply with the social norms of self-reliance and social solidarity. In the last part of the chapter, deploying Mills' notions of *personal troubles* and *public issues* and inspired by Robertson's notion of 'glocalisation' and Hochschild's notion of 'global care chains', a connection was established between affluent western families' local troubles and larger structural issues such as brain-drain, care-drain and brain-waste.

In last chapter of this thesis, I would like to briefly summarize the main findings of my study and point to some topical questions for further research.

7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

7.1. Research summary

The objective of the current study has been to find out why an increasing number of Norwegian families choose to hire au pairs in addition to using the state-subsidised childcare arrangements. While early in my study it became clear that Norwegian families' main reason for hiring au pairs is the need for flexibility in their everyday and professional lives, the question of 'who' uses the au pair institution appeared as equally important as the 'why' question I had originally asked.

My informants are middle class dual-parent dual-career families, except for two of the families who are single-parent families. All of them are employed in the post-industrial knowledge-intensive economy. The work is important to them. It is interesting, challenging and rewarding and it gives opportunities for personal and professional growth. But the work is also a seductive and greedy institution, which steals from their time for family obligations. Children as a part of the process of self-creation and self-realisation are also important to my informants. So are the cultural norms of ideal motherhood and involved fatherhood postulating that the good parents should spend enough time with their children. Affordable high-quality public childcare is available, but not flexible enough to enable parents' flexibility. Still, recognizing the pedagogical advantages of the public childcare the parents prefer that their children attend the state-subsidised childcare institutions. Being themselves busy with work, they delegate the responsibility of bringing the children to and from the kindergarten to an au pair, whom they have carefully selected among hundreds of candidates aspiring for this job. By carefully choosing the woman who is taking over parents' and especially the mothers' obligations at home, my female informants construct themselves as good mothers. The fathers, on the other hand, construct themselves as involved fathers by sharing with the mother the financial responsibility for the au pair.

Racial, ethnical and bodily stereotypes are mobilized in the process of selection of the 'right' au pair. The 'right' au pair is educated, mature, responsible and healthy *female au pair* with in-built abilities to provide care and to do housework. She is also plastic enough to respond to the employing family's need for flexibility. Once recruited, the 'right' au pair is further

moulded by the receiving family – clothes, behaviour, appearance and (male) friends are controlled so that they do not confront the receiving family's middle-class image. Spatially segregated from the rest of the family and subjected to strict appearance and behaviour rules, the au pairs may hardly be defined as family members.

Cultural exchange is not a priority – neither for the au pairs nor for the host families. That is why the language acquisition is sometimes left to the au pairs alone. The conduct of the household duties, however, is not. The au pairs are carefully instructed of how to carry on the care and domestic work. These instructions are given solely by the mothers in the family as it is the mother whom the au pair substitutes. Through the au pair, housework and housework-related conflicts are outsourced and with this, the opportunity of achieving gender equality in the nuclear family. Equality is achieved on the basis of the contributions to the family budget rather than on equal participation in the domestic chores. Equality is solely *financial equality* achieved at the expense of housewifisation and Norwegianization of educated women from East. By hiring women (rather than men) to conduct the care and domestic work, the traditional gender division of labour in the receiving family and the local society is reproduced and cemented. At the same time, the inequality between women at large is exasperated. Hiring an au pair emphasizes the difference between women who can afford having an au pair and those who cannot, but also between those who hire au pairs and those who work as such. Affluent families' difficulties at achieving work-family balance with the resources provided by the welfare state enhance structural inequalities at both local and global level, as the women performing domestic and care work at affluent homes, often leave behind their own social networks that are often in need of the same type of work. Personal troubles become glocal issues.

7.2. Main findings

The main findings of the current study may be summarized in the following,

1. Cultural exchange is not Norwegian families' primary objective for participating in the au pair programme. Norwegian families hire au pairs to solve the care and housework related problems, which emerge as a result of the women's re-incorporation in the labour force. The work's requirements for flexibility, availability and face-time, the

inflexible opening hours of the state-subsidised childcare arrangements and unavailability of the grandparents for the daily care of their grandchildren, makes the au pair institution an attractive option for families who can afford hiring an au pair.

2. The au pair is a substitution for the mother in the family. By hiring an au pair to take over the women's duties at home, housework-related conflicts are not solved, but simply outsourced. The traditional gender division of labour is reproduced and cemented. A new type of gender equality is achieved – a *financial* gender equality, based on parents' contribution to the family income. Supported by the findings of previous studies on the au pair institution and drawing on the history on the housemaid profession in Norway, I claim that this type of equality is a *Nordic model of gender equality* achieved at the expense of housewifisation of educated women from East.
3. As the *Nordic financial equality* is achieved at the expense of housewifisation, Norwegianization and cultural subordination of au pairs from East, the au pairs may not be defined as family members.

7.3. Topical questions for further research

A number of questions emerged while working on this project. These might be a starting point for a further research on the subject,

1. How is the *Nordic model of gender equality* maintained after the au pair has left the receiving family? Are the families outsourcing domestic work by buying home-based services on the commercial market or are they sharing domestic responsibilities?
2. How is the participation in the au pair programme influencing the lives of the persons placed au pairs? Has the programme given them a chance for a better life or has it trapped them in a process downward social mobility and deskilling? What is the life of the au pairs who are still in Norway like?
3. How is the au pair programme influencing the lives of the au pairs' families? Do the left-behind families experience upwards mobility thanks to the remittances sent by the au pair? How is care organized in the au pair's family network given her unavailability for the care of the family members?

The answer of these questions might provide important insights into the functioning of the au pair institution and the implications of au pairing.

7.4. Closing note

This study has been a long journey into the field of the Norwegian ideas of gender equality, parenthood and international solidarity. My encounter with the field and the informants revealed how difficult it is to achieve work-family balance and gender equality even in a family-friendly welfare state as Norway. However, what at first sight looked like gender equality paradise, appeared to be a very traditional society, where the domestic and care work is still done by women, and recently by foreign women. Travelling through the field I met parents, who squeezed between the requirements of the work, the family life and the changing cultural norms of ideal parenthood chose to hire au pair to help them meet all these requirements. Now at the end of my journey I can tell the story of the *Nordic model* of gender equality achieved at the expense of cultural subordination of educated women and legitimized as international solidarity and cultural exchange.

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9. APPENDICES

9.1. Appendix I – Interview request

Jeg er masterstudent i sosiologi ved Universitetet i Bergen og holder nå med den avsluttende masteroppgaven i sosiologi. Temaet for oppgaven er småbarnfamiliens bruk av ulike former for barnepass og jeg skal undersøke hvorfor og hvordan norske familier velger de former for barnepass de gjør. Stadig flere norske familier velger å ansette en au pair å ta seg av barnepass i stedet for å bruke offentlig barnehage eller andre former for barnepass (dagmamma, kontantstøtte, kontantstøtte kombinert med barnehage). Jeg er interessert i å finne ut hvorfor stadig flere norske familier velger denne form for barnepass og hvordan/hva de tenker om det å ha en au pair hjemme. For å finne ut av dette, ønsker jeg å intervjuere familier som har eller har hatt au pairer.

Spørsmålene vil dreie seg om hvorfor familien bestemte seg for å ansette au pair, hvem som tok den avgjørelsen, hvordan familien fant sin au pair, hvordan au pairen trives i vertfamiliens hjem, hvilke oppgaver au pairen har osv. Jeg vil bruke båndopptaker å ta notater mens vi snakker sammen. Intervjuet vil ta omtrent en time, og vi blir enige om tid og sted.

Det er helt frivillig å være med og du/dere har mulighet å trekke deg når som helst underveis uten å måtte begrunne dette nærmere. Dersom du/dere trekker deg vil alle innsamlede data om deg bli slettet.

Alle opplysninger jeg kommer til å få vil bli behandlet konfidensielt, og ingen enkeltperson vil kunne kjenne seg igjen i den ferdige oppgaven. Alle opplysninger skal anonymiseres når oppgaven er ferdig, våren 2008.

Dersom du har lyst å være med på intervjuet, er det fint om du skriver under på den vedlagte samtykkeerklæringen og sender den til meg på e-mail mbi062@student.uib.no eller per post Mariya Bikova, Elvenesveien 17 C, 5223 Nesttun.

Hvis det er noe du lurer på kan du ringe meg på 97 60 40 96, eller sende en e-post til mbi062@student.uib.no. Du kan også kontakte min veileder Lise Widding Isaksen ved Sosiologisk Institutt på telefonnummer 55 58 91 57, eller sende en e-post til lise.isaksen@sos.uib.no. Studien er meldt til Personvernombudet for forskning, Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste A/S.

Med vennlig hilsen

Mariya Bikova
Elvenesveien 17 C
5223 Nesttun

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt skriftlig informasjon om studien og ønsker å stille på intervju.

SignaturTelefonnummer.....

9.2. Appendix II – Interview guide

Kort om familien

Barn - hvor mange barn, alder, barnepassordninger, hvorfor, spesielle behov, fritidsaktiviteter

Foreldre – type jobb (fulltid, deltid), stilling, ansvarsområde, hvem gjør hva hjemme, hvorfor, spesielle behov, fritidsaktiviteter

1. Hvordan bestemte dere dere /du deg for å ansette en au pair?
2. Hvem tok avgjørelsen?
3. Hvordan fant du din au pair?
4. Hvilke oppgaver har au pairen?
5. Hvem bestemmer au paires arbeidsoppgaver, lønn, fritid? Hvorfor?
6. Hvordan reagerer barna på au pairen?
7. Hvorfor tror du dine barn reagerer på den måten?
8. Hvordan ser du på din au pair? Familiemedlem? Ansatt?
9. Hvilke personlige egenskaper la dere/ du vekt på når dere/du valgte au pairen?
10. Vil du anbefale denne formen for barnepass til andre? Hvorfor?

9.3. Appendix III – General description of the informants

Family one

Lonely mother with three children – two boys aged 13 and 6, and one girl aged 10 at the time the interview was conducted (March 2007). The family had had two au pairs as of March 2007. The first was recruited with the help of agency and the second was recruited privately. The family used both kindergarten and au pair when the children were small. As of March 2007 all three children attended school and the au pair was hired to be there for them after school. The family used au pair since 2003 and had two au pairs in the period 2003-2007. During the same period (2003-2007) the mother was a full-time student and a lonely mother. The family's grandparents could not help with the children as they were living in another town. At the time the interview was conducted (March 2007) the mother had recently completed her higher education and had started work in the education sector.

Family two

Two-parent family with three children – two boys aged 11 and 9, and one girl aged 7 at the time the interview was conducted (March 2007). As of March 2007 all three of them attended school. The family had had two au pairs, both of them recruited privately. The first au pair was recruited through a newspaper advertisement. The second was recruited through a friend of another au pair. The family had no au pair as of March 2007. The family had combined au pair with children's park, as well as au pair with an after-school care service when the children were small. Grandparents could help with childcare only occasionally. At the time the children were small the host mother worked 50 per cent (3 days a week), but she increased the number of working days as the children grew older. The mother worked in the education sector. The host father held a position as an engineer and worked full time at the time the children were small.

Family three

Two-parent family with one child aged 1 year at the time the interview was conducted (March 2007). The father held a full-time position at the media business. The mother worked 80 per cent in the health sector as of March 2007. The family had applied for a kindergarten place, but had not received one as of March 2007. None of the grandparents could take over the daily care of the family's one-year old boy. The au pair was recruited privately. As of March

2007 the family had had only one au pair.

Family four

Two-parent family with three girls aged 14, 11 and 6 at the time the interview was conducted (June 2007). The family first hired au pair when the children were 8, 5 and 1,5 year old. At the time (2002) the father had a full-time position in the oil-industry, working 14 days offshore and staying at home for 4 weeks. The mother enrolled a full-time study that required a lot of practice at that time (2002). Two of the children were attending school, while the smallest girl attended children's park as of 2002. None of the family's grandparents could take over the daily care for the children as they were gainfully employed themselves. The family had had two au pairs. The first was recruited with the help of agency, the second through a friend of another au pair. The family had no au pair as of June 2007.

Family five

Lonely mother with two children – a girl aged 12 and a boy at 6 months at the time the interview was conducted (March 2007). As of March 2007 the host mother was a full-time student and a lonely mother. The girl went to school and the boy was cared for by an au pair, as he was too young to be sent at a daycare institution. The family's grandparents could not help with the childcare as they were living in another town. As of March 2007 the family had had only one au pair who was recruited privately.

Family six

Two-parent family with three children – two boys aged 8 and 7, and one girl aged 2 at the time the interview was conducted (March 2007). As of March 2007 the family had had only one au pair who was working for them for a second year. The au pair was recruited through an agency. The boys attended school and after-school care institution (SFO), the girl attended kindergarten. The au pair was responsible for bringing the boys from the after-school institution, as well as bringing the girl from the kindergarten. As of March 2007, the boys were allowed to come home alone from the after-school institution, so the au pair was mainly responsible for the girl and the household. Both parents held full-time positions in the health sector as of March 2007. The family's grandparents were living nearby and could sometimes help with babysitting, but could not take over the daily care of the children as they were gainfully employed themselves.

Family seven

Two-parent family with two children – a girl aged 13 and a boy aged 8 at the time the interview was conducted (June 2007). As of June 2007 both children were attending school. As of June 2007 the family had had four au pairs and had used au pair in six years. The first three of the au pairs were recruited through agency and the fourth was recommended by a previous au pair. The first au pair was hired when the children were 7 and 2 year old. As of June 2007 the family was hosting their fourth au pair. Both children had attended kindergarten in addition to being cared for by the au pair. As of June 2007 both parents held full-time administrative positions in the oil-industry. The parents had full-time positions in the oil-industry also when the children were small.

Family eight

Two-parent family with three children – two girls aged 11 and 4, and a boy aged 9 at the time the interview was conducted (June 2007). As of June 2007 two of the children were attending school and one was attending children's park. Both parents worked in the oil-industry. The father was working in another town from Monday to Thursday and was at home Friday to Sunday. The mother had a full-time position in the oil-industry and travelled a lot in relation to work. As of June 2007 the family had had one au pair. The au pair was recruited privately through a friend.

Family nine

Two-parent family with two children – two boys aged 2 and 4 at the time the interview was conducted (September 2007). As of September 2007 the family had had 3 au pairs. The first au pair was hired six months before the birth of the second child and stayed with the family for about 15 months. After that the family hired two au pairs, each of them staying with the family for about half a year. All three au pairs were recruited privately; the first was recommended by a friend, the second was recruited with a help of the first au pair and the third was recruited from a spots-club in Eastern Europe. At the time the interview was conducted both children attended public daycare institution and both parents were full-time workers. The father held position in the financial sector and often worked between 55 and 60 hours a week. The mother was researcher with a flexible working time, but worked longer hours, too. The grandparents were very helpful with the care for the family's first child.

Family ten

Two-parent family with three children – three boys aged 15, 12 and 6 at the time the interview was conducted (August 2007). As of August 2007 the family had had two Norwegian childminders (praktikanter) and two au pairs. The Norwegian childminders were recruited privately, the au pairs through an agency. The host father worked full-time during the whole period the children were small. The host mother worked full-time when the family had Norwegian praktikants and 87.5 % when the family had au pairs. During the whole small-children period the family used different forms for childcare – day mother, praktikants and au pair combined with children's park. Both parents work as engineers.

Pilot interview

Two-parent family with five children – four girls aged 25, 20, 9,6 and one boy aged 12 at the time the interview was conducted (February 2007). The family had had two Norwegian childminders and five au pairs. The family had used both private childminders (praktikanter and au pairs) and public daycare (kindergarten, children's park and after-school care service). The Norwegian childminders were recruited privately. Some of the au pairs were recruited with the help of agency, other privately. The family had combined public and private childcare for some periods of time. All five children had attended kindergarten. At the time the interview was conducted, the mother held an 80 % position at the health sector and the father 100 % position as a technical supporter. The family was hosting their au pair number five as of February 2007.

As the pilot interview was one of the two interviews that were occasionally destroyed by the recording machine, only few notes from the interview situation are available. These are the notes taken during the interview (children's age, parents' occupations and number and origin of the childminders), as well as the interview report written immediately after the interview session. As larger parts of the pilot interview were destroyed by the recording machine, I chose not to include it in the analysis. The interview report (field note) written immediately after the interview session is presented in the opening section of the thesis (p.1).