

‘I AIN’T YOUR MAMMA’

A study on women’s emotional labour
in heterosexual relationships

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Abstract This research explores how young women experience emotional labour in heterosexual relationships. It does so against the background of three main interconnected concepts, namely those of power, gender and emotion. Thereby, subtle ways are uncovered in which women reproduce gender stereotypes in their intimate personal relationships on a daily basis. The results include that, in the private sphere, women still feel accountable for the emotional care work usually associated with the traditional female role of motherhood. Specifically, they seem to engage in a conscious process of internal, as well as, external emotional management. However, the effort undertaken by women to supervise the emotional climate of their relationships, as well as, their own feelings, was also found to be reciprocal in some cases, showing that there are complex ways in which young, modern couples resist gendered power.

I Introduction

In 2017, Merriam Webster established ‘feminism’ as the word of the year. With an ever-increasing amount of celebrities, public figures and women of all age-groups in the West joining the common cause of gender equality, the feminist agenda seems to be becoming a mainstream phenomenon. In a “Case against Contemporary Feminism” published in the *New Yorker*, Jia Tolentino (2017) argues that the biggest ideological issue feminism faces nowadays, is that of being softened to the point of uselessness while at the same time being too strict to be directly applicable. This is a debate worth having, since it might not actually be beneficial for the enhancement of women’s status in society if their mobilising efforts are turned into a trend that loses its teeth and political meaning. The urgent need for women’s emancipation and gender equality is particularly evident in light of people’s continued struggle against the strict gendered identities they are expected to comply with by and from birth. Most of these identities are internalized, thereby prohibiting a deeper reflection on the social origins of gendered identities. This is the case for men and women alike. The latter still tend to fulfil their ‘duty’ for the personal realm, which exceeds mere household work and often includes emotional care work and support associated with motherhood. It is in this context that the concept of *emotional labour* provides a useful tool for showing how women ‘naturally’ take on their gendered role in the emotional sphere of their relationships.

Against this background, one of the most important tasks for contemporary feminists may lie in uncovering the subtle ways in which women are still discriminated in their intimate social relations despite the achievements in working towards gender equality that have been made so far. For this purpose, the academic field of gender studies is highly relevant for assessing and describing existing hierarchies and dynamics of power. While previously conducted research has put great emphasis on the gendered domestic division of labour (e.g. Cooke, 2004; Breen, 2005), the emotional, private sphere has received surprisingly little attention. Since antiquity women have commonly been portrayed as overly emotional - a role that is deeply embedded in notions of femininity. By the same token, women are commonly perceived as more ‘emotionally intelligent’ and naturally inclined to provide support (McQueen, 2016). Hence, intimate personal relationships seem to be a crucial point of investigation for sketching complex and sometimes paradoxical female experiences (Erickson, 2005).

Yet, the existing literature on emotional labour in relationships has largely ignored young adults and, instead, focused on traditional family settings. This study aims to enlarge the field on the sociology of emotion by answering the following research question: How do young women at university experience emo-

tional labour in heterosexual relationships? The major findings of this study include that it is largely through emotional labour that young women produce and reproduce accounts of their own gendered identity. Emotional labour seems to happen on two levels: internally - through a process of 'holding in check' - and externally - through a conscious effort of 'pulling'- both of which are time-intensive, exhausting activities. Nonetheless, some couples displayed tendencies of 'resisting gendered power' by means of mutual support or empowerment and satisfaction through open communication.

This study is especially relevant in light of its interdisciplinary nature: it combines gender studies, sociology and the sociology of emotions with political power dynamics. None of these fields can be viewed in isolation, since it is only through the lens of power dynamics that gendered behaviour and emotional conduct can be understood with regards to their implications for the private and public sphere. In their work 'Emotions and Social Structure: Towards an interdisciplinary approach' Scheve and Luede (2005) suggest that emotions are not only individually felt but, in fact, are relatively predictable phenomena that have their origins in society. It, thus, makes sense that the following study attempts to draw a link between the micro and macro level of gendered emotions by using the concepts of gender, power and emotion as a theoretical framework.

This paper begins by reviewing previously conducted literature and research within the realm of gender studies and the sociology of emotion. Subsequently, a theoretical framework is established in order to provide a critical basis for the interpretation of the qualitative data gathered in 7 in-depth interviews and one focus group. A detailed account of the methodology is given in a following step. The following thematic analysis of the data introduces the three recurring themes of 'holding in check', 'pulling' and 'resisting gendered power'. Lastly, a brief discussion and conclusion establishes the complex ways in which young women experience emotional labour in their relationships.

2 Literature review

During the 1970s, a growing body of feminist academic literature has focused on reconceptualising traditionally female tasks, such as child care and housework, as forms of 'unpaid labour' which require time, effort and skill (Erickson, 2005). This approach is important because the work people perform defines their status in society and, thus, sets the basis for their identity and perception of the 'self' (Daniels, 1987). The sociology of emotion and *emotion work* is a component of women's unpaid, invisible labour and, thus, of their gendered identity.

Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden (1993) have attributed this to conventional 'male-stream sociology' in which emotion is seen as something irrational and hence, untheorisable. However, recently emotion work has come to be considered with regards to employment and traditionally female professions in which women are required to manage their own emotions according to certain norms. These are comparable to 'feeling rules', a term coined by Arlie R. Hochschild (1983) to describe the creation of a "publicly observable facial and bodily display" (p. 7). This is when the actual 'labour' takes place: performing and managing one's own emotions in a certain way depending on the environment. Since emotional conduct is "essentially communicative" (McQueen, 2016, p. 18), mechanisms of control and reflection happen between people, both internally and externally.

Thus the concept of emotional labour has been extended to include self-management *as well as* the management of another person's emotions. Rebecca Erickson (2005) has defined emotion work as "activities that are concerned with the enhancement of others' emotional well-being and with the provision of emotional support" (p. 339). This may include listening, validating and pretending to feel something for the sake of the other, all of which, are assumed to require a form of 'emotional intelligence' (Hutchison, 2017). Women and men alike tend to find justifications for the unequal distribution of emotional support (Van Hooff, 2011). *Emotion work* has, until present, been investigated in the sphere of marriage and family life. For example, by DeVault (1999) who describes the long-term strategic choices that stay-at-home mothers make to comfort their husbands when they come back from work.

While we intend to adopt Erickson's (2005) definition of emotion work, our own research extends the existing literature by including young romantically involved couples. This is particularly interesting because it can give insight into how young women assume a certain role in emotional participation despite the absence of factors that urge them to such as financial dependency or children. Furthermore, the extent to which they comply with the general gender stereotypes could give insight into how cultural values might or might not still be assumed in a time of increasing notions of egalitarianism between couples (McQueen, 2016).

Although *emotion work* has appeared within the sphere of sociology by now, there is some disagreement on the origins of gendered emotional behaviour. Generally, there are two broad categories under which the existing literature in the field can be sub-grouped: those which adhere to some form of gender essentialism thus seeing emotion work as a result of 'natural' roles and those which underline a more complex, flexible system of ongoing reproduction and construction of gender. Duncombe and Marsden (1993) on the one hand, estab-

lished a first traditional outlook on gendered emotional behaviour. Their research portrays women as the emotionally demanding party in a couple relationship, while men assume a somewhat more passive role, ultimately, not satisfying their female counterpart. This position highlights a common perception about a general gendered asymmetry in emotional behaviour: emotional effort and romantic discourse is something primarily made and deemed necessary by women (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993).

Erickson's (2005) findings, on the other hand, suggest that these differences in expectations and performance in intimate personal relationships between men and women are a result of the close link between emotion work and the construction of gender. According to her, providing emotional support and management in a family is one way of 'doing gender', a way of adhering to a culturally accepted gender role that is linked to one's personal identity building. McQueen (2016) too attempts to move past gender essentialism and has concluded that traditional accounts of the male as being unemotional and generally unengaged, do not comply with the contemporary increasingly emotionalised male subject. Gender, thus, still "shapes the cultural construction of emotional habitus" (McQueen, 2016, p. 4) but is also learnt, reconstructed and renegotiated on the individual level. Delphy (1993) strongly supports this argument by adding that there is a need to discuss any prescribed differences between the sexes in general. Delphy (1993) states that "classifications are dichotomous and imply social roles which are not just distinct but hierarchical." Delphy (1993) considers social 'roles' to be based on the reproductive characteristics between the two normative sexes, and the work associated with each determined the 'status' of the person on the social ladder. Our project adheres to the latter perspective, as we assume gender is not an essential category; nevertheless, we do not deny its importance in constructing our social identities.

3 Theoretical framework

The following section gives a preliminary account of the key concepts that form the theoretical basis of the research. These are three main conceptual variables *gender*, *power* and *emotion* as adopted from McQueen's (2016) PhD-thesis on emotion work. The research takes the nexus of these three concepts as an analytical framework. Firstly, gender is defined as a "socially constructed and performative aspect of social identity and social structure" (McQueen, 2016, p. 18). Femininity and masculinity are primarily normative definitions of how an individual ought to be (Scott, 1986). The premise holds that gender is a political con-

cept closely connected to one's social role and perceived identity, therefore influencing one's experience of the social world. It follows that these consequent behavioural expectations result from societal interpretations based on one's biological sex. These expectations in turn confine the individual to alleged 'natural predispositions' and are particularly problematic with regards to the structural disadvantages they create. This includes the existence of fundamental gender inequalities and what has come to be called 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 2005). Thereby, adherents to one particular notion of masculinity enjoy great privileges and domination over women, as well as over anybody who does not comply with the dominant framework of gendered identities. As a consequence, non-compliant individuals suffer from psychological distress and social pressure (Richman, 1988). Within this study, the concept of gender is used to better understand the female participants' performances of their identity and how the emotion work associated to them can be an imposed obligation rather than an instinctive and pleasurable manifestation of empathy.

Secondly, the concept of power is understood as having a crucial social dimension, within which dynamics of dominance and subordination are depicted as being natural (McQueen, 2016). Power is, thus, referred to as a flexible concept that serves as a tool for the dominating individual or group to reinforce existing social structures. This social conditioning based on cultural practices is clearly visible in the dynamics between men and women. Gendered power, in particular, refers to the process whereby gender is used as a means to support a specific form of power: patriarchy (McQueen, 2016). This form of power is that which is relevant to the present study. The reproduction of gendered norms constrains people's agency as women and men are socialised into behaving in accordance to specific properties. This concept is used to demonstrate how women's attitudes and behaviours on a micro-level (i.e.: intersubjective interactions) are also moulded and defined by structural forces. More specifically, we aim to show that women's internalized behaviour might have root in pleasing their male-counterparts rather than themselves, as their attitudes are potentially designed to maintain the patriarchal status quo.

Binary expectations are highly visible in how men and women experience emotions (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993). This last crucial concept is a largely neglected variable in the social sciences due to its extremely subjective and ambiguous nature. Nonetheless, there always is a certain 'emotion culture' (Calhan, 1995, p. 225) that individuals conform to. This is best shown by Hochschild's (1979) pioneering ideas on the relation between emotive experience, emotive management and so-called 'feeling rules', all influencing individual conduct. Her hypothesis holds that feelings are not instinctive reactions of

the individual but are rather “embodied responses to social stimuli” (McQueen, 2016, p. 22). Individuals choose to display their emotions in a certain way depending on the circumstances. The emotional communication depends on the ‘feeling rules’ of the situation, which usually reflect sex-specific emotion norms (Richman, 1988). This is, hence, what constitutes “emotion work”: the attempt “to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling” (Hochschild, 1979, p. 561), an activity predominantly assigned to women. It is this concept which dictates the research inquiry of the following study. This last concept serves to analyse how embodying stereotypical gendered emotion rules allow or deny the reproduction of women’s current societal status and how working within the field of emotion might be crucial in defying gender inequality. Consequently, this paper uses the intersection of the concepts gender, power and emotion as a point for theoretical investigation.

4 Methodology

The epistemological framework adopted within this study takes a feminist approach. Thereby, the focus was “on the position that women occupy within a social context characterised by a patriarchal sex-gender system” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010, p. 36). Using a feminist lens for this research presupposes that the current social reality is afflicted by gender inequalities which leads to an ever-present male privilege. The assumption is that categories of gender serve to maintain the patriarchal status quo.

The aim of this research study was to obtain key insights on how women perform *emotion work* in their heterosexual relationships and if or how they reproduce gendered stereotypes in interpersonal interactions. The methodologies used to conduct this study were carefully considered as to produce the most accurate results to answer the research question. As such, this study takes a qualitative approach in order to allow participants to express their experiences in-depth. Before gathering data on personal experiences through individual interviews, we conducted a focus group interview with five of the seven female participants. This focus group lasted about two hours and served to design more precise questions for the individual interviews. To better understand how gendered identities are influenced by culture and social forces, the researchers conducted seven one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews. Each one started with some questions about the women’s backgrounds, such as their age, nationality, relationship status, some significant insights about their past relationships and relationships with their families (especially their mothers). The following section was dedi-

cated to the participants specific situational emotional conduct, such as, strategies of emotional expression, the importance of intimacy and communication. Some examples of the questions asked are: Are you emotionally involved and communicate your feelings to your partner?; Do you think your partner is equally invested/interested in your relationship as you are?; Do you feel responsible for your partner's emotional well-being?; Have you ever felt anxious to tell your partner how you really feel about something? The last section concerned the topic of conflict and negotiation. This included questions about anxiety, vulnerability and jealousy as well as, compromises and problem solving within the relationship.

There was a total of seven participants who took part in forty-five minutes to one hour interview sessions. The characteristics that were necessary to participate were that 1) they were Maastricht University students, 2) they identified as being female, 3) they currently were, or had recently been, in long-term heterosexual romantic relationships, and finally, 4) they were in their early to mid-twenties. The socio-economic status and nationality of the subjects were not taken into consideration. The participants who consented to being part of the study were Linn (25, USA), Koi (20, Germany), David (23, Australia), Catalina (20, Spain), Carol (23, Germany), Maja (22, Germany), Paloma (25, Portugal) (see Appendix 1). All names have been changed in consultation with the participants in order to guarantee their anonymity. They were recruited through a convenience sampling method entailing that most of them were taking part in the same 'wom*n's space' in Maastricht and were in one friend group. This allowed for an unhindered dialogue with the researchers.

All participants were carefully informed about the purpose and research framework before consenting to participate. They were informed about the research question, the nature of the study and the materials involved, such as audio-recorders. Participants' confidentiality was safeguarded by changing the participants' names and by deleting all recordings in the audio-recorders. There are some important limitations to take into account. First and foremost, the research was done by women about women, so there is an undeniable bias to this research.

We employed the method of *thematic analysis* to deconstruct and define the meaning of the information retrieved from the interviews (Gray, 2014). After collecting the data, we created preliminary memo notes considering the initial interpretations of the data. Following that, we carefully analysed it by using colour codes. Hence, patterns - in the form of themes - were identified to foster a link between data and research question. A theme was established when four or more participants showed similar experiences concerning a specific attitude. The final interpretation of this information is found in the following section.

5 Themes

In the following, the main themes observed in all interviews are presented and set into context with the existing literature and theoretical framework. They include ‘holding in check’, ‘pulling’ and ‘resisting gendered power’, which represents more egalitarian tendencies. Most interviewees described their own behaviour and that of their partners along stereotypical lines of gender construction. As Erickson (2005) has illustrated, emotional conduct seems to be a central area in which normative views of gender are created and reproduced. For example, female emotion norms hold that “women experience, express and be sensitive to feelings in general to a greater extent than men” (Richman, 1988, p.212). Although Hochschild (1979) believes that the feminist movement was able to transform the sex-based normative expectations, they seem to persist alongside rising notions of gender equality (Richman, 1988). In line with Delphy’s assertion that dichotomous gender roles for men and women are essentially hierarchical, the following theme of ‘holding in check’ is of particular importance.

5.1 “Holding in check” – Internal emotion work

The management of one’s own emotions, as traditionally required from women in service-oriented jobs, means living up to the aforementioned emotion norms and covering up one’s true feelings for the sake of seeming ‘professional’ (Hochschild, 1983). This tendency of keeping up a façade is a central part of emotional labour and has been incredibly present in all conducted interviews. It can partly be explained by the way in which the women perceive their own emotional behaviour, for example, as being characterised by frequent outbursts and overreactions. This reveals that certain patterns or “sex-linked expressivity norms” (Richman, 1988, p.209) are not only socially expected but also imposed upon women by themselves. This is a crucial issue, explicable by the so-called ‘self-labelling theory’, whereby stereotypes of emotional expressivity exert “social control based on self-labelling processes” (Richman, 1988, p.209). This finding can be related back to the concept of gendered power that was previously mentioned. The participants tended to abide to the performative expectations of their assigned genders, which in the grander picture allow the dynamics of dominance and subordination between men and women, respectively, to be maintained as the status quo.

5.1.1 *Emotional outbursts*

The reference to their own hysteric or ‘emotional outbursts’ was made by almost all interviewees independently from one another. While McQueen (2015) states that nowadays the male subject is increasingly emotionalised, most inter-

viewed women tended to see their boyfriends as more emotionally closed off and described themselves as overly emotional. As Catalina puts it: “I’m also.. because of my character I do have little hysteric outbreaks. And I just become emotional because of a reason and then maybe I really overreact and dramatize something”. Koi, too, says the way she started a fight with her partner once “wasn’t super justified. It was really just an emotional outburst”. Both Catalina and Koi explicitly see the way they express their emotions as an unnecessary overreaction to something that was, in fact, not that big of an issue. Catalina ascribes this to an inherent feature of her character which is part of ‘being herself’. In a similar fashion, Maja elaborates: “I’m really a person, [...] I have my heart on my tongue. I’m rather talking too much than not enough”. The fact that all interviewees explain the amount of their own emotional expressivity and communication as being a feature of their character highlights that they have accepted certain mannerisms as being somewhat natural and inevitable.

This shows an interesting facet of the concept of ‘emotional outbursts’, namely its direct link to the identity of the interviewees. As Erickson (2005) established, reproducing a culturally accepted gender role is linked to one’s personal identity building, which is partly the reason for why people internalise certain typical character traits. Consequently, women can perceive their emotional behaviour as inherent to their social identity. In contrast to Catalina, who feels confident enough to have her emotions on display, Maja points out that a crucial flaw in her relationship was her inability to show what she really felt. This was due to a general fear of losing the other person, as well as, seeming immature and overly emotional. Maja is just recovering from the break-up of a shorter relationship in which she could “never have an emotional outburst or anything”. What is especially interesting about Maja’s perspective is the fact that holding back her emotions and not displaying them openly has been a constraining and painful process: “I was basically hurting myself for the whole time by keeping it [her thoughts and emotions] to myself and [...] I wasn’t at all myself in that moment”. Evidently, the interviewees experience the possibility to disclose their emotions as a part of their identity and as being able to show a somewhat unveiled version of themselves. Having to mask their own emotional state, on the other hand, does not allow them to fully unfold their own character and requires a constant self-control and management.

“[...] there’s always still this kind of fear in the back of my mind like ‘Oh God, but what if I show too much of the absolute inner turmoil that it sometimes feels like. My mind is, it’s like I know I’ll push him too far and he’ll turn away and everything will be ruined.” (David)

Comparably, what David fears might push her partner away is ultimately the disclosure of her own chaotic and confusing feelings, which is why she subjects them to a form of censorship. The idea, thus, persists that her emotions might be too much to handle for the other person, annoying or simply “emotional nonsense” as Koi termed it. This perception might relate to an ideal image of the woman as a source of positive emotion, since this is precisely what women are expected to derive their social value from (Barbara, 2008). This seems to put the women into a position where showing their, sometimes negative or complex, emotions has the potential to ‘ruin everything’ and destroy the relationship, which is odd considering the fact that an open emotional exchange should constitute the basis for a functioning relationship (Curran, 2015).

5.1.2 *The irrational-rational divide*

This further becomes apparent when Maja describes: “I always felt like if, as soon as I do that [have an emotional outburst] I would lose him because I couldn’t be, you know, like a childish, irrational kind of person”. The fact that Maja compares more emotional behaviour to being more childlike and immature illustrates another crucial point: the ancient division between the irrational, emotional female subject as opposed to the more rational male still seems to be present in the way women reflect upon themselves. In turn, this recreates existing power dynamics between men and women, whereby women are only assigned tasks within the domestic sphere as a result of their alleged greater affinity to emotional conduct (Laqueur, 1986). In this case, the own perceived irrationality of the interviewees hindered them from communicating their feelings openly, thereby, significantly reducing their agency. This can be seen in context of Bourdieu’s theory of power (as cited in McQueen, 2016), within which agency and freedom of individual action is constrained by internalized external social structures. Furthermore, it could be interpreted in light of a process termed “masculinisation” (Richman, 1988), whereby, women feel that they have to alter their behaviour to conform more to male styles of conduct. Usually considered in the professional sphere of male-dominated jobs, in this case the attempt to seem more ‘rational’ is specifically related to emotional expressivity.

As outlined in Carol’s interview: “I felt very irrational in that moment and he [her partner] was always keeping up the façade of being rational. [...] I didn’t feel like he understood me but he tried to explain to me why I couldn’t possibly feel this way”. Similar to Maja, Carol, who is mainly drawing her experience from a relationship that lies 2 years in the past, remembers that she did not want to be seen as irrational by her boyfriend. However, to her, instead of an actual ‘outburst’ or criticism, even general communication about her own emotions did not

sufficiently take place because she lacked a feeling of legitimacy for them. Clearly, both, Carol and her partner were suffering from the gendered expectations that were super-imposed upon them. Indeed, the fact that her boyfriend tried to rationalise away her feelings made Carol feel even less understood and led to her closing herself off entirely. As a consequence, she kept her thoughts and feelings to herself, convinced that what she felt could not be shared and acknowledged in its entirety by the other person. Accordingly, most interviewees were paradoxically afraid of showing the entirety of their emotions to their partners, while at the same time feeling restricted in their personality by it.

5.2 “Pulling” – External emotion work

In accordance with existing literature on emotional labour, the aforementioned management and control that women exert with regards to their own feelings can extend from oneself to others (Erickson, 2005). However, the emotional labour performed by women seems to be subject to a certain ambiguity. Although commonly depicted as more emotional or hysteric, women are simultaneously expected to perform the majority of emotional support and care-work associated with a working couple-relationship. This reasserts the usual complexity of the female experience, whereby, a perceived lack of rationality and an undisputed responsibility for the domestic sphere go hand in hand (Laqueur, 1986). The following theme of ‘pulling’ accurately represents the initiative that women show in their relationships, usually accompanied by a process of extensive self-reflection.

In several of the interviews, the women explained that they have to engage in a conscious effort of ‘pulling’ from their partners the feelings they have: “Sometimes I have to pull how he is really feeling. Or used to. Especially in the beginning. That is just too much effort.” (Linn). Linn perceives this as a somewhat tiring activity that requires time and effort in order to get the other person to open up. In Koi’s case, this aspect is very pronounced and she mentions she wants to “give [her boyfriend] emotional support by trying to get him to talk about it [his feelings] more. So he’s more aware of his feelings by actually communicating them to another person”. Apparently, Koi tries to create a form of awareness of her boyfriend for his own emotions, which is an interesting way of providing support. It reinforces the notion that men are somehow unaware of, or not in touch with, their own emotions. At the same time, this recreates a one-sided dynamic whereby women keep trying to gain an insight into the feelings of their partner, always in the position of providing encouragement and assistance. Similarly, David attempts to get her partner to talk more about his feelings because she thinks he has a recurring issue in terms of communication: “It’s not that he tries to be closed but I don’t think he had the same upbringing in terms

of being encouraged to being emotionally vulnerable or like open with your emotions [...] so sometimes he needs like an extra push”.

This ‘pushing’ for more openness and extends to the sphere of resolving conflict in the relationship. DeVault (1999) assesses women’s emotion work in family life and states that most women share common behavioural patterns, such as, initiating to ‘talk things over’. Indeed, all interviewees describe how they are usually the ones addressing emotional issues, mostly met with a lack of comprehension by their partners. As Koi puts it: “Sometimes when I raise issues it kind of surprises him out of the blue, because he doesn’t see them like that”. However, what may again be seen as ‘overthinking’ is in fact something time-consuming, labour-intensive that all interviewees state they would rather not be left alone with. To them, being trapped in a constant role of bringing up problems or seemingly creating conflict where none is necessary is a lot of effort and an invidious task. Therefore, most interviewees report instances in which they strictly distanced themselves from their boyfriends for several days. However, it appears they primarily did so in order to make a point, almost as a way of teaching their significant other a lesson: “[...] with this he realized at least that I really meant it and I told him, you know, I also did this [distancing herself] so that you see that this [his behaviour] is something that really annoys me.” (Catalina). This strategy is something that, indeed, resembles a pedagogic measure, intended to produce a learning effect, rather than arising out of the necessity for more independence or space.

5.2.1 The mother-role

This pattern of negotiating and supervising emotional matters, which was observed in the interviews, could be seen as comprising a part of the traditional tasks associated with motherhood (DeVault, 1999). It is hence worth mentioning that some of the interviewees specifically defined their position in the relationship as resembling that of a mother. In Carol’s interview this aspect was especially pronounced. She recalls that her partner had quite a few emotional issues she helped him with but that there was no reciprocal support. In fact, “he was openly not interested in it, I think. [...] It made me feel like I had a child.” Since Carol has broken up with her boyfriend 2 years ago she has a bit more of an objective distance to the matter but she still remembers being exhausted by this kind of dynamic in her relationship: “[...] Then I also started questioning why, why I felt like I was the main anchor of support for him but not the other way around in a way. And why I felt like I was drained in this relationship [...]”. She also recalls how the feeling of being drained was reinforced by the fact that she had to take care of their joint social relationships and friendships with other people. Apparently, she was in the position of being responsible for her own, as well

as, her partner's interpersonal connectedness. Since they lived together and were very much 'acting like a couple', she was the one making excuses for his sometimes inappropriate behaviour and somehow compensated for his inability to engage with other people socially. This is somewhat congruent with the mobilising efforts that mothers go through to foster contact between their children and others (DeVault, 1999). Consequently, by engaging in what could be called 'mothering', the interviewees perpetuated a systematic picture of themselves as being more socially skilled and sensitive and, hence, prone to emotional labour (Richman, 1988). Here, we find that one of the most essential gendered roles in embodied in these young women; that of the mother-role.

5.3 "Resisting Gendered Power"

Nevertheless, according to McQueen (2016), not only are heterosexual couples subject to a vast number of social norms and gendered expectations, but there are also numerous ways in which they resist gendered power. This includes that, along with an increasingly emotionalised male subject, young couples may show egalitarian tendencies. This was, indeed, observable in Carol's case, where harmful gendered emotional behaviour and more progressive tendencies seemed to co-exist:

"Like he didn't make me feel that I was a woman the whole time, and I know that is what other people say they want from their relationship, but for me this, this feeling of having a certain role doesn't feel very good. Or having to look good or anything like that and with him I didn't feel like that at all. [...] I could stink, I could look shitty, with greasy hair, acne in my face and he would, he would be with me almost more than if I was wearing makeup." (Carol)

Here Carol describes that she did not have to prove herself as a 'woman' to her partner by means of her outward appearance. Instead, she felt secure to, at least physically, be her most genuine self and embraced the fact that she did not have to conform to common ideas of what looking and acting as a female entails. Most of the interviews actually showed that the women were, at times, fulfilling traditional gender roles and simultaneously felt empowered. This may partly confirm what is suggested by DeVault (1999, p.55): "emotional support is work, but it can be a source of satisfaction". This is particularly true for David, who repeatedly mentions the good communication that she and her partner have. She does not seem to mind supporting her partner emotionally because he shows his appreciation for it. As a matter of fact, she wants to help her partner to learn to be more expressive, a process which she recognises requires a lot of patience and understanding. This also shows that, ultimately, what determines whether emo-

tion work is perceived as positive or negative is the extent to which it is reciprocal or mutually valued. Since David is currently in a long-distance relationship this appears to be a particularly touchy subject to her and she says in tears: “Learning to value myself through how much he values me is really incredible” which explains the self-love she experiences due to the amount of love her partner shows her.

In fact, in most of the interviews the women voiced a sense of empowerment for various reasons. For example, Linn feels there is a balance in who takes the lead in solving moments of conflict and negotiation and some women saw their partners as their home and best friend. In Catalina’s relationship, being herself and having a very outspoken, emotional character is possible because her boyfriend leaves her room to do so and because she feels safe enough. She elaborates further on this link by stating that her boyfriend has a more laid-back character, thereby, letting her be herself. “[...] With [my boyfriend] as he is more of this passive person he allows me to have this strong character that takes up much space and this is nice because then I can really be myself “. Additionally, a common strategy the couples used to endorse more gender equality in the relationship was by preserving each other’s freedom and independence. For instance, Paloma and David have already lived in open relationships with their partners and, hence, moved past the traditionally monogamous commitment associated with heterosexual relationships. Lastly, the most useful way reported by the interviewees to combat hierarchical emotional behaviour was explicit, open communication. Despite expressing a wish for a more unhindered dialogue in other situations, both, Catalina and Maja also acknowledged the amount of successful exchange that happened in their relationships. Maja says: “He [her partner] was quite mature I think, very different from other people I met before [...] thinking, not immediately rejecting something on the basis of ‘that’s not manly or you’re being hysteric’”. This might be ascribable to what McQueen (2016) calls the ‘emotionalised’ male subject, which is increasingly aware and reflective of its feelings.

6 Discussion

These various individual experiences and distinct situational dynamics begin to sketch an increasingly complex and multifaceted picture. The primary insights of this case study are that women, who are at a young age and not yet tied to their partners in a family-setting, already employed a vast array of strategies linked to emotional labour and gendered emotion norms (Richman, 1988). By ‘holding

in check' the expression of their own feelings the participants subjected themselves to a process of control and self-reflection, which is an activity that is as demanding as it is limiting. Additionally, women subconsciously continue the cultural narrative of having a more emotional, impulsive and even irrational character which needs to be restricted and, yet, represents a major part of the interviewees' identities (Erickson, 2005). But since this definition of the 'self' as more emotional is incompatible with the alleged rationalism of their partners, the women actively try to be less emotional. Consequently, social pressure is exerted on the individual level through gendered identity building, by creating a tension between what is and what ought to be (Daniels, 1987).

Contradictorily women are at the same time expected to enhance the emotional well-being of their partners and report instances in which they give what can only be compared to parental advice and care-taking (DeVault, 1999). All these traditionally gendered dynamics have been described as something draining or labour-intensive, and thus contribute to underlining the urgent need to view intimate relationships as a reflection of socially learnt practices (Richman, 1988). These, in turn, continuously reproduce notions of gender and hierarchy, whereby, women are assumed to be responsible for the private sphere. Since the labour people do defines their status in society (Daniels, 1987), young women in many ways seem to be no exception of performing motherly tasks and emotional care work. This is particularly striking due to the fact that they all live in relatively critical surroundings at university which tend to foster egalitarian tendencies (Delphy, 1993). However, as has been true for most of the couples, great potential lies in reforming these ways of 'doing' gender in relationships through open dialogue and reciprocal support. In fact, being actively engaged in the emotional sphere of their relationships is not always something negative for women.

On a macro perspective, the implication of women's submission to their assigned gender expectations is that it allows the reproduction of western society's status quo: patriarchy (Gimenez, 2005). Roles related to masculinity - such as rationality and strength - are interpreted as being more valuable than their dichotomous opposites - irrationality and vulnerability. Women are structurally conditioned to nurture especially the latter qualities thus giving them a lower status on the social ladder. People benefit from embodying male-oriented characteristics as they are the ones reproducing the capitalist state of affairs, which promotes competition, reason and individualism (Gimenez, 2005). Anybody that deviates from this ideal is confronted with a sense of inferiority; one which was observed in most of the participants of this study. The demands of the current socio-economic system and its market-oriented condition extend into the private sphere, hence piercing into people's gendered identity (Gimenez, 2005).

7 Conclusion

In light of the initially posed research question - How do young women at university experience emotional labour in heterosexual relationships? – there is a crucial conclusion to be drawn. Firstly, a conscious activity of ‘holding in check’ their own emotions is accompanied by a paradoxical effort of the women to ‘pull’ their partners emotions from them, who tend to be hesitant to show them. Secondly, young couples have found several ways to overcome these traditionally gendered roles, e.g. through open communication and mutual trust. Thirdly, gender remains, first and foremost, a flexible concept which is constructed in various situations. This research has shown that its confining tendencies and normative expectations are, both, created and overcome on the individual level. Accordingly, social change can only be reached if tackled at the very foundation: in interpersonal relationships characterised by the position that women occupy in them. Further research is needed in the field of the sociology of emotion. This study could not cover several interesting aspects, including the male perspective of the situation, as well as, emotional labour in non-heterosexual couples. These will surely serve to create a more holistic picture of the social forces that shape emotional conduct. Homosexual couple dynamics are especially relevant for providing an insight into gendered emotional behavior in a context that is allegedly not heteronormative.

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Appendix I

I.I. Participants overview

	Linn	Koi	David	Catalina	Carol	Maja	Paloma
Age	25	20	23	20	23	22	25
Country of origin	Texas USA	Darmstadt Germany	Melbourne Australia	Madrid Spain	Berlin Germany	Cologne Germany	Lisbon Portugal
Relationship status	2	> 1	1.1	2.6	Single	Single	Single