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**The performativity of choice: Post-feminist perspectives on work-life balance**

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**Abstract**

A strong emphasis on individual choice is considered to represent a particular neoliberal culture, and is claimed to blur power relations and conceptually substitute feminism in contemporary western societies. This article adds to the existing literature by arguing that choice should also be explored as a *performative concept* – a concept producing ontology. The proposed “performativity of concepts” approach enables analysis of how choice functions as a site for the double entanglement of (post-)feminism and neoliberalism. Subject positions at the intersection of work, career and motherhood constitute the issue for empirical investigation. The analysis shows how the “exceptional career mother” is construed as desirable, but risky in that it easily morphs into a “failing career mother”, thus leaving the “part-time-working, good mother” as the least controversial subject position. A strong interpretative repertoire of “work-life-balance” provides “choice” with performative force. By exploring the performativity of choice it becomes evident how choice performs dichotomies and differentiations.

**Key words:** choice , gender, performativity, post-feminism, work-life balance

**Introduction**

“Was it really this kind of hectic life that feminists in the 1970s believed would liberate me? Is the only option for living a free, gender-equal life to become a career-oriented mother?” These questions, raised by Norwegian journalist and author Linn Stalsberg (2013, book cover, my translation), effectively summarize the central tensions in the contemporary Norwegian public debate concerning women, work, career, and family: the conflict between ideals relating to family life and professional success is framed as particularly pressing for women, indicating that what is commonly referred to as “work-life balance” is a gendered issue. Noteworthy is also the fact that feminism is portrayed as part of what fuels the tension by producing ideals for what is seen as “free and gender equal”. However, the posing of such a rhetorical is only possible as long as it embeds the implicit expectation of being free to choose. In this article I explore choice as another potential driving force for the expressed tension relating to women, work, career and family.

The strong emphasis on Individual choice is often interpreted as a signifier of a neoliberal culture, in which the political discourse of neoliberalism extends the rationality of the market to all institutions and social action. In the European context neoliberalism has, for example, been perceived as altering the meanings of concepts such as “responsibility” and “participation” (Newman and Tonkens, 2011). Furthermore, scholars have argued that neoliberal culture is changing feminism and perceptions of feminism. According to McRobbie (2009), the vocabulary of “empowerment” and “choice” has come to function as *substitutes* for feminism due to a double entanglement of feminist legacies with neoconservative and neoliberal values. Observed changes in western, contemporary culture, is also described as a new post-feminist sensibility, and a new gender modality (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2007; Gill and Scharff, 2011).

The ideas with which neoliberalism permeates the bodies and minds of today, co-opting the meanings of concepts and feminist criticism, evoke an urgency to further explore the mechanisms producing this “saturation.” In this article, I argue that choice, not only as a social practice but also as a main concept in contemporary culture, constitutes such a mechanism. Put differently, instead of interpreting the language of choice as merely a signifier of individualization, choice *as such* is centered as the main object of analysis: What role does the vocabulary of choice play in producing gendered tensions of work-life balance? Could it be that “choice” *as such*, rather than “feminism”, is producing the situation where there seem to be “no option but to become a career-oriented mother”?

To explore these questions I draw on theoretical perspectives on performativity (Barad, 2003; Butler, 2004; Latour, 2005), suggesting that the (material) performativity of concepts should be further explored. This reasoning is illustrated through an empirical analysis of media texts. The empirical analysis is conducted by use of discourse analytical perspectives, enabling the identification of interpretative repertoires and subject positions (Wetherell and Potter, 1988). Hence, my primary interest is not in categorizing or evaluating the options that women face, per se, but rather to explore how choice pivots different interpretative repertoires and construes subject positions that structure social categories, such as gender and class.

The article addresses calls for further research on understanding neoliberalism as culture in general and, in particular, the relationship between neoliberalism and post-feminism (Brown, 2003; Gill, 2007). Scharff and Gill (2011, p. 4) call for further empirical studies on neoliberalism “on the ground.” In organization studies, gender scholars have called for explorations of how organizations are embedded in a broader cultural context in order to enhance understandings of how intersecting inequalities are shaped within the framework of an organization (Acker, 2006; Holvino, 2010), and the this article can be read as an effort in developing an approach to understanding of how cultural context works, by pursuing the “performativity of concepts”. Thus, the article also contributes to the discussion on the potential for what Gond *et al*. (2015) promote as a “performative turn in organizational and management theory.” Finally, the article also reads into the ongoing debate on the metaphor of work-life balance.

**Work-life balance, choice, and the post-feminist gender modality**

The work-life balance metaphor has gained a foothold in organizational research in parallel with the transition toward flexible and fluid boundaries between work and life outside the workplace (Gregory and Milner, 2009; Houston, 2005; Kvande, 2007; Lewis, 2003; Lewis *et al*., 2007; Perrons, 2003). Although the expression “work-life balance” was initially used to describe new forms of pressure on employees, its widespread use has arguably produced and inscribed particular tensions in construing a dichotomy between two entangled spheres (Lewis *et al*., 2007, p. 361). Lewis, Gambles, and Rapoport (2007) argue that a changing terminology for dilemmas addressing the relationship between paid work and non-paid activities must be interpreted as a response to larger societal trends embedded in a particular contemporary Western context. Thus, the metaphor can arguably be seen as accompanying the trend toward greater emphasis on individualism and fluid modernity (Baumann, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) and as closely linked to the culture of neoliberal societies. A critical analysis of the work-life balance discourse has revealed the embedded assumptions of individual choice and personal responsibility (Lewis, 2003; Caprioni, 2004; Gardiner, 2009). It has further been argued that the seemingly gender-neutral nature of the work-life balance concept disguises the reproduction of gender inequalities (Lewis *et al*., 2007; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005).

Conversely, gender-sensitive versions of work-life balance studies have often come to be operationalized solely as work-*family* conflict, explicitly associated with gendered parenthood and gender gaps in care work, categorically focused on women and on the second shifts and double binds that working mothers face (Hochild, 1990; Jamieson, 1995; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). Furthermore, choices and priorities in work-life balance are often included as parts of the explanation for gender gaps in management or other high commitment careers (Halrynjo, 2015; Halrynjo and Lyng, 2009). Moreover, the issue of the competing devotions of motherhood and women’s career is often interpreted within the framework of work-life balance (Blair-Loy 2003), which should not come as a surprise, considering that work-life balance is the most commonly used expression with regard to the organization of paid labor and in relation to other tasks and aspects of everyday life (Gregory and Milner, 2009; Fleetwood, 2007).

The gender gap in management positions has, from feminist perspectives, been interpreted in different ways. From a liberal feminist perspective, the gender gap is a symbol of underlying structures producing different opportunities for men and women. Within the framework of neoliberal culture, however, gendered patterns have also come to be interpreted as merely the result of individual choice. The idea that individual choice is fundamental to feminist actions has been labeled *choice feminism*, which builds on the idea that as long as women “do what they want,” it should be considered a feminist act. A leading issue in debates over choice feminism is that of motherhood and the choice to opt out of a career and stay at home and whether this choice should be interpreted as a feminist act (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Wealthy, highly educated women have been the focus of choice feminism; hence, a common criticism against choice feminism is that “it often fails to account for how women’s choices are structured by economic inequality” (p. 245). Others claim that choice feminism represents a backlash against feminism, blurring into a new form of sexism. Gill and Scharff (2011), however, describe the voluntary return to traditional gender identities as part of a *post-feminist culture*.

The term “post-feminism” has been variously used to conceptualize contemporary transformations of feminism within academia, in politics, and as a cultural phenomenon (see Lewis, 2014, for an overview; Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009). The prefix “post” implies a turn away from a liberal feminist focus on institutions and regulations. Some scholars have interpreted this development as a backlash (e.g., Faludi, 1991), with others interpreting it as a new form of feminist activism, which emphasizes cultural change (e.g., Mühleisen, 2007). Gill (2007) uses the term *post-feminism* to describe an identified shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways in which (some) women are represented, thus emphasizing self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline, a focus upon individualism, choice, and empowerment. Instead of focusing mainly on “backlash” against feminism or “retro-sexism,” Gill and Scharff (2011, p. 4) emphasize the manner in which a selectively defined feminism is both considered and repudiated as a distinctive characteristic of post-feminist culture. Similarly, McRobbie (2009) maintains that in popular culture, the undoing of feminism is not merely about re-traditionalization; it is also about the idea that because liberal feminism was successful, feminism is no longer necessary. With the contemporary disarticulations of feminism, McRobbie argues that regulation currently occurs within an overarching framework of capacity, freedom, change, and gender equality. Through the discourse of empowerment, women are offered *substitutes* for feminism. Consequently, the re-enforcement of gender and class hierarchies has blurred, which choice becoming an important substitute for feminism.

Furthermore, in this sense, post-feminism can be used analytically as a “term that needs to be specified in its nature and content” (Gill and Scharff, 2011, p. 4). This understanding refers to a distinct sensibility that seeks to illuminate how norms of femininity are produced and operate independently – not necessarily in relation to masculine norms (Genz, 2009; Gill, 2007; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Lewis, 2014). McRobbie (2009) criticizes the belief in the transformative potential of cultural re-imaginations of femininity. Instead, she maintains that the aftermath of (liberal) feminism has resulted in a new gender modality and new reproductions of inequality. For instance, class positions seem to be embedded in the modality of gender and femininity, disguised by modern and enlightened “gender-aware forms of governmentality” (McRobbie, 2009, pp. 2-7). Accordingly, the re-drafting of gender hierarchies is produced through a double entanglement of post-feminist culture and neoliberalism.

**Situating the media discourse of work-life balance and career mothers**

Despite the general relevance of the topics of work-life balance, motherhood, and career, the data used in the analysis cannot be interpreted without considering the particular situation in which the media texts are embedded.

Several analyses of Norwegian culture have indicated a strong norm of equality (Gullestad, 1984; Berg, Flemmen and Gullikstad, 2010), and politicians and scholars have been eager to reproduce a narrative of Norway as extraordinarily gender-equal (Skjeie and Teigen, 2005). In general, Norway scores high on gender equality indices (Statistics Norway, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2014), and evaluations of the conditions for motherhood place Norway at the helm (Save the Children, 2015). Throughout the modern history of Norwegian politics, there has been a strong emphasis on mothers’ rights, coupled with other liberal rights in relation to property, inheritance, and suffrage (Danielsen *et al*., 2013; Christensen *et al*., 2004; Melby *et al*., 2008). Furthermore, the double-earner household has been the ideal for policymakers in the post-war period (Melby *et al*., 2008). The emphasis on women’s participation in the labor market has also been encouraged within feminist perspectives, which have emphasized economic independence as key to women’s liberation (Hernes, 1987). Accordingly, welfare politics have been shaped to accommodate gender equality in childcare, for example, through extensive parental leave and a father quota (Annfelt, 2008; Bugnum and Kvande, 2013; Kvande, 2009). Nevertheless, in Norway (as elsewhere in Western Europe and the US), “opting out” has become an established expression to refer to women who have left their careers to become full-time stay-at-home mothers (Blair-Loy, 2003; Gill, 2007; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Kitterød, 2005; Stone, 2007). In the Norwegian context, “opting out” and the debate over women “opting out” entail women reducing work-life participation rather than leaving the workforce altogether. I thus use “opting out” as an expression for women scaling back on their work-life participation and career ambitions.

There is no clear evidence that women in Norway are actually leaving the workforce in droves to care for children (Kitterød, 2005). Statistical studies show that Norwegian mothers returned to work sooner after childbirth in the late 2000s than they did a decade earlier (Kitterø and Rønsen, 2015). With regard to climbing the career ladder, however, the picture of women bearing the burden of work-life balance is clear (Lyng, 2010): a recent survey of senior executives in Norway showed a dramatic gender gap regarding work-life balance within this group. When asked about preconditions for their career success, 94% of female managers described their own efforts in organizing and performing housework and providing care within the family as crucial. In contrast, among the male respondents, 94% pointed to their partners’ efforts in running the home as crucial to being able to pursue their own careers in top management (Halrynjo, 2015).

The use of domestic workers, cleaners, and au pairs has increased dramatically over the past decade, leading scholars to hypothesize this phenomenon as a symptom of Norwegian dual-career couples engaging in “buying gender equality” (Kristensen, 2015; Stubberud, 2015). In addition to the increased market for domestic services, childcare is available and affordable to all Norwegian families, which is regarded as an explanation in securing fertility rates despite increased female participation in the workforce (Rindfuss *et al*., 2010). Furthermore, parental leave benefits allow one year off, with a father quota meant to ensure gender equality (Kitterød and Røndsen, 2015; Kvande, 2009). In examining the institutional context of Norwegian working mothers, it might seem surprising that there is cause for frustration, as the introductory quotation suggests. Why has work-life balance remained a topic of controversy and tension? As already mentioned, I propose that an enhanced understanding of such questions is possible if the performativity of the concept choice is further explored.

**The performativity of concepts**

The notion of performativity has its origins in language theory and the work of John Austin (1962), who argued that utterances should not only be considered true or false but also as constituting certain truths. Since Austin launched his theory of speech acts, scholars across disciplines have developed theories of performativity.

Feminist scholars have been at the forefront in theorizing performativity, with Judith Butler as the most influential thinker. Butler (2004) uses performativity to develop an argument opposing the idea of “natural” gender: “Gender is the mechanisms by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized” (Butler, 2004, p. 42). A central inspiration to Butler’s argument was Jacques Derrida, who criticized Austin’s theory of speech acts to move the understanding of performativity beyond intention, instead arguing that *citation* constitutes the force of a performative. Repetitions, practices of citation (by words, actions, aesthetics), are central to Butler’s understanding of how gender duality persists and how radical change can be sought. Thus, following Butler’s thinking, attention should be paid to repeated concepts. Furthermore, these concepts should be deconstructed in order to come to grips with how the performative force is constituted.

Another prominent field in theorizing performativity is science and technology studies (STS), in particular, actor-network theory (ANT). ANT encompasses an understanding of how groups of various kinds – entities or facts – emerge and are upheld through continuous actions and events by making and remaking associations, often by means of performatives (Latour, 2005). Latour distinguishes between “ostensive” and “performative” definitions: “the object of an ostensive definition remains there, whatever happens to the index of the onlooker. But the object of a performative definition vanishes when it is no longer performed – or if it stays, then it means that other actors have taken over the relay” (p. 37). According to ANT, neither society nor the social can be assumed to preexist; however, the division between ostensive and performative implies that not all things are performative. Hence, ANT analyses require the tracing of actors to locate and identify performatives. Latour’s main point is that the identification of a performative is always an empirical question, which requires scrutiny of whether the performative can make its object vanish if taken away.

Barad (2003) offers another perspective on performativity whereby neither discourse nor action is positioned as the most relevant performative. Barad advocates an understanding of performativity that contests the privilege of language in constituting “reality” and proposes a “post-humanist materialist account of performativity that challenges the positioning of materiality as either a given or a mere effect of human agency” (p. 827). She argues that a performative understanding of discursive practices challenges “representationalism,” that is, words representing culture (or nature for that sake). Barad’s notion of performativity thus opens the possibility of thinking about concepts as performative in a materialist sense, not as representational, but as entities enabling reality. Thus, performative concepts create ontology.

One commonality among performatives of any kind is that they inscribe perceptions of what is “real.” Different theoretizations, however emphasise awarness to the different aspects of discourse, practices and materiality. In the following analysis I seek to combine elements on performativity. Pursuing empirical analyses the opening question on the role of choice in producing gendered tensions of work-life balance can be rephrased as: How does choice uphold a reality depending on that very concept? How does the performative concept of choice create ontology?

**Analytical strategy**

In this paper, the performative concept of choice was identified by investigating three textual sites: literature on post-feminism, literature on work-life balance, and media discourses on women who combine career with motherhood.

The subsequent step, thus, is to deconstruct the performative concept and ascertain the kind of ontology it produces. What does the vocabulary of choice bring into being? In order to maintain emphasis on the concept as a “discursive materiality” (in the Baradian sense), I have chosen to draw on analytical tools from discourse analysis, providing a lens for what is performed by the concept of choice, namely, the concepts of interpretative repertoires and subject positions. Importantly, in taking the performative-concept approach to studying media texts, I am not interpreting the texts as representations of social practices or patterns. Rather, I am more concerned with how the media narratives and interpretative repertoires therein participate in producing the reality (Riessman, 2008). Thus, even though, the practices described in social studies of career mothers and gendered patters of work-life is just as real – there is no reason to compare in order to prove whether the media discourse is “true” or “false”. However, it is relevant to pinpoint how the subject positions produced in the media produces certain ontology in its own right – that might not coincide with patterns of social behavior.

Mass media (e.g., the tabloid news press) form a relevant site for studying contemporary discourses due to their commonality and the fact that their texts are dependent on citing the societal discourses of which they are part in order to make sense (Gauntlett, 2002). Since space is limited, texts need to communicate effectively, and meaning is conveyed in compressed narratives, simplified storylines, and polarization positions (Hjarvard, 2008). Sense-making in the mass media is produced largely by condensing collective interpretative repertoires.

Interpretative repertoires are relatively coherent understandings of a given phenomenon and are identified in analytical work as “common sense” and “taken-for-grantedness” implicitly or explicitly embedded in the text. Interpretative repertoires can thus be found in what is not said in the text, that is, in implicit knowledge and meaning, which are recognizable across texts. Every unit of text, however, often contains a multiplicity of interpretative repertoires at play in producing sense (Edley, 2001).

Media texts, which constitute the empirical basis for the present analysis, are interpreted as representations of *available* interpretative repertoires, as part of the resources available for the sense-making process surrounding everyday life (Wetherell and Potter, 1988), and as actively participating in creating ontology (Barad, 2003). Motherhood ideals, for instance, are a phenomenon inscribed to a strong interpretative repertoire in the media discourse, and there are certain commonsensical ways of evaluating “good” and “bad” mothering.

Notwithstanding, the analysis of representations of available interpretative repertoires is only the first step towards activating a discussion on the performativity of concepts. The next step, which addresses the effects of certain interpretative repertoires, is to identify how the interpretative repertoires construe certain subject positions. The term *subject position* is used to describe points of potential identification and cultural imagery, enabling people to understand themselves and make sense of relationships (Wetherell, 2004, pp. 23-24). Subject positions can draw on multiple interpretative repertoires, even implying ideological dilemmas (Edley, 2001).

In feminist organization studies, the engendering of subject positions constitutes a core interest (Calás and Smircich, 2006). In post-feminist analysis, it is also a common analytical concept in describing new femininities (see, e.g., Gill and Scharff, 2011). Again, we discuss cultural sense-making; noteworthy, the term subject position does not point to a personally defined and complex identity but rather to common ideas about how one can identify as a certain category of self. However, subject positions are often identified as representations of social life. In the present analysis I regard subject positions as ontological, and accordingly the subject positions are seen as performed by choice.

Combining the insights of the centrality of choice in neoliberal and post-feminist culture, as well as in how the issue of work-life balance is framed, it is fundamental to understand the performativity of choice; not only are choices structured by economic, institutional, social, and cultural conditions, but choice can also be thought of as a performative concept structuring sense-making, producing ontology. Choice can be studied as a site for the double entanglement of neoliberalism and post-feminism instead of being seen as merely substituting feminism.

**Methods**

The empirical material consists of texts from the Norwegian press. The data were gathered as part of a research project exploring representations of gender and power in arenas surrounding organizations and powerful institutions in contemporary Norway. To understand the persistence of gender as a symbolic and social order within organizations, the societal context and cultural imaginings of gender were noted as one area of research. One figure of interest was thus the career woman. The term *career woman* was invented during the 1960s to describe women who prioritized professional ambitions over having children. The term was associated with a modern and progressive femininity (Helson, 1972) and continues to describe women pursuing professional ambitions. The connotations, however, are not necessarily associated with the positive aspects of progressive femininity. How was the image of women prioritizing work achievements represented in the mainstream mass media? Following this research interest, the empirical material was sampled through systematic searches in the Retriever database, ATEKST, which includes all Norwegian newspapers in print and online (see retriever.no).

Database searches were conducted for the term “career woman” (*karrierekvinne*) in all national print media from 2007–2013. The time span was chosen based on previous media analyses and was updated when the research was conducted. The data were sampled during January 2014. In a previous study of media representations of feminism, I identified the period after 2007 as being characterized by a number of political actors oriented toward the political right wing, either as liberals or conservatives, reclaiming the notion of “feminism” in the Norwegian public debate (Sørensen, 2014). I was thus interested in exploring the representations of gender in the media during the same period, also expecting to find traces of influence of the changing landscape of controversy over feminism. The initial search was manually screened for double hits and minor texts, such as advertisements for TV series, resulting in a base of 220 individual texts, which included news coverage, feature articles, and opinion pieces. After the first screening for form, genre, and main content, the selected texts were uploaded to a software program, atlas.ti, which was originally developed for work based on grounded theory. The material was thereafter coded in two rounds: first, a more detailed coding of content focused on the wording and phrases applied in the texts enabled me to see the patterns of formulations and the ways of presenting career women.

A striking observation from the overview of the material was that of the 220 articles mentioning the term “career woman” (*karrierekvinne*), 90 used the specific expression “career woman and mother” (*karrierekvinne og mor*). This initial observation provided a clear indication of two distinct categories of femininity at play in the media representations. Furthermore, the phrase indicates a strong emphasis on the combination of career and family – of work-life balance – in addition to the two categories of femininity. Of the 90 texts using the particular phrase “career woman and mother,” only 19 addressed gender equality. The remaining articles used the phrase to describe successful women or, as was the case in a smaller sample of the selected material, to criticize the choices of particular women or the generalized “career woman.”

In parallel with working on systematizing and coding the media texts, I reviewed research literature on working mothers and work-life balance. A number of these studies addressed choice as a crucial issue – either as an observed practice or, from feminist perspectives, as an opportunity or problem for women. Furthermore, the controversy over choice within the frame of feminism and post-feminism sensitized my reading of the empirical material, raising awareness particularly of the concept of choice. Thus, for a more detailed analysis of the textual dynamics at work in the media, I revisited the empirical material, skimming through the selected texts again and selecting texts in which I found the categories of “motherhood,” “career woman,” and “choice” at play but in what intuitively seemed to represent different representations of voices and positions. Thus, the analyzed empirical material consisted of a selection of texts explicitly addressing choice, career, and mothering These texts provided a good basis for studying the discourse of work-life balance.

Following the lead of both critical discussions of work-life balance and the contested concept of post-feminism, I observed that the vocabulary of choice frequently occurred in the collected material. Based on the theoretical assumption of a strong impact of the metaphor of work-life balance and combined with brief accounts of the historical, institutional, and sociological contexts of the media texts, one would expect choice to be entangled in discourses of both “gender equality” and “work-life balance.” Hence, I attempted to identify these discourses in the material, looking specifically for expressions of the lack of either equality or balance – i.e., seeking problem representations.

The third stage of my analytical work, which consisted of investigating problematic representations of the inequalities and differentiations produced in the texts, was inspired by discourse analysis (Phillips and Hardy, 2002; Wetherell and Potter, 1988; Wetherell, 2004). In particular, I sought to identify interpretative repertoires and the production of subject positions (Edley, 2001). I read the texts attentively and repeatedly, developing a sense of the role played by the concept of choice in the texts. Choice was identified as either expressed directly in explicit language by expressions (“She had to choose,” “I made the choice,” “there was no option but to….” etc.) or as an implicit presumption in the texts. The implicit representation of choice was found partly in silence, i.e., in what was not said but taken for granted by what was explicitly worded, as well as in referring to the practice of choosing by using other words, e.g., “I feel the responsibility to do what is right for my family.” In the implicit cases, the context was important for interpretation. In general, I found that the framing was seldom about “doing the right thing” in terms of taking financial responsibility, for instance. “Doing the right thing” and “taking responsibility” as well as “feeling trapped” or “no matter what I do, I do it wrong” were interpreted as expressions subsuming the positioning of women in relation to family and work, which drew on the discourse of individual choice.

**Subject positions in the intersection of work, career and motherhood**

I now present strategically selected examples from the empirical material to illustrate how subject positions are construed and the interpretative repertoires that constitute resources for sense-making. The performative function of choice is emphasized with the underpinning norm of work-life balance.

*The part-time working, good mother*

A frequently occurring story in the media is that of aspiring women opting out of career ambitions to have children due to the perceived impossibility of maintaining a work-life balance after having children. This idea is illustrated by the following quotation from an interview with a recruitment consultant: “It is not that men still create barriers to women becoming top executives; it is that women themselves are opting out because they feel it is too difficult to combine managerial positions with their private situations.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Men are explicitly absolved from the responsibility of excluding women; hence, gender hierarchy is assumed to be irrelevant, corroborating McRobbies’ (2009) argument of the blurring of gender hierarchies though the vocabulary of choice. Furthermore, women are represented as making choices on the basis of “feelings” rather than external constraints. Considering the extensive use of childcare facilities for children one year and older, the strong emphasis on the importance of intensive mothering during the infant stage is striking, indicating the strengths of the “good mother” script, which, precisely because of the widespread use of childcare outside the home, might increase the symbolic value of mothering for infants.

Furthermore, choice seems to be constitutional in the sense of provocation. A mother *could* choose differently; implicit in this statement is the script of a good mother as one who opts out of career ambitions. This sense of there being *no choice*, but still a strong *imperative to choose*, is accurately illustrated in the newspaper heading: “Women who want a career need to choose.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

That choice is addressed specifically to women opting for careers, with no mention of an alternative option, thus exemplifying what Ravn (2005) calls the “cultural imperative of having children.” Hence, as in the previous example, choice is activated as a distributor of responsibility, not only for making choices but also implicitly for making the *right* choice. The evaluation criteria for making good choices when combining children and a career or – in this case – opting out of a career to prioritize children (or *choosing* not to have children if devoted to a demanding career) are constituted by gendered norms and are evaluated by standards relating to the “best interest of the child” – a consistent and barely challenged discourse. The option of pursuing a career is rooted in the less consistent discourse of women’s liberation and gender equality. Adding pressure to this situation is the underlying idea of the prioritization of motherhood as *natural*, as illustrated below:

—I don’t see the problem. We live in 2013, and so women should do what they want to, and every family should decide what is best for itself. (Einar Øgrey Bransdal, owner of Netthandelen)

In his opinion, it is natural that women and men choose different professions and that women are more likely to choose part-time work.

—We are different, and in some families, the man wants to stay at home. This is all good. However, I think that due to maternal instincts, most women prefer to stay at home when their children are young. Then, there will also be more part-time work. It is not that men don’t care, but we are different. (Bransdal)[[3]](#endnote-3)

The quotation draws on the neoliberal free choice discourse, positioning women who opt out as doing the “natural thing” – making the “right” and “good” choice. Hence, the notion of choice allows the reproduction of traditional gender roles. The underlying discourse in the representations of women opting out is the discourse of good mothering associated with an idea of “natural femininity.” However, as noted earlier, only a small minority of women actually opt out of paid labor altogether. Furthermore, we recall the findings of a study of top executives in Norway, which showed that the vast majority of female managers performed their share of domestic chores whereas nearly all their male counterparts had partners who took on the housework and children. In practice, the opt-out scenario is more likely to provide a framework for legitimizing the choice not to pursue a career because it demands “too much” in terms of time, energy, and mental capacity. What about the representations of women combining career with motherhood? How are they portrayed, and does choice function as a pivot point for interpretative repertoires or as a performative concept in these cases?

*The exceptional career mother*

The media construes a perception of two conflicting scenarios – “having it all” or “opting out” – fueled by the continuous evaluation of women’s choices by the standard of “balance.” The polarization of options and the “either/or” scenario are not surprising, considering the dramaturgy of the news media (Hjarvard, 2008). Nevertheless, the significance of gender relations is ever-present (Van Zoonen, 1994). We should thus further explore how gender relations and other forms of differentiation are construed and produced in this mediatized scenario of “having it all” or “opting out.” How are interpretative repertoires produced, and what subject positions are represented? We begin with an example of a text on fertility rates between top male and female executives, focusing explicitly on how women in top executive positions cope with work-life balance.

In October 2012, a feature in *Aftenposten* was headlined: “I’ll have both, please! More female top executives have children compared to male top executives.”[[4]](#endnote-4) In the scientific research literature, differences between men and women in top managerial positions has been further explored particularly along the dimensions of age and marital status (e.g., Kitterø and Rønsen, 2015). In the mediatized discourse, however, there are few traces of any problematization of differences in life courses that combine career development. Instead, the “exceptional woman” is frequently portrayed. The vast majority of texts representing women as professionally successful mothers apply some form of wording, positioning these women as special and exceptional. The exceptional woman can be both admired and condemned, depending on the type of discursive frame activated in the text (more below). The point here is to illustrate how choice contributes to constituting the subject position as “exceptional.”

The article features what is presented in the exact wording as “an exceptional woman”: a mother of six young children and HR director of the Norwegian division of a large international company. She is framed as “having it all,” and most noteworthy, she explicitly narrates her situation in terms of choice:

The way I see it, there is no *must* in life. I don’t have to work; I don’t have to live in a big house in an expensive area. I choose to do all this. Moreover, my job provides me with energy because I find it enjoyable.

The quote implies a discretionary situation for the privileged woman. She portrays work as something to enjoy rather than a matter of necessity. That she reports living by standards requiring financial strength is explicitly narrated as something that can be chosen. Although status, power, and economic independence can be regarded as good reasons to pursue a high-level career, the quote emphasizes the joy of having the job that she has: the script of a self-fulfilling individual who is in charge of her own life – fully resembling the neoliberal ideal. The quote almost paints a caricature of the neoliberal individual subject, freely choosing her own life. The idea of women choosing on the basis of their own desires is present in most of the representations of exceptional women. Downplayed, however, is the infrastructure enabling this choice. Nannies, au pairs, and cleaners are briefly mentioned in the article but uncritically so, being portrayed without any agency, which is typical of texts in this category. Instead, the emphasis is on how the career mother in focus manages the logistics of the home in addition to her high-commitment career.

The subject position of the “exceptional career mother” is construed mainly by drawing on the interpretative repertoire of the neoliberal individual. The relationships and dependencies of other subject positions are silenced. Noteworthy, the articulation of choice results in the consequent silencing of class and privilege in representations of the “exceptional career mother.” Hence, choice contributes to the discursive universalizing of the subject position of the “exceptional career mother.” Although she is portrayed as exceptional, hence distant from the average “working mother,” the language of choice keeps the exceptional within optional reach as a universalized ideal.

Based on the notion of choice, the “exceptional career mother” is construed as a desirable subject position in the mediatized work-life balance discourse. However, choice is also part of the production of a different subject position, namely, the figure of a “failing career mother.” The coin portraying the exceptional career mother is easily flipped, morphing into a portrait of the stereotypical career woman who fails at motherhood.

*The failing (career) mother*

The subject position of a failing career mother was prominent in a heated controversy instantiated through the utterances of a well-recognized economics professor, Karen Helene Ulltveit-Moe, who graced the front pages of the national press by criticizing Norway’s parental leave benefit, which allows parents to stay at home for one year with a new child. Motivated by gender equality, Ulltveit-Moe left no doubt that what she prioritized was the assurance that women would be able to fulfill their professional ambitions. She argued: “Despite the fact that we have come far in terms of gender equality in Norway, there is still a lot more to achieve.”[[5]](#endnote-5) To overcome gendered inequalities rooted in the family sphere, Ulltveit-Moe suggested that women should be able to exchange parental leave benefits with subsidies for a nanny or infant nursery. Her claim was that the parental leave program was overly rigid in its assumption that all families wanted at least one parent to stay at home during an infant’s first year. She asserted:[[6]](#endnote-6)

Not everybody is in a family situation where the man says, “yes” to staying home for half a year. If the man doesn’t want to stay home and neither does the wife, then what should be done?

In this quotation, choice functions as a premise, but instead of the positive framing of choosing work for the joy of it, as in the previous excerpt, the emphasis is on the lack of motivation for staying at home; neither parent will choose to stay at home with the infant if there are other options. Furthermore, Ulltveit-Moe emphasized the costs of building a professional career. She explained:

Many people think that they should be able to work from nine to four, then have time for their kids and everything else they want to do, as well as a career on top of that. These types of expectations are naive and unrealistic. If you leave work at four to pick up kids, you will have to work late nights to compensate.*[[7]](#endnote-7)*

This quote is not particularly controversial. Rather, it contributes to a common understanding of what is required to have a successful career: extra hours of work. However, unlike the previous example, which justified the pursuit of a career because one enjoys it, the emphasis on the demands of achieving career success does not resonate in the same way as the neoliberal discourse of self-realization. Furthermore, it explicitly frames the “having it all” scenario as unrealistic. Hence, the ideal of work-life balance is construed as irrelevant, and the facilitation of childcare is repositioned as a matter of producing equal opportunities. Ulltveit-Moe has thus activated a frame of gender equality.

This quotation explicitly acknowledges that both gender inequality and economic inequality influence the choices that are available to balance life between work and family. The man is positioned as being able to actively choose whether to stay at home or not. If he does not say “yes,” it is assumed that the mother will “have to” stay at home until the baby is one year old and eligible for regular daycare. Thus, the conflict between women’s needs related to pursuing a career and rearing children is framed as an issue to be solved by gender equality.

Ulltveit-Moes’ reform suggestion was not politically realistic in the sense that no political party at the time questioned parental leave benefits as such. The only policy debate on the issue concerned disagreements over the size of the “daddy-quota” (Kvande, 2009). Nevertheless, the initiative engendered negative reactions. In one interview, Ulltveit-Moe reported:[[8]](#endnote-8)

I have received a number of furious e-mails from women who state that people like me should never be allowed to have children. These are criticisms that make me very angry. Nobody will ever say to a man that he should not be allowed to have children just because he chooses to work 15 or 18 hours a day.

By describing work-life balance as an unfairly gendered norm, Ulltveit-Moe comes to represent not only the subject position of an exceptional career woman, but also another version of the career mother, namely, the failing (career) mother. In the media, Ulltveit-Moe was, like in the previous example, positioned as an exceptional career woman by description: “She herself is a mother of two with access to childcare centers and au pairs. She submitted her PhD dissertation only two weeks before giving birth and defended her thesis with a four-month-old baby in her arms.”[[9]](#endnote-9) However, the subject position of the exceptional career women was soon disrupted and transformed into the subject position of the “failing (career) mother” by the many comments and criticisms of her choice. Noteworthy, these criticisms drew largely on a framing of the “best interest of the child”:[[10]](#endnote-10)

A woman working 14-16 hours a day is not a good mother. You basically have no time for your children. If there is anything that children need, it’s time!

Typical of the critical voices was the questioning of the mothering capabilities of “career women.” The standard for good mothering was represented as intensive mothering (Christopher, 2012), suggesting that the only way to practice good mothering was to be present with the child and providing direct care. In criticisms of Ulltveit-Moe and her peers, the imperative of “having to choose” indicates an expectation that the only legitimate choice is to opt out of career ambitions and to prioritize motherly care for infants over work. It is simply not sufficient to ensure that the child is in good care with a nanny. Another variant of the criticism centered on choice:

If you think it is so terribly exhausting to achieve both a high ranking position and a family, then you should choose to give up one of them. I know that education is important, but isn’t this a “luxury problem”? After all, we are talking about the most resourceful among us.

The two criticisms illustrate the manner in which the idea of “the best interest of the child” is evoked and operationalized in the context of “time with the mother.” It is not considered sufficient to ensure that your child is cared for. A good mother will, according to the interpretative repertoire underlying the quotations, spend time with her children. The example shows another variant of blaming, which contributes to establishing the failing (career) mother subject position. Framing the concern raised by Ulltveit-Moe as a “luxury problem” produces a distance between what is implied to be “ordinary people” (working class) and the “most resourceful” (upper middle class). The statement further suggests the notion that choosing should solve the problem. Choice functions as a marker of an eschewed balance, producing class differences.

Hence, the controversy in the aftermath of Ulltveit-Moes’ initiative illustrates a clash between the interpretative repertoires of good mothering and gender equality ideals. The underpinning schema is that of work-life balance. Part of the provocation that Ulltveit-Moe produced can be understood not only in that she fails to accommodate good mothering; she *also* fails to accommodate the ideal schema of work-life balance by insisting on prioritizing career ambitions. Unlike the exceptional career mother subject position, she does not describe her work in terms of enjoyable self-fulfillment but instead describes the necessity of intensive and extensive efforts. Thus, she also breaks with the interpretative repertoire of the successful neoliberal subject.

The only alternative and legitimate solution to the career woman’s dilemma of caring for children while simultaneously pursuing career ambitions is voiced in the media as a matter of “choosing the right husband.” Drawing on a discourse of gender-equal parenthood, the subject position of an equal parent and career woman is construed. However, this figure is not particularly prominent in the media representations.

Gender equality functions as a frame for work-life balance, but it turns traditional gender roles upside down. This coping strategy, when represented in the media, merely raises eyebrows, indicating that the “new father” legitimately compensates for the motherly absence. The “best interest of the child” frame aligns with the “best interest of the career women” frame; they are not in conflict. How the subject position of the failing (career) mother is construed in the interpretative repertoire of gender equality was activated in relation to women and men pursuing careers. The message is that women, like men, should be allowed to choose to work long hours. This method of drawing on an interpretative repertoire of gender equality did not trump the criticism drawing on interpretative repertoires of good mothering, understood as intensive mothering, which requires that time be spent with children.

**Discussion: What does the concept “choice” do?**

“Choice” points to a demarcation between necessity and freedom and is described as one of the neoliberal rationalities in Foucauldian theories of governmentality, directing attention toward processes of self-governance and subjectivity (Dean, 2010; Rose, 1999). In this sense, choice is not merely a matter of individuals being “free to choose” but also being “obliged to be free” (Rose, 1996, p. 16). Choice is the act constituting individual agency, i.e., “choice” can be seen as a concept loaded with the power to normalize individual actions. Individuals are perceived as being in charge of their own destinies through *choice* – they understand and enact their lives in terms of “choice.” In line with this reasoning, the empirical analysis illustrates the act of refusing to choose – or the narration of actions and priorities in terms of necessity – as virtually absent from the media. The vocabulary of choice, however, permeates the debate on women dealing with career and motherhood.

Gill and Donaghue (2013) discuss the turn to agency in feminist writing, illustrating how feminism aligns with neoliberalism in subscribing to normative requirements of deliberative action and choice. In analyses of how women are repositioned from being perceived as victims to being understood as actors in international aid work, they demonstrate that the turn to agency does not necessarily challenge an imperialist gaze. In this article, I have showed that choice also constitutes differences in that it performs agency for certain women while others are left out. Therefore, returning to the introductory question – “Is the only option for living a free, gender-equal life to become a career-oriented mother?” – it becomes clear that such a rhetorical question only makes sense when posed from the position of women who are privileged to choose. The frequent mediatized appearance of the expression “career woman and mother” in descriptions of successful women indicates that the combination assumes importance in perceptions of womanhood.

The “exceptional career mother” comes across as the desirable subject position, maintaining the neoliberal ideal of self-realization at the core of its representation. The exceptional career mother, however, easily morphs into the subject position of a “failing (career) mother” as soon as motherhood ideals are activated as the main framework. The tension between the subject position of a career woman and a mother is created by competing norms. Both a successful career and successful mothering are narrated as matters requiring investments in time. Women pursuing both goals risk failing in the act of balancing. The norm of being a good mother by standards of intensive mothering seem to be more powerful than the norm of being a successful career woman. Hence, the subject position of an “exceptional career mother” can easily be transformed into the subject position of a failing (career) mother who is no longer worthy of admiration for her professional success.[[11]](#endnote-11) Thus, the least controversial subject position in the work-life balance discourse analyzed here is the “part-time working mother.”

Still, the introductory question embeds a claim that this subject position is under pressure as it fails to live up to standards of gender equality and individual freedom. Liberal feminism is associated with goals of economic independence and support for women’s work-life participation and success. In the quote, “feminists of the 1970s” are positioned as contributing toward producing the pressure felt by “women of today” while the implied cultural imperative of having children is left unchallenged (Ravn, 2005; Ravn and Lie, 2013). The present analysis, however, suggests that one could look elsewhere – and not to liberal feminism as such – in seeking to understand the gendered dimensions of combining career with parenthood. As illustrated, the vocabulary of choice is performative in the sense that it produces inherently ambiguous subject positions.

At the core of what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001, p. 55) label *reflexive modernization* is the shift from living for others to living one’s own life. In this shift lies the implicit expectation of self-fulfillment beyond what can be found in relation to others. Motherhood is, by definition, relational. Motherhood has traditionally been associated with constraints and barriers to gender equality and women’s emancipation (e.g., De Beauvoir, 2001; Haavind et al., 1973; Rich, 1976). The status of motherhood is no longer perceived to contradict freedom and emancipation but is instead positioned as a potential part of being free. This corroborates an interview study by Aarseth (2007, 2011) showing how upper-middle class couples combine dual careers and children through the narrative of continuously choosing family as a project. Hence, the family is re-created as a “center of gravity” but with different motivations than it would have had previously. Aarseth interprets these new motivations of the family as the site for a new configuration of a “gender equality project.”

Family and motherhood are culturally re-created as sites of “being free”; hence, opting out constitutes a legitimate option in neoliberal culture. Furthermore, the script of good mothering provides the opt-out strategy with the power of normalization – fueling the perception of women making a “natural choice.” The career woman figure, however, does not attach to an equally powerful norm for femininity, leaving the impression that “having it all” comes at a cost – not only in terms of effort and strain but also in terms of perceptions of *un*feminine subjectivity. Successful femininity now involves a tension between exercising the traditional feminine mode of relationality and the exhibition of individualized agency, which was previously associated with masculinity (Gonick, 2004, p. 191).

Several studies have noted that class and gender intersect in the production of working-class femininity (e.g., Skeggs, 1997; Skilbrei, 2005). Skilbrei’s (2005) study of Norwegian working-class women showed that motherhood represents a symbolic demarcation toward becoming middle-class women. The working-class woman positions herself as having no choice but to work. She views middle-class women, however, as free to choose not to work. Economic needs do not force them to work, so implicitly, they should choose to stay at home and care for children. Working-class women take pride in doing their work without complaints, and it is fundamental to be a proper mother. From the perspective of Skilbrei’s informants, complaints regarding struggles with time and the competing devotion to children and career are thus absurd. This working-class position is also recognizable in the criticism contributing to construing the subject position of the failing (career) mother. In other words: choice does not only align feminism and neoliberalism (c. f. Gill and Donaghue, 2013). Choice performs classed differences. In the introductory quotation this becomes visible in the way the rhetorical question is posed, and in the way “the exceptional career mother” is held to be the ideal.

**Conclusion: The performativity of choice**

I have explored the discourse of work-life balance by studying how subject positions of working mothers and career mothers are produced through choice as a performative concept in media texts. Drawing on theoretizations of performativity including emphasis on discourse, action and materiality (Barad, 2003; Butler 2004; Latour 2005) the present analysis represents an attempt at proposing a further development of methods for studying and analyzing the performativity of concepts. Thus, the analysis contributes to the elsewhere-proposed “performative turn” in organization studies (Gond *et al*., 2015). Furthermore the “performativity of concepts” contributes to analytical strategies for understanding of the relevance of cultural context in organizations, potentially enhancing understandings of patterns of inequality and difference (c. f. Acker, 2006).

Understanding choice as a performative concept, rather than as a notion representing social practices or a neoliberal form of self-governance, implies a strengthened emphasis not only on how inequalities persist but also on the potential for change embedded in conceptualizations. This is not to say that there is a direct link between performative concepts and human practices. However, acknowledging how choice functions in producing certain subject positions and in contributing to processes of differentiation offers an important step in exploring the dynamics of neoliberal culture. The next step in exploring the performativity of choice (as a concept) requires investigations of how the concept functions as a performative in socio-material interactions. Moreover, the *simultaneity* of how choice affects gender, class, ethnicity, race, and nation should be further addressed (Holvino, 2010).

This article has demonstrated how choice functions as sites of simultaneity and an entanglement of neoliberalism and post-feminism – thus affecting gender and class – and how the language of choice contributes to silencing processes of othering and to the creation of class privileges through compliance with gender norms. Hence, choice should not be seen merely as a substitute for feminism or as a signifier of neoliberal culture (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2007; Gill and Scharff, 2011). Not only is the vocabulary of choice a mere “covering up of power structures” (cf. McRobbie, 2009), but “choice” is also performative, a concept *producing* dichotomies and differences by the looks of individual agency.

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**Notes**

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11. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)