ABSTRACT

POSTER PRESENTATION

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COMBINING LEADING AND SUPPORTING ROLES - FAMILY AND CAREER STRATEGIES AMONG ELITE COUPLES

Keywords: elite couples, family roles, career strategies, familism

In our study we explore what are the most important resources and types of capital related to marital relationship and family that help a spouse to enter the contemporary elite of Hungary. We identify typical successful routes and strategies followed by elite members and their spouses. We also seek to understand the influence of elite position on the relationship between the spouses. We identify supporting and leading roles in the sphere of career and family as an analytical tool in our qualitative research.

We start from the assumption that marital relationships\(^1\) play an important role in reaching, maintaining and transmitting elite positions. The spouse may serve as an additional resource for an elite member, whether they pursue a traditional two-person career or act as a modern ‘power couple’.

Theoretical framework

The career of an elite member is usually examined from a ‘teleological’ perspective: How was a person able to reach his or her current position that we categorize as ‘elite’? In that sense, a career means a person’s vertical movement in a particular professional field. Typically, an individual’s working career starts at the same stage of one’s life-cycle as starting a family. As the two spheres of life interact, a variety of career life-forms can develop. Elite researchers (Esseveld and Anderson 2000) constructed three typical career life-forms on a comparative empirical basis:

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\(^1\) By marital ‘relationship’ or ‘marriage’, we do not refer to a legal form but also include cohabitation and other forms of long-term partnerships.
1. Traditional career life-form: a top leader with a non-working partner (this life-form is often referred to as a ‘two-person career’)

2. Mixed career life-form: a top leader with a partner who works but does not hold a leading position

3. Dual career life-form: both partners have careers and leading positions (often referred to as a ‘power couple’)

According to one author’s previous research (Kristóf 2013) that studied longitudinal changes in the Hungarian elite between 1988 and 2009, the dominant type of marital relationship is the mixed career life-form. For historical reasons (i.e. women’s wide inflow into the labour market in the socialist era), a traditional career life-form in Hungary (and, more generally, Eastern Europe) does not imply a non-working spouse. Usually, it takes the form of a dual-earner couple where the job of the non-elite member of the couple is far less demanding – and far less well-paid. The share of couples pursuing a dual career life-form in the elite has been constantly increasing during the last two decades and by 2009 reached one third of the elite members. (Although this share varies across segments: it is higher in the economic elite than in other segments.) In these cases, the partner of the elite member also pursues a career characterised by high professional standards, continuous progress through a hierarchy, and high degrees of challenge and commitment (Dribe – Stanfors 2010). It is likely that he or she also has an elite or sub-elite position. However, the choice of life-form is influenced by the gender of the elite member: chances of living in a power couple are higher for women (Coltrane 2004, Kristóf 2013).

Research questions

The key questions of the research are the following:

1. What are the resources that marriage and family bring to the career advancement of elite members? These resources can be related to the home (the concept of ‘supportive background’, e.g. childrearing, arranging the practicalities of family life) or to work (advising, discussing, decision making, arranging professional/social networks)

2. What are the characteristics of gender roles in these families? Are there any ‘elite’ specialities? Do career/family balance problems occur less or more acutely in the elite?

3. Are the narratives of the elite member and his/her spouse different? Are differences in narratives position or gender related?

Methodology

In order to detect family strategies and resources that emerge from marital relationships, the units of our analysis are couples rather than individuals. We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with elite members and their spouses. We interviewed both the wife and the husband of the chosen families. With the help of this method, we expect to identify the narrative of the elite member and also that of his or her spouse.

The criteria for selection were based on the established definition of elite (Higley et al. 1991) already used in previous quantitative research (Kristóf 2013): participation in decision-making that affects the whole society. This definition was carefully operationalised in different elite segments (see also Kristóf 2013). Sampling was based on the snowball method. We conducted 40 interviews with the members of the Hungarian political, cultural and economic elite (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elite member</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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Preliminary Findings

Leading and supporting family roles

Family roles and the related division of labour and decision-making in the family significantly depend on the type of the elite couple: whether they are a power couple or not. The latter is strongly determined by the woman’s career. The question of work-career balance arises in the life phase when the couple has small children. Strong traditional norms related to motherhood and familialism (Dupcsik – Tóth 2013) result in a traditional, gender-based family role-structure even for power couples. Maternity has central and symbolic values and the father has only a supporting role in family life.

Power couples and mixed couples begin to differ once the period is over in which internalised social norms prescribe that the woman’s most important task is to take care of her family. Mixed couples continue family and career life based on traditional roles, where the woman’s leading role in the family is being a mother. By contrast, power couples keep changing the leading and supporting family roles between themselves, depending on their career tasks. The result is a more equal division of labour and power structure in the family after a more traditional period.

Leading and supporting career roles

Among the advantages of the dual career life-form, one can emphasise the mutual understanding of the spouses through their own work experience: advising, discussing decisions and even competition can be inspiring (Diem-Ville and Ziegler 2000). In a power couple, the network capital of the spouse can also be very useful in career advancement.

The importance of discussing decisions and professional dilemmas is also emphasised by mixed career couples. However, these couples profit mainly from specialisation. This life-form provides a supportive background for the elite member who can thereby afford more time and energy for work (Dribe – Stanfors 2010). In parallel with their partner’s elite position, the spouse with the supporting career role has a leading position in organizing family life.

Even in couples who originally had similar career expectations, the female partner lags behind in her career during the life phase of childbearing and early childrearing. In the meantime, fatherhood has no significant impact on the family-career life of elite couples. Though several interviewees emphasised the intensive father-children relationships, in most cases they do not influence the father’s work commitments. In some cases the career of the husband is already so advanced after the early childrearing years that it becomes a rational family strategy to continue concentrating on his career since he has, by this time, a much greater income. This may promise more profit even for the woman than investing in her own career. The other way is to make the careers sequential: when the children grow a bit older, it is the ‘women’s turn’ to find new ways in her professional advancement. Gender roles are altered depending on this choice of strategy.

Conclusions

Our results prove that among elite couples, supporting and leading roles are identified differently in family life and in professional life. In family life, roles are defined by parenthood and implemented under strong social norms in which maternity plays a central role, whether the mother was a power woman before childbearing or not.

By contrast, the leading and supporting roles of spouses in career life are defined by their actual work position and dependent on traditional gender roles. In the case of power couples the roles of wife and husband are based on a more or less equal partnership where the spouses support each other mutually. In the case of mixed career couples the relationship is more unequal: one spouse (usually the wife) has only a supporting career role. This defines a double leading role for women with children in power couples: usually they act as ‘leading women’ both in family and career life. Less commonly, they adopt a three-phase model to reconcile family and professional development phases (Rusconi – Solga 2008).
However, the script of this double role is under the control of strict social norms and our interviewees reported congruently that being a committed mother is no sacrifice at all. Our research proves that the ideology of familialism is deeply internalised by elite couples and determines parenthood-based family roles regardless of the type of career forms. At the same time, the relationship between wives and husbands concerning their career life is more a matter of individual choice.

References

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