

Choosing the lesser position

The motives and consequences of the choice of Dutch men for a caring and housekeeping role.

May 2004

Paper for the course *Inclusion and Exclusion in Contemporary European Societies*

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Introduction

Many people argue that the labour market is one of the most important domains of social integration (Alden & Huw, 1998). Participation on the labour market is generally highly appreciated in Dutch society (de Witte & van Ruysseveldt, 1998: 14). By the state, as the social policy of the Dutch government puts much emphasis on participation in paid labour (Hemerijck & Visser, 1999: 131; Nagelkerke & de Nijs, 2001: 44-5). But also by a much broader public, since jobs are supposed to give people access to well-being (van Berkel, Hornemann Møller, & Williams, 2002). According to Giddens, work offers people money, an activity level, variety, temporal structure, social contacts and a personal identity (1989: 506-7). Other authors make similar statements, and it is stressed that a person's occupation is the most important factor determining his place in society. (see e.g. de Witte & van Ruysseveldt, 1998; SCP, 1998; Ultee & Dronkers, 1995; Zanders, 1988) So it can be argued that many people believe that a person who is excluded from the labour market takes a lesser position in society.

Considering all this, it seems normal that exclusion from the labour market is perceived as negative and that people think overcoming this exclusion is a good thing.

In Dutch society however, there is a small category of men who voluntarily exclude themselves from the labour market by giving up their jobs fully or partially, in order to care for their children and to keep house. These are the so called house husbands.

Their exclusion is active and therefore different from the passive exclusion of for instance the unemployed, the disabled or illegal migrants. The active character of their exclusion is what distinguishes house husbands from house wives. The Dutch house wives have been forced into their roles to a great extent by strong cultural norms and structural circumstances, while this is not the case for the house husbands (Keuzenkamp & Hooghiemstra, 2000; Schnabel, 2000; van der Lippe & van Doorne-Huisjes, 1995).

I will focus on the Dutch house husbands, because they are part of a social phenomenon that doesn't seem to fit into the mainstream picture regarding social exclusion, since they *exclude themselves* from the labour market.

Therefore my research question is: *What are the motives of Dutch men to become house husbands and what are the consequences of this choice?*

Methodology

First a conceptual definition of a house husband is needed. I conceptualised a house husband as ‘a man, sharing a household with an employed female partner and one or more children, who is able to work, and who takes care of the major part of the housekeeping and child-caring, whether or not combined with a part-time job.’ The reasons for this conceptualisation are threefold. Firstly it is important to focus only on men who really had a choice, when they (partially) excluded themselves from the labour market, since this selfexclusion constitutes the core of the sociological problem we are dealing with. Secondly, the conceptualisation is close to the male equivalent of the house wife. The reason for this is that men who perform a role that was traditionally reserved for women, might experience consequences of that role that are sociologically interesting. Thirdly, the conceptualisation includes part-time house husbands as well as full-timers. This is partly contrary to the aim to resemble the house wives, but there are two important reasons for including part-time house husbands in the conceptualisation. The first reason is that the case of the part-timers might provide insight when it is contrasted to that of the full-timers. The second reason is that, when I tried to contact potential respondents, it became clear that many of the people who identify themselves as house husbands are in fact part-timers. Furthermore, the (virtual) house husbands group in the Netherlands, www.huismannen.nl, includes part-timers in its definition as well (van Veelen, 2003a)

This paper is based upon data collected in an explorative research. The research had an explorative character, and the most important method applied was the semi-structured interview. Another method that was used is a content analysis of the website www.huismannen.nl.

I contacted respondents for the interviews in several ways. Firstly, I placed calls for respondents on websites about house husbands, parenting, fatherhood and on a general commercial site.¹ Secondly, I asked as many people as possible to get me in touch with possible respondents. Thirdly, the method of *snowball* sampling was applied; some respondents referred me to other house husbands.

In the end, I completed twelve semi-structured interviews², on a great variety of subjects.³ Although it is, of course, not a random sample, I am confident that, due to the different ways through which contacts were established, the respondents make up a varied group. This view is supported by the variation in the background characteristics of the respondents (see *Appendix*, pp. 15).

The interviews have a high validity, when one uses the concept of validity in the meaning of authenticity: ‘giving a fair, honest and balanced account of social life from the viewpoint of someone who lives it everyday’(Neuman, 2000: 171). I tried to ensure

¹ Calls were placed on the following websites: www.huismannen.nl, ikvader.nl, pappa.bevalt.nl, oudersonline.nl and www.marktplaats.nl

² The interviews took place in April and May 2003

³ The interviews were about motives for becoming a house husband, motives for the type (part-time or full-time), advantages and disadvantages of being a house husband, their plans for the future, reactions from their direct and more remote environment, impressions of and feelings about media coverage of house husbands, the role of the government, the family situation during their own childhood and several background characteristics.

validity by causing as little interference as possible during the interviews. I only indicated the broad themes, and let the respondent do the talking, in order to avoid distortion caused by interference of my own views.

Findings

The first part of my research question is about motives of choice. In all but two cases the choice to become a house husband rests upon an ideological basis, which is followed by pragmatic decisions. These respondents made clear that one of the partners stays at home because of a similar ideology, based on the interests of the child. They believe that one of the parents should be home to care for the children, because that serves the interests of the children best; they think day-nursery and other child care facilities have a negative influence on children. As the respondents remarked:

'When you decide to have children, you've got to care for them' [1]

'The interests of the children are in any case the most important. We are inferior to that' [3]

'To take our children to a day-nursery was no option for us' [5]

So the choice is based on the idea that one of the parents should be at home to care for the children. But why do the men take this role, instead of their partners? The reasons for this decision turned out to be of a pragmatic nature. Three motives are of importance, in various combinations.

The first one has a financial character. In this case the partners decided that the one with the highest income continued to work, while the least-earning partner stayed home. The house husbands for whom this was a motive, were thus earning less than their partners.

To illustrate this motive:

'It turned out that I had to make twice as many hours to earn as much as she does' [2]

'My wife worked fulltime, and she earned the most, so it was quite normal that I was the one that stayed home' [1]

The second motive is also occupation bound. It is what I call the career motive. In this case the opportunities of career making and the attached importance were decisive. The respondents to whom this motive applies had less opportunities to make an occupational career and/or considered a career to be less important than their partners did.

Some quotations to illustrate:

'My wife is really ambitious and wanted to work' [10]

'Well, my wife has had twelve years of education to become a medical specialist. In such a situation you don't just say "I will quit, I will stay home to care for the children"' [4]

'We had to choose between my career and her career, and we have chosen for her career' [7]

The third motive is based on pleasure. In this case the pleasure derived from an occupation or from a caring role was of importance. When this motive played a role, the man enjoyed child caring activities more, while the woman preferred to work. This is illustrated by:

'This is what I like most. My girlfriend works, that's what she likes. So, well, it's fine this way' [3]

'My wife didn't want to stay home all day and I had no objection to that' [5]

A systematic representation of the findings related to the choice to become a house husband can be found in the *Appendix* (pp. 15)

The interviews with the house husbands also revealed a lot about the consequences, for various aspects of their lives, of the choice to become a house husband. Considering the theme of this course, I will only discuss the consequences related to social exclusion.

It became clear that the active self exclusion of house husbands from the labour market has consequences in the form of passive exclusion from other social spheres.

The case of the house husbands confirms the observation in literature that labour market exclusion is of fundamental importance, because participation in the labour market gives access to other spheres of social life (Alden & Huw, 1998). All of the fulltime house husbands indicated that the number and depth of their social contacts was severely reduced when they became a house husband, while this was not the case for part-time house husbands. So to say, their full active exclusion from the labour market led to passive exclusion from a large part of social life. They consider this to be an important disadvantage of their choice. As the respondents remarked:

'What I miss, are the social contacts. That world has become much smaller' [4]

'It is necessary that you can stand it to be alone. The circle you are in is very small. That can be a disadvantage' [10]

'It makes you lonely. Not sad, but lonely.' [3]

The exclusion from the social life meant here, is not the only form of passive exclusion experienced by the house husbands. Another form of passive exclusion is that full-timers as well as part-timers, are seen as outsiders by the imaginary 'male community'. Becker (1963: 3) meant by outsider a deviant from group rules:

Social rules define situations and the kind of behavior appropriate to them, specifying some actions as "right" and forbidding others as "wrong". When a rule is enforced, the person who is supposed to have broken it may be seen as a special kind of person, one who cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed on by the group. He is regarded as an *outsider*. (Becker, 1963: 1, italics in original)

When thinking of social rules, it is important to keep in mind that ‘they [can] represent informal agreements (...); rules of this kind are enforced by informal sanctions of various kinds’ (Becker, 1963: 2). Becker constructed the following typology of deviant behaviour:

	<i>Obedient behaviour</i>	<i>Rule-breaking behaviour</i>
<i>Perceived as deviant</i>	Falsely accused	Pure deviant
<i>Not perceived as deviant</i>	Conforming	Secret deviant

Source: Becker (1963: 20)

In this sense the house husband can be considered a ‘pure deviant’ in many cases, since he breaks the informal rules of the male community, and is therefore labelled as deviant by other males. House husbands are considered to be ‘softies’, as different from ‘real’ men, by other men. This is illustrated by:

‘I can tell from the reactions of other men that they consider it abnormal’ [6]

‘Mainly men say things as “you really shouldn’t do things like vacuum cleaning and ironing”’ [8]

‘When I hung my clothes on the line, the man next door said “you shouldn’t do that, your wife should”’ [5]

“Men often make fun of it, and try to make it ridiculous” [9]

The house husbands resemble the Beckerian outsider even more. Becker states, with reference to Hughes (1945) that the status of deviant is a master status, a status that overrides all other statuses and has a certain priority. Subsequently he argues that

one tends to be cut off, after being identified as deviant, from participation in more conventional groups, even though the specific consequences of the particular deviant activity might never of themselves have caused the isolation had there not been the public knowledge and reaction to it. (Becker, 1963: 34)

Some house husbands are really cut off from participation in traditional men’s groups, as becomes clear from:

‘I have entered a world of women and I had to learn to deal with that fact’ [3]

And even more from:

‘Men are not interested in what I do, so at parties I sit on the women’s side’ [8]

Furthermore Becker argues that to understand cases of intended non-conformity, it is necessary to find out how the deviant manages to avoid the impact of conventional commitments. Quoting Sykes & Matza (1957), he states that deviants deal with impulses to be law-abiding by ‘techniques of neutralization: “justifications for deviance that are

seen as valid by the delinquent but not by the legal system or the society at large.” This supports the view of house husbands as deviants, since the house husbands make use of a technique mentioned by Sykes & Matza, called *condemnation of the condemners*. This is the case when house husbands accuse other men of wrong behaviour in order to be able to argue that what they themselves do is right. Some examples are:

‘That’s what I see at school. Both parents of many, many children work, so the children are dumped at a quarter past eight and they are picked up by the day-care centre at quarter past three. Their parents pick them up at seven ‘o clock and when they get home, the children have to go to bed. We believe that this isn’t the right way to do things’ [2]

‘When parents work all week they have to compensate for that in the weekends. So these children become spoiled’ [1]

‘I spoke to parents who work both and said ‘we give our children quality time. Then we’ve got time for our children.’ But children need time for themselves. Their parents should pay attention to them the moment the children like it, instead of during an hour of quality time. I become a little angry when people say such things. I don’t think it is a good system.’ [3]

The similarity of the case of the Dutch house husband to the outsider as described by Becker goes even further. According to Becker ‘a final step in the career of a deviant is movement into an organized deviant group.’ (1963: 37). In the case of the Dutch house husbands such a group exists in a virtual form: as a website. The website www.huismannen.nl⁴ functions as a virtual house husband’s group. This virtual group shares the characteristics of the deviant group as described by Becker.

First of all, deviant groups tend, more than deviant individuals, to be pushed into rationalizing their position. At an extreme, they develop a very complicated historical, legal and psychological justification for their deviant activity. (...) While such [self-justifying] rationales do operate (...) to neutralize the conventional attitudes that deviants may still find in themselves toward their own behavior, they also perform another function. They furnish the individual with reasons that appear sound for continuing the line of activity he has begun. A person who quiets his own doubts by adopting the rationale moves into a more principled and consistent kind of deviance than was possible for him before adopting it (Becker, 1963: 38-9)

An example of an historical justification found on the site is an article by one of the house husbands who contribute to the site (van der Wekken, 2002b), that contains the parts of an interview with John Lennon that deal with being a house husband. Some quotes from this article to illustrate⁵:

‘Lennon: I’ve been baking bread and looking after the baby’

⁴ *Huismannen* means *house husbands* in Dutch

⁵ For the original English text I used Playboy Press (1980)

'Lennon[:] The number-one priority is her and the family. Everything else revolves around that.'

'Lennon (...) So I like it to be known that, yes, I looked after the baby and I made bread and I was a househusband and I am proud of it. It's the wave of the future and I'm glad to be in on the forefront of that, too.' (italics added by author)

Psychological and social justifications can be found in interviews with social scientists published on the website. To illustrate:

"I make a plea for caring fathers. These are fathers who combine childcare and work by working part-time", from an interview with psychologist Vincent Duindam (Huismannen.nl, 2002)

"Scientific research from all over the world shows that men can (learn to) care, just like women" (ibid.)

'Vincent Duindam, psychologist, writer, poet, father: he wants to be the living evidence that men could and should care' (ibid.)

[Question:] Men fulfil relatively little caring tasks, in the family as well as in society. Do you consider that to be a problem, and, if so, what division would you like better?
[Answer:] It is a problem because it leads to an overburden for women in the family, and to much discontent of women. Moreover, children, especially boys, get a wrong example this way. By that, the unequal distribution is perpetuated. (...) I would like the distribution better when, on average, men and women would spend an equal amount of time on housekeeping and child care activities', from an interview with Prof. Dr. Willemsen (van der Wekken, 2002a)

This is not the only similarity of the website with an organised deviant group. Becker continues:

The second thing that happens when one moves into a deviant group is that he learns how to carry on his deviant activity with a minimum of trouble. All the problems he faces in evading enforcement of the rule he is breaking have been faced before by others. Solutions have been worked out. (Becker, 1963: 39)

On the website help for various problems is offered. In the first place, information about government rules and policy is offered by the house husbands who maintain the site. From articles such as *Emancipation Policy from 2004* (van Veelen, 2003b), *Legal Leave Arrangements* (van Veelen, 2003c) and *The Right to Work Less* (van der Wekken, 2003a), house husbands can learn about the legal arrangements that support being a (part-time) house husband. In the second place, articles about child care and rearing are present on the site. Examples are: *Children More Often Chronically Tired* (Sikking, 2004), *The Computer and Television as Baby-sitters* (Maarse, 2003), *Respect and Obedience* (van

der Wekken, 2004) and *St. Nicholas Stress*⁶ (van der Wekken, 2003b). In the third place, information and tips about housekeeping are supplied, in the large sections *Housekeeping Tests* (Huismannen.nl, 2004b) and *Housekeeping Tips* (Huismannen.nl, 2004c). Use of the information on the site about child care, child rearing and housekeeping may lead to better results in these activities. Therefore it can be of use to evade enforcement of the set of informal rules that state that men should not engage in these activities because they cannot do it right.

The forum section of the site is designed for interaction among house husbands. They help each other in case of problems related to the topics mentioned above, and they can seek company and support in case of social isolation. On the forum, among others, the following categories are to be found: *Backgrounds & Information* ('How does one become a house husband and help with choosing'), *Care and Rearing* ('On the rearing of your children, puberty, and school'), *Housekeeping* ('Tips, recipes, and everything about housekeeping') and *Calls* ('To seek likeminded men in your neighbourhood or someone to discuss experiences with') (Huismannen.nl, 2004a).

⁶ At the feast of St. Nicholas presents are given to children.

Discussion

I have discussed the phenomenon of the house husband in relation to various dimensions of social exclusion, thus contributing to sociological understanding of a relatively new and unknown phenomenon. Together with this scientific relevance, this paper has some relevance for policy.

In the Netherlands, policy has been made in order to stimulate men to participate in caring and housekeeping tasks. This policy has not been very effective. This paper can help to understand this ineffectiveness. In my opinion it is partly caused because government campaigns tend to confirm stereotypes. Men are presented as belonging to one of two categories in the campaigns: a man is either a working man, or a caring man. Because a caring and housekeeping man is therefore implicitly presented as different from 'normal', the labelling of a man in a caring and housekeeping role as an outsider is stimulated. Several respondents noticed this:

'What they do now confirms [stereotypes]. It creates even more narrow mindedness' [3]

'I consider it to be quite negative. (...) Men are always presented like mugs. That has always been my main objection. It is something that is visible again in the latest government commercials' [7]

I think that men do not like to be seen as an outsider. In any case, this holds true for the respondents, as became clear from the interviews. Therefore, as long as the government campaigns implicitly support the view that men who perform caring and housekeeping tasks are outsiders, the campaigns will not be effective.

My policy recommendation is to present men in caring and housekeeping roles as normal in the campaigns, instead of confirming the division between so called 'real' working men and 'other' caring men. By presenting them as normal, these men are less hampered by views about what they should and should not do.

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Appendix

On the next page, the most important data are presented in an overview. The following terms and abbreviations are used:

- #** Indicates the number of the respondent. This number corresponds with the one that is given with each quotation from an interview.
- Education** The highest education that the respondent completed. *LVS* stands for lower vocational school, *IVS* for intermediate vocational school, *HVS* for higher vocational school and *Uni* for university.
- Duration h.h.** Indicates the number of years the respondent has been a house husband.
- Family size** The number of persons in the respondent's household.
- Political pref.** The political preference of the respondent, coded *left*, *middle* and *right*.
- Type** Indicates whether the respondent is a part-time (*part.*) or a full-time (*full.*) house husband
- Prim. motive** Indicates what the primary motive for the choice to become a house husband was. *child* indicates the interests of the children, *finan.* indicates financial motives and *career* stands for career related motives.
- Sec. Motives** Indicates what the secondary motives for the choice to become a house husband were. *pleasure* indicates the pleasure motive.
- Disadvant.** Indicates the most important disadvantages of being a house husband. Next to the disadvantages that are, due to their lack of relevance for this paper, not discussed above (*hk.*, indicating the burden of housekeeping, and *caring*, which indicates that child care is sometimes too demanding for the respondent), *contacts* indicates that the number and depth of his social contacts are problematic for the respondent.

#	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Age	46	33	46	54	42	28	40	42	34	41	44	59
Education	HVS	LVS	Uni	HVS	IVS	HVS	Uni	HVS	IVS	HVS	HVS	HVS
Duration h.h.	6	5	15	14	12	5	9	4	1	7	15	19
Family size	5	5	5	4	4	3	4	4	3	4	7	6
Political pref.	middle	left	left	right	left	left	left	left	middle	left	right	left
Type	Part.	Full.	Full.	Full.	Full.	Part.	Part.	Full.	Part.	Full.	Full.	Full.
Prim. motive	child	child	child	child	child	financ.	child	child	career	child	child	child
Sec. motives	financ.	financ.	pleasure	financ.	pleasure		pleasure	financ.		pleasure	pleasure	financ.
				career	career		career			career		
Disadvant.	hk.	contacts	hk.	hk	contacts		hk.	hk.		contacts	contacts	contacts
	caring	caring	contacts	contacts			contacts				caring	