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Feminism, Masculinity, and You

A qualitative study of self-described feminist men's understanding of the
relationship between their feminism and their masculinity



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UNIVERSITET

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Master's thesis SOCM05 - 30 credits
Spring semester 2026
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Word count: 21 980

Abstract

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Drawing on 8 semi-structured interviews, this thesis explores how self-described feminist men in Sweden negotiate the interplay between their positions as men and feminists, as well as how this process is facilitated and challenged by broader cultural discourses of masculinity and feminism. Specifically, thorough attention is given to the "uniqueness" of the Swedish case, as discourses that situate Sweden as a progressive utopia coincide with contemporary anti-genderist movements that highlight men as victims of feminism. Through the use of the theoretical frameworks of hegemonic masculinity, hybrid masculinity, and symbolic boundary-work, the thesis contextualises the relational nature of gender-identities and the meaning-making processes that the interviewees engaged in regarding their understanding of a masculine and feminist self. The findings of the thesis show that the men engaged in a multifaceted process of negotiating the interplay between their positions as men and feminists that entailed both an acknowledgement of an outsider status within the feminist movement and a strong belief that they are nonetheless needed for change to occur. In practice, the men believed that their unique role within feminism necessitated a deeper commitment to change in their private lives, and that they could challenge detrimental masculine gender roles through a self-reflexive reformation of themselves. However, the line between transforming or reproducing systems of oppression was delicate, and their beliefs at times led to contradictory consequences. Additionally, by paralleling arguments of anti-genderist movements, some of the men stressed that certain radical tendencies within feminism may have an adverse effect on men's lives. Ultimately, such opinions could have negative repercussions regarding men's support for feminism in the future.

Keywords: Feminism; Masculinity; Feminist masculinity; Hegemonic masculinity; Hybrid masculinity; Symbolic boundaries.

Popular Science Summary

The feminist struggle for women's rights has arguably come a long way. Although much is still left to be done, it is impossible to ignore the advancement that has occurred in regard to the improvement of women's social and political position globally. Few countries have come to symbolize this political change better than Sweden, which, through generous social welfare programs, has been lauded internationally as a role model regarding gender equality.

As the topic of women's rights has naturally been the driving force behind feminism, the movement has often been understood as a campaign for women, by women. Yet, as recent times have seen an increased activity of pro-feminist men in both the Swedish and global contexts, the question of men's role within feminism has become more and more commonplace. For some, this question is a mere technicality, as everyone is believed to be needed if change is to occur. For others, the experience of belonging to a gendered minority is believed to be central to a feminist identity. Can men then be feminists? And in what ways may men's feminism differ from others' feminism? These questions, and more, are explored in this thesis with the help of sociological theories of masculinity, social identity, and cultural discourses.

Drawing on 8 interviews with Swedish self-identified feminist men, the thesis shows how the respondents negotiate between different cultural and social expectations about feminism and masculinity. Although they often agreed that women should always be the focal point of feminism, they still believed that they had a part to play in the movement. In practice, they believed that they, as men, could more actively change their own behaviour for the better, which they in turn hoped would push men's gender roles towards equality. However, their reflection over their own actions and comparisons to other men would at times result in feelings of shame and guilt that could hinder, both also further, a deeper commitment to feminism. Similarly, the findings show that the processes of progressive change and reproduction of tradition can at times be intertwined, thereby leading to contradictory consequences. This aspect was perhaps most clear in relation to some of the men's opinions of contemporary anti-feminist movements, as they roughly agreed with the sentiment that certain forms of feminism impact men's lives negatively. As such, only time will tell if these opinions have an adverse effect on men's broader involvement with feminism.

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1. Introduction

Sweden often ranks among the highest in measurements of gender equality in the world (EIGE, 2025). Such statistics reflect a history of comparably progressive politics, coinciding with the development of a welfare state that facilitated an expansion of policies directed towards women's rights (Bergqvist, 2015:55-56; Hearn et al., 2012:32-33). Consequently, the nation's emphasis on institutionalized gender equality through legislation regarding, for instance, parental leave, women's incorporation into the workforce, and other policies directed toward the strengthening of women's positions, has led certain researchers to dub Sweden a “women-friendly” welfare state (Borchorst & Siim, 2008:207-208). In other words, an extensive political and cultural discourse surrounding gender equality, and in connection feminism, has permeated much of Swedish society in recent times (Rydström & Tjeder, 2021:69-70; Towns, 2002:157-158).

Although this national discourse on gender equality clearly emphasizes the importance of women's emancipation as a political goal, it has similarly aimed to promote men's engagement in the stride for gender equality. As such, the prevailing social opinion in Sweden has long been that all individuals, regardless of their gender, must contribute to the process of achieving gender equality (Bergqvist, 2015:63; Hearn et al., 2012:33).

Nevertheless, political discourses that situate the country as a progressive utopia have been criticized for blurring real-life experiences of gender oppression (Jezierska & Towns, 2018:55; Kirkebø et al., 2021:191). Likewise, while Sweden historically has been at the forefront regarding gender equality, the recent global rise of *anti-genderism* and right-wing populism has impacted the nation's political environment and cultural discourse on feminism (Karlberg et al., 2025:733; Off, 2023:452). The emergence of this staunchly anti-feminist movement has frequently been described as a conservative backlash that entails a counterreaction against perceived detrimental liberal values and socioeconomic politics, including a deeper resentment against progressive gender politics (Anduiza & Rico, 2024:479; Piscopo & Walsh, 2020:265-266). In the case of Sweden, this reactionary element of right-wing populism and anti-genderism has fuelled the support for the Sweden Democrats, who, by advocating for a return to gender traditionalism and a reversal of the

presumed dominance of a feminist “gender ideology”, has quickly become the country's second-largest party (Lilja & Johansson, 2018:84; Off, 2023:471).

This cultural and political backlash has further coincided with the popularity of reactionary masculinities. Often exemplified through the term *manosphere*, these distinct configurations of masculinity promote a misogynistic worldview where men are perceived as clear victims of feminism and women in general (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023:1393; Farrell et al., 2019:89). To combat this perceived societal wrongdoing, certain influencers, such as Andrew Tate, argue that men must “retake” their position of power, especially at the expense of women and other gendered, sexual, or ethnic minorities (Renström & Bäck, 2024:1788; Roberts et al., 2025:20). This dogma has had clear effects on the broader population of younger men, and as a recent study by Ipsos shows, 31% of Gen Z men believe that a wife should always obey her husband. Altogether, the survey, which included Sweden alongside 28 other countries, indicated that younger men today adhere to much more traditional gender values compared to both young women and older generations of men (Moser & Skinner, 2026). Unsurprisingly, research has shown that these opinions have coincided with a deeper support for anti-genderism and far-right populism among younger men (Miloslav et al., 2026:460).

Nonetheless, while recent cultural and political trends have negatively impacted men's opinions on feminism and gender equality, men who label themselves as feminists do still exist in Sweden and elsewhere (Ekelund, 2020:523; Kean & Buiten, 2024:269). To what extent their actions and beliefs have changed as a result of this general paradigm shift is, however, under-researched, as studies that examine men's feminism during the 2020s are rare, but with notable exceptions. Therefore, it may be valuable to examine how self-described feminist men nowadays conceptualize feminism in relation to notions of masculinity, as well as in relation to the changing times. Arguably, Sweden presents itself as a unique case in regard to this topic, as the position of being a feminist man can be construed as having gone from being “mainstream” to more uncommon rather quickly, especially among young men.

1.1 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of the thesis is to gain a deeper understanding of how self-described feminist men conceptualise their feminism in relation to their own and others' masculinities. By analyzing how their meaning-making regarding masculinity and feminism is negotiated socially and in relation to different cultural discourses, the study explores how their feminist beliefs impact their practices, relations, and interactions. To achieve this, single semi-structured interviews will be used. In accordance, the thesis's research questions are as follows:

1. How do men who describe themselves as feminists negotiate and understand the interplay between their positions as men and feminists?
2. What importance is given to the act of creating social boundaries between oneself and other notions of masculinities?
3. In what ways have recent reactionary cultural trends regarding feminism and masculinity impacted their self-understanding of feminism?

2. Prior Research

The following chapter aims to critically discuss previous research on men's involvement with feminism and is divided into two main sections. First, research that discusses the fundamental question of whether men actually can be feminists will be the focus. Following this, the latter section will present and discuss research that deals with how self-described feminist men themselves negotiate between different social norms about masculinity and feminism in the Swedish context specifically. This section will also include an overview of how previous research has conceptualized the Swedish welfare state in relation to *masculinity politics* and notions of gender equality.

2.1 Can men be feminists?

While the status of women has been the natural focal point of all feminist movements, the question of men's status has arguably always been present. If one is to strive for the emancipation of women, one must simultaneously contend with the notion of men, sometimes as oppressors, sometimes as potential allies, and sometimes as both. In other words, different groupings have had different answers to this conundrum, ranging from separatist arguments to inclusionary endeavours (Gardiner, 2004:35; Harding, 1998:175-179).

This has also been the case within academia, as various feminist scholars have problematized men's involvement with feminism in different ways. Yet, the fundamental question of what it means to be a feminist has served as a unifying factor among most studies, and those that have studied feminist men have dedicated much time to the mere labeling of these men as either feminists, pro-feminists, or otherwise (Flood, 2004; Messner et al., 2015). More specifically, two main issues have dominated the literature on men's involvement with feminism, namely the question of men's gendered experiences and their gendered interests. The following section will present some of the leading arguments for and against these propositions.

2.1.1 Experiences of being an oppressor

Harding (1998) underlines how most of the early theorization of men's involvement with feminism had its roots in strains of *radical feminism*. With clear inspiration from standpoint theory, these perspectives underscored what they believed to be the oxymoronic nature of male feminists (Harding, 1998: 179-181; Messner, 1997: 49-50).

According to Ashe (2004), the core component of feminist standpoint theory is that women's unique experiences of oppression under a patriarchal system enable a counterepistemological standpoint that can challenge the logic of said patriarchal system. Men, as a unitary gendered group, are instead believed to lack these experiences of oppression that make the development of a feminist consciousness possible, and they are deemed to inherently benefit from their patriarchal positions (Ashe, 2004: 189-191). Echoing a similar point as Ashe, Gardiner (2004) argues that certain standpoint theorists take this essentialising argument one step farther by discussing men's biological makeup as the reason for their upholding of the patriarchal system. By describing certain characteristics as natural for men and their experiences, men become oppressive as a result of their inner core, immobilizing the possibility for change. The only way forward for gender equality becomes the abolishment of masculinity and men as a gendered category (Gardiner, 2004:40-41).

While this theoretical framework may seem counterintuitive for pro-feminist men, there are a plethora of male researchers who engage in feminism that advocate for similar ideas. Perhaps the clearest example of this is Heath's (1987) discussion on male appropriation of feminism. Heath, while himself a man who ascribes to feminist beliefs, posited that men's political and personal relationship to feminism is inherently impossible. Men, regardless of their opinion on it, have a natural relation to feminism, as they constitute what is inherently challenged within the movement, namely gendered domination. Rooted in their experiences of gendered privileges, most of men's attempts to reposition themselves in favour of women's emancipation will thus fail, and at worst devolve into a colonization and fetishisation of women's spaces (Heath, 1987: 1-3).

2.1.2 To go against one's own interests

Closely connected to a radical feminist weariness about the possibility of men's involvement with feminism is the question of why men would want to become feminists to begin with. Previous research on the topic has hence asked why men would organize themselves in an attempt to erase their own gendered privileges (Digby, 1998:1-3). Connecting this question to the concept of a *patriarchal dividend*, Flood (2004) raises a fear that all collective mobilization of men on the basis of their gender identity and gendered interests will only inadvertently reinforce their gendered privileges (Flood, 2004:459). Connell (1997) conceptualizes this patriarchal dividend as the material advantages that men gain as a result of their dominant position within the gender order. In other words, by following a perspective on power akin to a zero-sum game, Connell posits that all men gain some privileges from the oppression of women. As such, while these privileges are not equally divided among men as a result of other interconnected power relations, all men nonetheless have something to lose if the oppression of women ends (Connell, 1997:64). Conflicting interest could thus hinder a deeper participation in feminism for men, as their positive engagement with feminism may lack true commitment, and at worst function as mere appropriation or co-opting of the movement (Ashe, 2007:77; Kimmel, 1998:62).

2.1.3 Diverging interpretations of gendered experiences and interests

Although arguments that closely tie feminism to a female consciousness have remained prevalent, modern research has thoroughly criticized certain feminist theories for essentializing the dualistic division of men and women as two natural and static beings while also omitting the possibilities of differences among the categories (Messerschmidt, 2018:6-8; Messner, 1997:54-55)

One such critique can be found in the works of bell hooks (1984), who posited that standpoint theory reduces all feminist consciousnesses into one universal way of life, oftentimes equated with that of a white, straight, middle-class woman. This naïveté ignores differences in lived realities connected to other structures of power, as experiences of oppression for non-white, working-class, or non-heterosexual women will be different from their counterparts, resulting in diverging consciousnesses (hooks, 1984:3-6; 2000:15-17). hooks argues that this is also the

case for men, as different contexts lead to a plethora of experiences and interests that may make the possibility of a pro-feminist men's movement conceivable. For instance, while men are not oppressed by sexist institutions and norms, their lives can nonetheless suffer as a result of it, and these experiences may allow men to formulate anti-patriarchal interests (hooks, 2000:70-71; 2004:19-20). As such, standpoint theory upholds the notion of a universal category of men with unitary material interests and experiences, thereby failing to acknowledge that it may be in the interest of racialized, and/or working-class, men to work together with women in order to abolish all systems of interconnected oppression (hooks, 1984:68-70).

While hooks can be criticized for not directly addressing the question of non-racialized, and/or non-working-class, men's experiences or interests, Ashe (2004) expands upon her approach by asserting that there exists other interests among men that can mobilize a collective struggle for the betterment of gender equality, even in regard to white middle-class men (Ashe, 2004:194). As Ashe accentuates, the acknowledgement of pain as an undesirable consequence of patriarchal privileges can operate as the material upon which a male feminist consciousness is developed, even among non-subordinated masculinities. For example, by recontextualizing normative and hegemonic masculinity as something hindering for men, as its ideals may lead to isolation, aggressiveness, and a lack of intimacy with others, while at the same time recognizing it as a source of oppression against women, the development of an ethical position of pro-feminism among men may be possible (Ashe, 2004:201; 2007:120).

Theorizing how these diverging experiences and interests may result in a feminist consciousness, Pease (1999) suggests that different men formulate diverse interests dependent on the discourses available to them in specific contexts. Material interests and experiences are thus historical, and changeable, concepts, and the emergence of new feminist discourses on men's understandings, and dissatisfactions, about life may enable reconceptualizations of masculinity and feminism (Pease, 1999:131-135). More specifically, Pease argues that men can change ideological positions in relation to their condition of advantage within the patriarchy through consciousness-raising groups, which is to say groups where men collectively seek to understand their patriarchal behaviour and discuss how to change through an ethical framework (Pease, 1999:53-55; 2010:105-107). Although he acknowledges the differences between the standpoint of the oppressed and the oppressor, Pease challenges the deterministic cells within certain feminist theories as he maintains the

opinion that men can develop pro-feminist subjectivities through collective organization, at least as long as they acknowledge their own privileged position within the gender order (Pease, 1999: 14-18; 2010:91-92).

Lastly, while the above examples have used predominantly American sources to show how previous research has discussed the mere possibility of feminist men, there has been similar discussions within the Swedish context (Egeberg-Holmgren & Hearn, 2009:404; Hearn et al., 2012:35-37). However, as a nation often hailed for its gender equality and progressiveness, Sweden presents itself as a particular case regarding men and feminism. As the existence of feminist men is more accepted in a Swedish setting compared to the broader international context, national research that thoroughly examines the lived experiences and meaning-making of feminist men is also more common.

2.2 The emancipated Swedish man

“But my opinion is that men want to be good role models. And that boys want to grow up to become strong men. So let men be men”
(Ebba Busch, Almedalen 2025)

While the above quotation from Ebba Busch, the leader of the Christian Democrats, may signify the change in social trends described before, as Busch aimed to criticize what she believes are harmful gender politics, it nonetheless echoes a long national history of masculinity politics, generally coinciding with the welfare state's engagement with gender equality (Hill, 2007:42-45). The following section will thus serve to present and discuss how research has contextualized Sweden's relation to gender equality and masculinity in modern times. Furthermore, as previous research shows, this national focus on gender equality has also impacted the experiences and possibilities of men who describe themselves as feminists in unique ways (Egeberg-Holmgren & Hearn, 2009:404).

2.2.1 The welfare state and masculinity politics

The author Eva Moberg's article *“Women's conditional release”* from 1961 is oftentimes believed to have signalled the beginning of a debate on gender equality in Sweden. The

article, while being a component of a larger historical struggle for women's emancipation, came to symbolize the growing presence of the question of gender equality in both academia and politics (Hill, 2007:44; Rydström & Tjeder, 2021:221). However, what differentiated Moberg's work from other prominent feminist critiques of the time was her focus on the interdependent emancipation of both men and women. To put it simply, Moberg argued for women's entrance into public life simultaneously with men's entrance into the private (Moberg, 1961:171-173). Consequently, change in the gender order was to be achieved by the welfare state's involvement with child- and parental-politics. This new encompassing perspective resulted in an interwoven feminist critique of emancipation and state involvement in gendered politics, especially directed towards men's engagement with childcare (Hearn et al., 2012:35).

Moreover, corresponding with Moberg's advocacy for a double emancipation was the expansion of the social welfare state of Sweden, including the development of government founded health care, a robust day care system, and much more. The Swedish post-war political context thus favoured the view that social welfare was a primary responsibility of the state, and as the national feminist movement gained prominence, certain concepts of gender equality were incorporated into the state's social welfare plan (Hearn et al., 2012:32-33; Hill, 2007:45-46).

Egeberg-Holmgren (2011) conceptualizes this unique welfare context through what she calls the Swedish *national equality project*, encapsulating not only state policies but also leading cultural discourses and gendered actions at all levels of society. While Egeberg-Holmgren acknowledges the existence of multiple discourses of equality within the Swedish society at large, often bound to different time-periods, she nevertheless posits that an enduring feature of the project is the construction of men as gendered subjects that can be transformed (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011:50-52). Accordingly, Järvklo (2022) describes these policies and effects as components of state sanctioned masculinity politics (Järvklo, 2022:5-6). Most importantly, Järvklo argues that Swedish masculinity politics has had a lasting impact on the ideals connected to fatherhood. The new Swedish man, free from obsolete and harmful gender roles, would thus seemingly also become equal through being a present and caring father (Järvklo, 2008:20-21; 2022:54-56).

Following this argumentation, Hearn et al. (2012) assert that implicit in this national equality project is the assumption that gender equality is achievable through state policies directed at the “private life” of men and women. Heavily rooted in the theory of sex roles, these policies equated gender equality with the individual rejection of traditional gender roles that people were believed to be socialized into (Hearn et al., 2012:33-35; Rydström & Tjeder, 2021:221). In connection with the idea of a double emancipation, policies that removed obstacles for men to take part in household responsibilities and childcare were deemed to facilitate the transformation of male gender roles which would be beneficial for both men and women (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014:19-20; Järvklo, 2008:26-27). Olsson & Lauri (2022) likewise emphasise how a core component of this promised new man is a process of self-actualization and self-reflexivity bound to individuality. By becoming in touch with their “true selves” through active fatherhood and intimacy with others, new equal gender roles are believed to emerge (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011:56; Olsson & Lauri, 2022; 237-238).

As Olsson & Lauri continues, this conceptualization of gender equality contextualizes traditional masculinity as existing external to the true self of Swedish men. The problem is thus not structural patriarchal power directly, but instead societal norms that are learned through socialization and hinder a better, and more equal, masculinity (Olsson & Lauri, 2022: 242-244). In other words, the Swedish national equality project has directed a large amount of attention onto the gendered category of men without directly adopting a structural critique against patriarchal power, as the cultural image of the Swedish man as caring, equal, but undoubtedly still masculine, white, and middle-class, has been created (Hearn et al., 2012:35-36; Järvklo, 2008:21-22).

2.2.2 Studying the life of the gender equal man

In Egeberg-Holmgren's (2011) study of pro-feminist men in Sweden, she primarily aimed to examine how the men she interviewed constructed their gendered positions. While she found few concrete examples of feminist action within the men's stories, Egeberg-Holmgren began to see the interviewees' reflexivity and construction of their own subject within the interview-setting as a specific form of feminist positioning. Namely, the interview-setting became a unique scenario where these men could be recognized as “authentic” feminists in relation to the interviewer, who they assumed occupied a more “real” feminist position as a

woman (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011:73-76). This “doing” of feminism often coincided with how they reasoned, discussed, and positioned themselves in relation to other men and notions of feminism, especially regarding what they saw as “equality feminists” and “in-principle-men” who failed to practice feminism in reality. While some of the men discussed their feminism closely connected to the leading agreed terms of the national equality project, including a focus on an active private life, others criticised these concepts as a deradicalization of feminism, as they believed that such discourses promised new ways of expressing masculinity without necessarily losing gendered privileges. Diverging from this perspective, these men asserted that the path toward gender equality is not through what they saw as symbolic change and a faux double emancipation, but rather through a total upheaval of patriarchal systems (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011:90-93; 2012:112).

Moreover, this dimension of critical feminism also included a notion of self-reflection, as they often questioned how much they actually lived up to their ideals (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011:100). Norsted (2021), in his ethnographic study on the presence of anxiety among feminist communities in Stockholm, explores this notion of self-analysis, as the men he studied grappled with the idea of not wanting to “take up space” from feminist women. The men thereby acknowledged feminism as a movement for and by women, but nonetheless saw their own involvement as an important part in changing patriarchal masculinity (Norsted, 2021:67). All in all, knowing when to “take up space”, something they also associated with traditional masculinity, was a fine line that they at times had to confront, often resulting in them preferring to engage in feminist discussions in male dominated environments (Norsted, 2021:82).

Inherent within these expressions of male feminism was thus a reflexivity similar to the one associated with the “new man” in dominant equality discourses (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011:74; Norsted, 2021:76-77). In Norsted’s (2021) study, such self-reflexivity could result in anxiety, as they at times were unsure if they truly had changed (Norsted, 2021:63-66). Likewise, the symbolic distancing from certain forms of masculinity among the men in Egeberg-Holmgren’s (2011) study, including both notions of “traditional masculinity” and “equality masculinity”, often resulted in feelings of self-doubt and criticism for not being “feminine” enough (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2012:104-107).

This argument was further reciprocated in Wasshede's (2010) study of local resistance against heteronormative powers. Wasshede discusses these feelings of anxiousness and self-criticism associated with the symbolic distancing from certain masculinities and embrace of femininity as connected to a process of disidentification, as the men she interviewed expressed a feeling of not belonging with other men as a result of their feminism. However, this disidentification did not entail a total rejection of masculinity, but instead a demarcation between different masculinities based on values and morals. Namely, while masculinity per se was often identified as a problem, “good” masculinity became the solution, paralleling the arguments of the national equality project. Similarly, although some of the men she interviewed expressed a desire to move beyond a gender dichotomy, emphasizing the humanity in everyone, most of the men discussed their experiences in accordance with a dualistic view on gender (Wasshede, 2010:92-94). For instance, by viewing their actions through a self-created “gender-progressive scale”, the men could examine themselves and others. The more they distanced themselves from traditional notions of masculinity and embraced “feminine” traits, the higher the score on the hypothetical scale (Wasshede, 2010:217).

Wasshede (2010) considers this a complicated self-image, as they knew that they should not reinforce a gender-dichotomy but nonetheless idealized and actively addressed certain activities and attributes as feminine and therefore good (Wasshede, 2010:217-218). Intimacy, showing feelings, house chores, and communication thus became some of the most worthy and sought-after attributes, once again paralleling certain ideals of the Swedish nation equality project. Failure to live up to these principles would instead evoke shame and guilt (Wasshede, 2010:219).

An idealization of intimacy, emotional richness, and communication was also prevalent in Goedecke's (2022) study on friendship and homosociality among progressive, and oftentimes feminist, men in Sweden. While not equated to femininity to the same extent as Wasshede (2010) showed, the men she interviewed nonetheless saw these attributes as important cornerstones for a richer and more equal masculinity that could engage in deeper, and at times therapeutic, conversations (Goedecke, 2022:2-3). Once again echoing the findings of the research discussed above, this image of equal and progressive homosociality also entailed a differentiation from “traditional masculinity”, which they deemed hindered the possibility of truer conversations and in turn a truer self (Goedecke, 2022:7). More specifically, laddishness became synonymous with everything that they tried to distance themselves from.

By juxtaposing their own beliefs with those who they labelled as “lads”, they could construct a progressive and moral masculinity that did not include stereotypically masculine features such as watching sports, making sexist and homophobic jokes, and being overtly competitive (Goedecke, 2022:93-95). However, similar jokes and expressions of assumed inferior masculinities could be reconstructed in an ironic sense among the progressive men, at least as long as their friends were aware that they were parodying these practices. Goedecke posits that the line between irony and sincerity could thus at times be blurred, and while laughter could be seen among the friend group as a distancing strategy, it might be difficult for those outside the group to realize who is actually joking or not (Goedecke, 2022:100).

2.3 Summary

All in all, previous research has often discussed whether the labeling of men as feminists should be construed as oxymoronic or not. As this question has been answered in different ways, studies have shown that self-described feminist men frequently have to contend with different social interpretations when conceptualising their own beliefs and practices. In regard to the Swedish context, these contradictory interpretations are, however, not the only cultural discourses that influence the meaning-making of self-described feminist men. As research shows, men who actively position themselves as feminists in Sweden must also contend with the specific discourse on equality that has emerged as a result of the national equality project.

Moreover, while the works of Goedecke (2022) and Norsted (2021) indicate that studies that examine the meaning-making processes of Swedish self-described feminist men during the last decade have been done, these studies rarely address the changing reactionary cultural trends regarding feminism discussed beforehand. Likewise, while the study of such reactionary masculinities has become more common per se, these trends have unsurprisingly coincided with a dwindling academic interest in self-described feminist men. Therefore, it may be advantageous to investigate the manner in which such men not only understand the relationship between being a man and a feminist in the present day, but also how they engage with contemporary trends.

3. Theory

To earnestly interpret the multifaceted positions, interactions, and relationships that this thesis intends to study, it is advantageous to first discuss the social processes that shape and inform the construction of masculine identities. The following section will therefore present the theoretical foundations that the subsequent analysis will be dependent on, including the concept of hegemonic masculinity, hybrid masculinity, as well as the interconnected practice of symbolic boundary work.

3.1 Relational theories of masculinity

Throughout history, societal masculine norms have oftentimes gone unassumed and unrecognized. This has certainly also been the case within academia and the social sciences. However, as feminist research has become more prevalent in the recent decades, the gendered category of men has become more visible, recognized, and problematized. This has in turn led to the emergence of critical masculinity studies, which emphasize masculinities as socially and historically constructed gendered projects (Connell et al., 2004:1-3; Kimmel, 1986:517-519). While a plethora of theories and studies that have discussed these dimensions could assist with the answering of the thesis's questions in a variety of ways, it is difficult to ignore the imperative status of Raewyn Connell's work, especially regarding her theorization of hegemonic, and relational, masculinities.

3.1.1 Hegemonic masculinity

Connell (2005) understands masculinity and femininity as *configurations of gender practices* that are embedded in a political, relational, and historical process of production and reproduction (Connell, 2005:43-44). This understanding allows for multiple notions of masculinity and femininity as different configurations of social practices that are inherently relational to each other (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:846; Messerschmidt, 2018:28-29). However, it is important to note that configurations of masculinities and femininities are not definitive typologies but dynamic and fluid concepts of practices. For instance, an individual does not embody one unitary form of masculine configuration, instead there exist internal

contradictions and compromises that result in uncertain strategies for action (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:852).

Furthermore, embedded within this relational nature of gendered practices is a pattern of hierarchy. More specifically, the theory adopts a Gramscian interpretation of *hegemony* when discussing the structuring force of the hierarchical gender order. In brief, Gramsci's (2010) theory on cultural hegemony explains how a dominant class controls and sustains power through the consent of the dominated rather than through brutal force (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:831; Gramsci, 2010:264). Applied to the concept of masculinity, the theory affirms that certain gendered practices become hegemonic in a specific given historical setting by most efficiently legitimizing unequal gender relations between men and women, masculinities and femininities, as well as between different forms of masculinity (Connell, 2005:77; Messerschmidt & Messner, 2018:37-38).

As such, the hierarchical stratification of gender relations, and the condition of hegemony, presuppose domination of other gendered configurations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:846). Concretely, Connell formulated three main nonhegemonic patterns that other masculinities usually embody. The two patterns of masculinities that occupy the "lower" positions within the gendered hierarchy are the so-called *subordinated* and *marginalized masculinities*. First, marginalized masculinities symbolize the intersectional nature of gendered practices as they experience discrimination bound to unequal power relations external to gender relations, for instance, race and class. Second, subordinated masculinities become delegitimized as they are deemed to be deviant to hegemonic masculinity because of their gendered practices, often as a result of their believed connection to notions of homosexuality or femininity (Connell, 2005:78-80; Messerschmidt, 2019:87). On the contrary, *complicit masculinities* occupy a unique "middle" position within the hierarchy. While they do not rigorously embody hegemonic masculinity, they nevertheless benefit from the patriarchal dividend and do not challenge their gendered privileges (Connell, 2005:78-80; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:832).

Moreover, inherent within a Gramscian notion of hegemony are the dynamics of structural change. In regard to gendered hegemonies, the theory asserts that the relational and historical nature of gendered configurations allows for the possibility of contradictions, tensions, and disruptions (Connell, 2005:75; Messerschmidt, 2018:56-57). This historical process can

further be contextualized in accordance with *crisis tendencies* within the gender order. Such contradictions and crises enable an active struggle for dominance, and just as configurations of gendered practices are products of history, so can they become subjects for change and transformation (Connell, 2005:84; Segal, 2007:xxiv).

In the case of Sweden, such crises of power can be connected to the national equality project and the emergence of the “*equal Swedish man*” discussed beforehand (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011:61-62). As such, certain researchers have pondered whether this configuration of gendered practices, that is to say a masculinity that espouses certain individualistic hopes for gender equality while at times blurring its own patriarchal power, may constitute a specific form of local hegemonic masculinity (Hearn et al., 2012:39; Johansson & Ottemo, 2015:204). In other words, if one acknowledges that the “equal man” fails to critically challenge patriarchal structures while at the same time positioning itself outside of the power structure, one could argue that this form of masculinity functions as hegemonic in the context of Sweden, as it may be the masculinity that most successfully claims the correct authority to obscure the effects of the patriarchy (Bergman & Hobson, 2002:122-124; Gottzén & Jonsson, 2012:15-16).

The theory of hegemonic masculinity is however not without its fair share of critics. Perhaps most crucially, the question of vagueness is often raised, as an ambiguity about what conformity to hegemonic masculinity actually looks like in practice may lead to an inconsistent application of the theory (Hearn, 2012:590-593; Wetherell & Edley, 1999:352). This can most certainly be the case regarding interview studies, as only descriptions of gendered practices, and not the practices per se, are observed (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011:18). Although proponents of the theory have conversely lauded this ambiguity for enabling a richer theoretical application that focuses on the locality of specific hegemonic masculinities, I acknowledge the potency of the critique (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:39). Therefore, while the notion of hegemonic, and other configurations, of masculinities will be specifically discussed in relation to the local Swedish context and in relation to the gendered expressions of the interviewees, I see the main advantage of the theory in its ability to fruitfully conceptualize multiple relational masculinities that are always embedded in historical and cultural contexts.

Moreover, while Connell's conceptualization of hegemonic masculinities, as well as different nonhegemonic configurations, has in many ways stood the test of time, modern research has theorized how new crises and conditions have impacted the ways in which gendered practices can be embodied beyond her initial formulation (Eisen & Yamashita, 2019:804-806; Messerschmidt & Messner, 2018:48-50). Namely, another way to discuss the emergence of masculinities that are, for instance, deemed as both equal and undoubtedly masculine, such as the “equal Swedish man”, is to view it through the lens of *hybridity* (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014: 246; Demetriou, 2001:348-349).

3.1.2 Hybrid masculinities

While crises and disturbances have been an integral feature of gender relations and the gender order throughout history, Connell (2005) argues that such critical transformations have become more prevalent and intense in recent times (Connell, 2005:201-202). These crises have periodically resulted in a challenge to patriarchal legitimacy, and as different groups of men deal with societal changes differently, new masculine configurations have emerged. Furthermore, these “new ways” of being a man have at times become a focal point in the public eye, for instance the hipster or the metrosexual, and have exemplified emergent cultural ideals regarding a “modern” masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2018:254-256). However, even though these “contemporary” configurations of gendered practices help to symbolize how gendered expressions are products of historical processes, the question of whether they sincerely illustrate progressive change in the gender order remains (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014:247-248; Eisen & Yamashita, 2019:805-806). To answer this question, some researchers have developed the theory of *hybrid masculinity*, which posits that although these new configurations illustrate the fluidity in gender relations, they also symbolize how systems of inequality are reproduced and adapt to societal changes (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014:246; 2018:258).

This theorization of hybridity is grounded in the reciprocal and dialectic nature of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, something that Connell's initial formulation of hegemonic masculinity at times neglected (Arxer, 2011:397-398). Conversely, Demetriou (2001) refers to this reciprocity characteristic as dialectic pragmatism. Through this term, he specifies the ability of hegemonies to transform themselves by appropriating practices that are typically

associated with dominated groups in a manner that reinforces the position of hegemony. By applying this framework to hegemonic masculinity, Demetriou highlights how not all practices of non-hegemonic masculinities are completely eliminated or discarded, but instead can serve as the groundwork for historical transformations of gender relations (Demetriou, 2001:345). Hybrid masculinities are to be seen as consequences of this dialectic pragmatism within hegemonic gender relations, as they selectively incorporate sought-after elements of other marginalized and subordinated masculinities, oftentimes associated with homosexuality, blackness or femininity, into initially privileged gendered identities. This can, for instance, manifest itself in the adoption of certain colloquial slang originating in queer communities or through a pursuit of an emotionality that is otherwise affiliated with femininity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014:246; Messerschmidt, 2018:82-84). More specifically, the theory of hybrid masculinity posits that such practices can frequently result in three main interconnected consequences, namely, a *discursive distancing* between privileged men and hegemonic masculinities; a *strategic borrowing* from otherwise marginalized or subordinated forms of masculinity, and finally, a *fortification of inequalities* in gender relations (Bridges & Pascoe, 2018:258-260).

First and foremost, hybrid masculinities include a discursive distancing from hegemonic masculinity while at times simultaneously aligning oneself to it, which in turn can produce a complex picture where gender inequalities are both challenged and reproduced concurrently. This can be exemplified through how men can engage in pro-feminist discourses while at the same time make homophobic or sexist jokes, even if they justify this through a lens of irony (Bridges, 2014:65; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014:250-251). Furthermore, the symbolic distance between themselves and hegemonic positions can be maintained by situating other men as the real bearers of patriarchal power and themselves as outside of patriarchal structures. This disidentification with hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal privileges can also perpetuate hegemonic ideals, as they may characterize “feminist men” as strong while the “other men” becomes weak, thereby continuing to present strength and power as inherent resources for men (Bridges, 2021:680-681; Eisen & Yamashita, 2019:808-810).

Second, the process of strategic borrowing of practices otherwise associated with, for example, gay culture or femininity, into the identity of straight men is often strengthened by the belief that the masculinities commonly made available for young, white, and heterosexual men are in some way not as meaningful or worthy as those masculinities associated with

marginalized and subordinated groups (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014:252; 2018:263). This premise can result in a symbolic association with being marginalized while simultaneously engaging in a masculine rescripting of said marginalized or subordinated practices. Additionally, this strategic borrowing can be likened to a gendered symbolic tourism, as through the incorporation of practices that the discourses of hegemonic masculinity initially denied them, these privileged men can gain access to what they see as emotionally richer selves while avoiding the injustices that often comes with said practices (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014:255; 2018:264). Privileged men can therefore reframe themselves as symbolically “other” and rescript attributes such as emotionality as overtly masculine or straight, which in turn may trivialize the inequality experienced by the original “others”, situate the privileged man as the leading source for change in gender relations, and further otherize non-white or queer men as bearers of a regressive masculinity (Bridges, 2014:67; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014:253).

Altogether, the consequences of strategically borrowing otherwise marginalized practices, while at the same time creating discursive boundaries between themselves and normative signs of hegemonic masculinities, blur the ways that gender privileges play a part in their own lives, thereby obscuring and fortifying existing systems of inequalities and power (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014:254-255; Eisen & Yamashita, 2019:803). In other words, the characteristics of hybrid masculinities may signify a contemporary form of hybrid hegemonic masculinity, as they not only reproduce existing symptoms of oppression and inequalities, but perhaps most importantly, conceal that this is happening (Demetriou, 2001:354; Bridges, 2021:664-665).

However, it is important to note that these forms of hybridity do not necessitate an intentionality on the part of privileged men regarding the obscuring of their gendered power. Instead, by distinguishing between the motivations for, and effects of, hybrid masculinities, it is possible to better contextualize hybrid masculinities as gendered projects for certain men in times of transforming gender relations with patterned consequences. By highlighting these patterned consequences discussed above, the theory illustrates that while the motivations of hybrid configuration may be to truly challenge patriarchal power or hegemonic masculinity, the consequences of their practices may at times function to obscure the same systems of power that they aim to challenge, even if they are unaware of it (Bridges & Pascoe, 2018:269).

3.2 The aspect of identity construction

The manners in which gendered identities are constructed relationally through the interaction between various people while simultaneously reproducing or challenging societal systems of power are fundamental aspects of the theories of masculinity that have been discussed. As such, the construction of a masculine identity is not believed to be made in a social and cultural vacuum. On the contrary, the theories highlight how the interplay between different positions and cultural discourses, and the othering that said interplay enables, is essential to the development of a gendered identity. To define oneself as a gendered being is thus also a process of defining what one is not, for instance, in relation to other configurations of masculinity or femininity. Nevertheless, to further emphasize and contextualize how this process of differentiation is connected to the construction of a sought-after gendered identity, one can combine relational theories of masculinity with the framework of *symbolic boundary work*.

3.2.1 Symbolic boundaries

The concept of social boundaries, which is to say the demarcation between different social domains, has long been used within the social sciences. As Lamont and Molnár (2002) argue, early notions of the concept can be found in the works of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, and the theorization of different systems of classifications and social distinctions has since been an important sociological tool (Lamont & Molnár, 2002:167).

In contemporary times, literature that adopts the framework usually emphasizes the symbolic nature of boundary work and defines it as a social tool used by actors and groups in order to construct conceptual distinctions, classifications, and categorizations of objects, groups, and practices. Additionally, symbolic boundaries symbolize the dynamic struggle between groups and individuals as they compete for the ability to include, exclude, and define people and things (Lamont, 2001:15341; Lamont & Molnár, 2002:168).

When applied empirically, studies on symbolic boundary work oftentimes examine how these boundaries reproduce cultural notions of, and identification with, different categories, such as class, gender, and race, as well as the inequality often associated with these different

classifications. For instance, Lamont (2000), through her study on the identity of white and black male blue-collar workers in America, suggests that the self-worth of these men is often negotiated in relation to the other outgroups that they assume to be less morally dignified (Lamont, 2000:3-6). Namely, white workers expressed disdain for black workers when they juxtaposed their own presumed honesty and pride related to work ethics with the alleged laziness of black workers. On the contrary, black workers expressed the morality of their own communal empathy, which they deemed that white workers lacked, while at the same time engaging in boundary work against other black Americans that they deemed to have “no morals or life plans” (Lamont, 2000:51-53).

Inherent within this example is a latent focus on how symbolic boundaries can impact notions of masculinity, as the more individualistic male breadwinner-model of the white workers is compared to the higher family-collectiveness found among the black workers (Lamont, 2000:129). While Lamont chose not to examine this further, other studies have stressed how gendered categorizations should be viewed as one such grouping often either challenged or strengthened through symbolic boundaries (Gamson, 1997:179; Munsch & Gruys, 2008:375-376). By creating demarcations between practices and individuals based on a perceived immoral, insufficient, or excessive masculinity and/or femininity, people can justify who to include and exclude in a gendered “us” based on culturally specific moral criteria (Armstrong et al., 2014:101-102; Jacobsen et al., 2024:567). As such, boundary work can be construed as a practical example of how the reproduction or transformation of otherwise unquestioned systems of gendered hegemony is achieved through actions and beliefs.

Altogether, these examples of symbolic boundary work help to show how boundaries are key components of identity construction and represent a process of internal and external distinctions that creates a “us” and a “them” (Lamont et al., 2015:852-853; Lamont & Molnár, 2002:170). Furthermore, this broader focus on how boundaries constitute notions of the self and group association has its roots in cultural sociology, as the boundary work that actors do in order to define and categorize experiences, people, and themselves is believed to be constructed in accordance with available cultural and contextual resources, including, for instance, symbols and discourses (Lamont & Thévenot, 2000:4-6; Lamont & Molnár, 2002:171). In regard to the example above, Lamont's (2000) findings signify the specific importance of an individualistic and capitalist work ethos, the discrepancy between

communal religiosity among different racial groups, as well as the diminishing impact of class politics and solidarity in the cultural context of the United States (Lamont, 2000:51-53)

The boundaries that individuals and groups construct as core components of their sense of self are thus closely tied to cultural “toolkits” of context-based discourses and repertoires that provide people with strategies of actions and meaning-making that can build symbolic boundaries (Swidler, 1986:277). Boundary work should hence not be understood as merely a process of individualized actions, but instead as historically produced patterns shaped by the environment in which they are negotiated (Lamont & Molnár, 2002:168-171; Swidler, 1986:273).

3.3 Summary

To summarize, the primary theoretical framework of this thesis is shaped by Raewyn Connell's understanding of relational gender configurations and hegemony, contemporary conceptualizations of hybrid masculinities, as well as the notion of symbolic boundary work. These three theories were specifically chosen as they were deemed to provide an effective analytical toolkit that could not only analyze the empirical data but also adequately answer the thesis's research questions.

In short, Connell's concept of relational configurations of masculinity serves to illustrate how masculinities are multiple and created through action and interaction. While the use of interviews may hinder a thorough examination of the respondent's gendered actions beyond the interview-setting, the theory provides a theoretical foundation upon which the respondent's constructed masculinity and gendered meaning-making can be analyzed in relation to other notions of masculine and feminine expressions, as well as to believed hegemonic configurations, such as, for instance, the “equal Swedish man”.

This relational construction of a gender identity is further exemplified through the use of symbolic boundary work. Namely, boundary work can be construed as a specific form of practice that reproduces or transforms symbolic differentiations between gendered configurations and hegemonies in connection to culturally valued signs and discourses of morality. In the case of this thesis, these signs of morality were often bound to the cultural

discourses of the Swedish national equality project and the recent reactionary trends against feminism.

Lastly, the theory of hybrid masculinity provides a concrete conceptualization of a uniquely modern form of masculinity with distinct consequences that is of importance when studying forms of contemporary masculinities that strive for progressive change. More specifically, hybrid masculinity can be used to identify how the line between transforming and reproducing patriarchal systems of oppression often is delicate.

In combination, these theories will serve as the theoretical foundation for the analysis of how the self-described feminist men negotiated between their positions as men and feminists in relation to other gendered configurations and cultural discourses.

4. Methodology

The ensuing chapter will discuss the thesis's main methodological choices and other considerations that were done in order to facilitate the analysis and collection of the empirical data. At first, the sampling process and the characteristics of the respondents will be presented. This will be followed by a discussion of the choice of semi-structured interviews and the ethical considerations that were given considerable attention throughout the research-process. Lastly, the choice of discourse analysis as the thesis's method of analysis will be presented, along with the effects that this choice had on the coding and interpretation of the data.

4.1 Sampling and data

The thesis's selection criteria were based on a purposive and theoretical sampling approach. Specifically, relevant criteria for involvement were decided purposefully beforehand, while at the same time allowing for ingroup differences that could yield theoretical insight (Guest et al., 2006:61). In the case of this study, those that exhibited the sought-after theoretical attributes were simply self-described feminist men. To reach this population, a convenient recruitment through networks and public notice was applied (Gerson & Damaske, 2020:61-62). Concretely, I put up posters around university campuses and libraries in two different towns, while also emailing different national organizations that describe their work as feminist and accept men in their ranks.

In total, eight interviews with eight different men were conducted, and all lasted around one hour. Half of the interviews were conducted in person, while the other half were done online through video-call. Furthermore, all were recorded with the help of a recording device, and the physical interviews took place in a safe environment that the respondent either chose or agreed to beforehand. Regarding the characteristics of the respondents, all were cis-men between the ages of 20 and 54. One mentioned that he was gay while the others did not discuss their sexuality explicitly. Most did, however, mention having a girlfriend or female partner. Three of the men were currently members of pro-feminist men's groups aimed at enhancing men's involvement with gender equality, while one had previously been active in a

feminist and political youth organization. Four of them were students, one had recently finished university, and the other three worked.

It should be acknowledged that this relative homogeneity regarding the characteristics of the respondents could impact the findings of the thesis, as the men may undoubtedly share certain experiences and beliefs that other men, who still label themselves as feminists, may not have as a result of, for instance, not having attended university (Gerson & Damaske, 2020:62-63). Similarly, as the men themselves reached out to me after having either seen my poster or my email, it could be construed that they in one way or another possess stronger opinions regarding feminism compared to the self-described feminist men who decided not to participate, which may indicate some form of sampling-bias (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015:6; Gerson & Damaske, 2020:64).

Nonetheless, the aim of the thesis is not to generalize about how all self-described feminist men understand the relationship between being a man and a feminist, but to provide a discussion over possible social patterns. Likewise, as ethical interview-studies must rely on voluntary participation, it is impossible to circumvent all forms of biases in sampling. For that reason, my awareness of this potential sampling-bias, and recognition of its possible impact, could be understood as sufficient (Robinson, 2014:35-36).

Additionally, the smaller sample sizes of interview-studies are often a common critique against the method. In regard to this thesis, the sample size of 8 interviews can be construed as limiting if one's objective is to achieve the statistical generalizations that quantitative methods otherwise enable, but perhaps as well if one's aim is to identify deeper social patterns that can facilitate rich theoretical generalizations (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020:2-3; Gerson & Damaske, 2020:15-16). This somewhat limited number of respondents could also indicate that self-described feminist men are a population that is somewhat hard to reach, either because there exist few men who identify as feminists nowadays or simply because those that do exist do not want to talk about it for one reason or another (Shaghaghi et al., 2011:86).

Nevertheless, while I recognize that more interviews would undoubtedly be good in order to perhaps yield more detailed results, I believe that the sample size I collected was large enough to find concrete patterns upon which I could draw relevant conclusions and

theoretical generalizations. In other words, as the final interviews provided no new groundbreaking data that resulted in distinct changes in the analysis, I believe that the sample size was enough to sufficiently answer the thesis's research questions (Gerson & Damaske, 2020:52; Guest et al., 2006:64-65).

4.2 Semi-structured interviews

As discussed, the main aim of the thesis is to understand how self-described feminist men understand the relation between their feminism and their masculinity. To achieve this goal, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to comprehend the meaning-making processes of the interviewees and to gain a deeper understanding of their own perspectives and beliefs. In other words, interviews were chosen as they can offer an in-depth analysis of social patterns grounded in the direct understandings of the interviewees (Kvale, 2007:10-11; Lamont & Swidler, 2014:158). By applying a semi-structured approach to interviewing, the method also allows for structured questions as well as open-ended ones. A somewhat loose interview-guide was therefore created beforehand that dealt with the themes at hand, while specific attention was given to new discoveries that highlighted the topics discussed (Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022:1-2; Gerson & Damaske, 2020:78). The interview-guide can be found in full in appendix A.

This method of interviewing further enhances a conversational understanding of knowledge production and can be contextualized with the help of the metaphor of the interviewer as a traveller. The metaphor, which conceptualizes the interviewer as an equal partner to the one studied, accentuates the co-construction of knowledge and meaning behind the spoken word, in addition to the constant searching for the unexplored (Kvale, 2007:19-20; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008:49). In accordance, I view both the self of the respondents, as well as the knowledge produced through the interview, as socially constructed and relational processes (Liamputtong, 2007:15-16; Kvale, 2007:21).

Despite the fact that qualitative interviews are praised for their focus on giving a meaningful voice to those studied, they are not without critics. While the critique of smaller sample sizes has already been discussed above through the emphasis on finding theoretical generalizations and social patterns instead of statistical ones, other commonly raised criticisms highlight, for instance, the influence of the interviewer as well as the question of truth (Gerson & Damaske,

2020:15-16; Lamont & Swidler, 2014:156-157). Although these questions must be treated with respect, they can nonetheless be answered sufficiently. In regard to the influence of the interviewer, while this criticism highlights the inherent power imbalances of interview-settings, I choose to emphasize a dialogical perspective of interviewing that recognises the connection and co-construction of meaning between interviewer and interviewee (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014:286). This notion places an importance on the reflexivity and sensitivity of the interviewer, and although biases and influence may never vanish, they can nonetheless be subdued by acknowledging positionality and responsible interviewing, aspects that will be thoroughly addressed in the following ethics section (Gerson & Damaske, 2020:24). Moreover, the question of truth and the accuracy of answers may be deemed to be paradoxical through the thesis's constructivist approach to interviewing, as no such definitive truth is sought-after. Alternatively, contradictions are seen to be the result of intertwined discourses made available in specific contexts (Talja, 1999:464). Contradicting statements may instead serve to enrich the analysis, and function as a way to advance interpretations (Gerson & Damaske, 2020:20-21).

Although single interviews were conducted, other methods could serve to produce distinct forms of knowledge. For instance, focus-groups may underlie the relation process of identity creation, and therefore enhance the co-construction of meaning between group-members (Morgan, 2012:161-163). As perhaps the most important aspect of focus groups, the interaction between group members could then facilitate a collective discussion on how feminism is actualized through interaction with one's environment, specifically through agreements and disagreements (Liamputtong, 2011:32-34). However, the fluid dynamics of focus groups may result in opinions being overshadowed, as the sensitivity often associated with “divergent” masculinities could lead to an undersharing of one's personal experiences.

Moreover, a mixed methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative data through the use of surveys and interviews could examine both statistical and theoretical generalizations and offer distinct perspectives on the studied topic (Morse, 2012:199). In spite of these positives, a mixed method approach would result in a need to adjust both the questions and the purpose of the thesis. As a result, single qualitative interviews were deemed to be most suitable.

4.3 Ethics

One of the most important aspects of methodological choices, as well as a broader criteria for good research, is thorough ethical considerations. Namely, the researcher must always take different ethical dilemmas into account when conducting research in order to guarantee a sustainable and trustworthy study, particularly when discussing personal topics relating to the research-subjects (Dalen, 2015:24-25; Vetenskapsrådet, 2017:16). Despite the fact that the project will not need the approval of an ethical review board, it is nonetheless important to follow ethical guidelines to reduce potential harm. As a result, significant attention was given to ethical considerations.

One such important consideration is the requirement of informed consent. The use of a predetermined consent form, which the interviewees signed beforehand and can be seen in appendix B, informed them about their voluntary participation, their right to withdraw at any moment, as well as broad information about the project (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008:70-71; Liamputtong, 2007:33). Nevertheless, good research ethics needs to go beyond a simple one-and-done consent acknowledgment and instead emphasize the ongoing process of consent that influences the entire research process (Goedecke, 2024:174; Marzano, 2012:451). Furthermore, as topics that could be deemed sensitive were discussed, the need for confidentiality and privacy was addressed considerably. For instance, in order to combat deductive disclosure, all identifiers were anonymized, only I had access to the recordings and transcriptions, and finally, all audio was deleted when no longer deemed necessary (Kaiser, 2012:457).

4.3.1 Power asymmetries

As discussed before, I acknowledge the relational nature of interviewing while simultaneously recognizing the inherent power imbalances of an interview. As a result, reflexivity and positionality are two components of ethical considerations that I view as highly important (Bourdieu, 1999:609). Both reflexivity and positionality demand a deeper analysis of the interviewer's position, especially in connection to how they may influence the knowledge produced (Hearn, 2013:33; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002:118).

In regard to the specific topic of the project, I possess familiarity with those I study. I myself am a Swedish man who identifies as a feminist, and this has not only influenced my decision to research the topic, but will also impact the knowledge constructed through the interviews. My own pre-existing sympathetic understanding of the topic thereby required a continuous reflection regarding how my beliefs might interfere with the respondents' perspectives and my interpretation thereof. While this familiarity and reflectivity may function to reduce hierarchical positions, as the interviewees may feel more comfortable sharing personal experiences that I may share, it will nonetheless set both a positive and negative stage for what knowledge is possible (Bourdieu, 1999:610-611; Hearn, 2013:27).

In practice, I have tried to be as open about my own relation to the topic as I could when discussing it with the respondents. During most of the interviews, I presented why I am interested in the topic, and if they would ask if I too am a feminist, I would concur. However, this question was rare, perhaps because they already assumed the answer. All in all, familiarity and a reflexive positionality could encourage a collaborative process of knowledge creation, but must still be seen as a continual process of reflection and self-analysis (Gerson & Damaske, 2020:20-22).

4.4 Method of analysis

As the project pertains to how the interviewees construct, negotiate, and organize their understanding of feminism in relation to cultural discourses on gender and masculinity, the most suitable method of analysis is a discourse analysis. In correlation with the thesis's constructivist epistemological framework, discourse analysis acknowledges that there is no one true definition of meaning (Nikander, 2012:403). Alternatively, what is emphasised is the power of language and the construction of realities in interaction, made available through contextual discourses that situate and bound identities (Talja, 1999:469-479).

Theoretically, discourses, which is to say semiotic signs such as speech and writing, can be interpreted as forms of social and linguistic practices that produces and constructs the contemporary world we live in, but also transforms it in new directions (Wodak, 2014:303-304). Discourses are thus multifunctional and contribute to the construction of social identities, the relations between them, and the systems of knowledge that facilitate

meaning-making and interpretative abilities (Bamberg et al., 2011:178; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000:73). Consequently, a discourse analysis focused on respondents' construction and understanding of their selves, and how different social norms and conditions impact that construction, should explore the relationship between language and the social self, or namely, how the self is linguistically produced and reproduced in relation to leading social discourses (Bamberg et al., 2011:189; Boréus, 2015:180).

In regard to the purpose and theoretical foundation of the thesis, a discourse analysis allows for a deeper analysis of how different social discourses of hegemonic masculinity, the national equality project, radical feminism, anti-genderist movements, and so forth, produces distinct norms and conditions about masculinity and feminism that the men must relate themselves to during their meaning-making. For these reasons, a discourse analysis was, once again, deemed to be the method best suited for analysing how masculinities are constructed through speech in relation to available discourses that pertain to notions of gender hegemonies, feminism, and gender equality.

4.4.1 Process of coding and interpretation

In accordance with the methodological principles of a discourse analysis, the coding process aimed to highlight how the interviewees related themselves to, reproduced, and/or challenged multiple intertwined social discourses regarding masculinity and feminism. In practice, the coding was achieved through multiple readings of the transcripts with the help of the software Nvivo, which led to the development of codes that were applied in order to analyze the data collected (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008:202-203). At first, the coding process involved a preliminary and sentence-by-sentence coding of the collected empirical data. Such a framework allowed for a hands-on focus with the empirical data, which facilitated a creative work process (Ryan & Bernard, 2003: 91).

During this initial cycle of coding, I tried to be open-minded and observant to all potential codes that could highlight distinct beliefs that pertain to potentially important discourses. This means that I looked for passages of text that could illustrate dimensions of discourses regarding masculinity and feminism that influenced the men's stories, beliefs, and social conditions. For example, I focused on the manner in which they engaged in discussions and

negotiations regarding varying interpretations of masculinity and feminism, the manner in which they conceptualized gender equality, and the manner in which they related themselves to other men through moralizing terms. In practice, this led to the development of codes that were grounded in the spoken words of the respondents but also partially reflected broader social discourses that influenced their narratives.

After I had coded all eight interviews inductively, I began a second cycle of coding, which served to synthesize the first cycle categories into specific theoretical and discursive themes (Saldaña, 2012:207). As such, I let the thesis's theoretical foundations deductively guide the interpretation of the initial open codes when deemed applicable. During this cycle, pattern and focused coding were used as a method to help configure and combine previous codes with discursive similarities into concrete summaries (Saldaña, 2012:209-213). For instance, specific attention was given to how certain codes could be interpreted as patterns of boundary work against notions of other masculinities, as well as how these symbolic boundaries related to cultural and political discourses, such as the national equality project. Likewise, their understanding of the different social conditions and expectations that impacted their feminism was interpreted through the lens of radical feminism and contemporary anti-genderist movements, which resulted in final codes that represented those theoretical and political discourses. Additionally, the initial codes that illustrated gendered practices, relations, and hierarchies were also more concretely connected to the theoretical components of hegemonic masculinity and the patterned consequences of hybrid masculinities.

The main themes and subthemes presented in the following analysis were thereby chosen after an extensive thematization process in which the analyzed data was categorized based on discovered patterns and underlying discourses that could be connected to the thesis's theoretical framework and the findings of previous research (Saldaña, 2012:223-224). Lastly, while the coding was done using the Swedish transcripts, the codes, themes, and useful citations were translated into English in order to be in accordance with the rest of the paper.

5. Analysis

In the following section, the analysis of the thesis's empirical data will be presented. This analysis is divided into three main overarching themes, namely, *Understanding yourself in feminism*, *Emphasising the personal*, and *A changing culture*, all with encompassing subthemes. These three headings were created with the aim of providing an overview of the findings, to facilitate a clear common thread throughout the analysis, and finally, to provide adequate answers to the thesis's research questions.

5.1 Understanding yourself in feminism

“But for me, it was almost obvious, that of course I’m a feminist, now that I know what it really is, it was just obvious”. (Ruben)

As Ruben demonstrates in the above quote, most of the men that were interviewed saw their own feminism as something given and almost natural. However, while he understands his feminism as an obvious matter of fact today, Ruben also admits that it only became apparent that he was a feminist when he “really” learned the meaning of the word and what it meant to adhere to its principles.

This process of meaning-making was further echoed by most of the respondents, as the need to beforehand define feminism and to contextualize their own role within the movement served as a prerequisite for their progression towards feminist beliefs, even if this process seems distant and banal for them today. In other words, as it is with all political beliefs, these men were not born feminists, they became it.

5.1.1 A process of becoming and defining

Although all the men that were interviewed agreed that they would identify themselves as feminists at the time of asking, some of them emphasized that this was not always the case. For these men, the process of becoming a feminist could be likened to the choice of stepping outside a restrictive box that they did not know existed beforehand. This metaphorical step

entailed gaining a newfound critical lens on society, which oftentimes coincided with a refined gender consciousness and the realization of societal inequalities, which the quote from Dante below helps to illustrate.

“But I started to look at the world differently, I learned that women earned less, and I felt that that was awful, and then I thought about my own parents, why does Dad cook food on special occasions but Mom does it every other day, even if it is Dad who says that he enjoys cooking and Mom doesn't?” (Dante)

For Dante, this recognition of the world as unequal based on gendered categories was part of a grander political awakening when he was younger, but as others showed, this process could similarly occur at an older age.

“I guess that I have always been on the fence about feminism, but then I met up with [an organization that works for gender equality], and I felt that these are my people in a way. And then I also started to dig a little deeper into feminism, what are the different interpretations, and what can it mean to be a feminist for me personally, as a man” (Arvid)

However, as Arvid shows above, to define feminism favourably and to take a step towards it was not always an easy task. Rather, many of them had to grapple with what they saw as contradicting interpretations of feminism, especially regarding their believed ambiguous positions towards men. This process can be interpreted as them contending with, and occasionally confronting, preexisting notions of radical feminism and the belief that men are fundamentally patriarchal. By proactively taking a stance for feminism, these men had to contend with their own masculinity and actions as feminists in relation to a radical feminist worldview, which at times would result in feelings of shame and guilt.

Yet, in contrast to some of the previous research (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011; Heath, 1987), a majority of the men disassociated themselves actively from what they perceived as “extreme” interpretations of feminism, instead choosing to emphasize feminism as a broader ideological commitment for gender equality that everyone could adhere to.

“There will always be variations and different extreme interpretations, but I would say that it [feminism] is simply that women, or that all genders, should have equal opportunities in a democracy” (Ruben)

As made evident by the quote, the men often contextualized feminism as a crucial extension of democracy and the pursuit of equal opportunities for all. This belief may appear innocuous, but could also be interpreted as a way to disparage and discredit radical feminism as its antithesis, that is to say, as authoritarian or oppressive toward a specific group, namely men. Accordingly, if feminism is purely an extension of a belief in democracy, then any individual can develop a feminist consciousness.

While the above examples of becoming a feminist could be contextualized as an active choice, that is to say that they took a conscious and affirmative decision on whether or not they were feminists, such a narrative was not prevalent in all interviews. On the contrary, the lack of a choice was an imperative factor for some, as they believed that their identification with feminism happened naturally and without clear thought.

“In some way I think that there has always been a connection between these ideas and my background. I have always had these ideas that I wanted to change the world into something better, so in some way feminism has always been a part of my way of thinking” (Felix)

As Felix exemplifies, these men connect their feminism with their inherent interest in political justice. By further explaining that he has “always” had these ideas, Felix's feminism almost becomes trivial, once again situating feminism as something natural and unquestioned. To this extent, his feminist consciousness becomes tied to his personality, rendering the frequent grappling with different interpretations meaningless, as he already perceives himself as undoubtedly feminist.

Furthermore, regardless of whether this initial development towards feminism was conceptualized as an active choice or as a gradual and instinctive development, they could all agree that feminism was not something that they often used as an active identity marker. While this could arguably obscure the existence of feminist men and indicate a reluctance to embrace feminism openly, they frequently justified this behaviour by asserting that they rather hoped that their actions would indicate that they were indeed feminists. In other words,

they hoped that they did not need to exclaim to their surroundings that they were feminists for said surroundings to realize that they were one. This in turn situates other individuals as the true acknowledgers of whether someone is a feminist or not, and leads to a conceptualization of a unique role for feminist men with a clear focus on action instead of mere identification.

5.1.2 Men's unique role

As discussed in the previous section, during their meaning-making process of becoming feminists, the men not only had to navigate between different interpretations of feminism, but they also had to determine to what extent they themselves, as men, could engage in its tenets. Comparatively, these aspects raised similar concerns, as the question of experiences of oppression became focal. However, contrary to their previous aversion to radical feminism, their conclusions most often loosely followed the arguments of radical standpoint theories, as indicated by the quotes below.

“I believe that we only can try to understand by having this new lens, but I don't think that we can actually approach and understand these questions as women can” (Kristoffer)

“I guess that a lot of it boils down to how much people are driven by self-interest compared to love, and that it is this factor that makes it easier for women to be feminists” (Mark)

Diverging gendered experiences are therefore believed to function as a unique barrier for men when developing a feminist consciousness. This not only situates women as a homogenous group of individuals who all naturally share experiences that “make” them feminists, but it accentuates an essentialistic understanding of men's experiences as patriarchal, something that they tried to distance themselves from when defining feminism. For Mark, this aspect also entailed a differentiation between women's natural instincts for love and men's drive for self-preservation. Embedded within this argument is the belief that men, as selfish individuals who gain advantages as a result of the patriarchal dividend, have something to lose if they dedicate their lives to others, which in turn makes it difficult for them to become feminists, once again echoing a radical feminist view.

Although this somewhat conflicting self-image could hinder men from positioning themselves as "equally" feminist compared to women, they nonetheless often challenged the conclusion that men could never develop a feminist consciousness and that they had no role to play in the advancement of feminism.

"I think it's a collaboration, that we need men to be involved in this societal development, because I think when men talk about feminism, I think more people listen and acknowledge it" (Kristoffer)

Instead, men's unique experiences of not being oppressed should lead them to play a different role within the feminist movement. As Kristoffer discusses above, this position of privilege and power that women usually are barred from may enable men to reach a larger audience that otherwise would ignore the claims of women. As such, while men lacked the experiences of being oppressed, they were believed to be able to use their patriarchal position for the greater good. However, this argumentation could at times lead to a lack of a thorough critique against their own position of power, as only the positive side effects were highlighted.

Nevertheless, by emphasising their ability to do the "behind the scenes" stuff without necessarily taking the spotlight away from women, for instance by being role models for other men and through listening to women, which in turn once again situates women as the true bearers of feminist knowledge, they could conceptualize feminism as a movement for women, by women, but advanced with the aid from men, an understanding akin to the findings of Norsted (2021).

"I think that a huge problem we have in Sweden today is that a lot of people took our progressivism for granted, and that they thought that they did not have to do shit to keep it that way. But the thing is that people need to actively make an effort and act in order to make things better" (Björn)

As Björn illustrates above through his emphasis on effort and action, it also becomes crucial for feminist men to actively use this developed feminist consciousness if they aim to prove themselves as feminists in their everyday lives. However, if you fail to demonstrate this through your actions, you could easily fall into the category of "performative men".

“There is definitely a dogma in certain circles to call yourself a feminist, but it easily becomes so superficial, and that's what I mean by responsibility and action ... I often feel like people use it for political points in discussions too, it all just becomes so shallow” (Felix)

Similar to the “in-principle” men from Egeberg-Holmgren’s study (2011), the notion of performative feminist men who used the label for their own benefit, and who did not act in a way that corresponded to what they presumably believed in, was a common character in the men's stories, as shown by Felix. To differentiate themselves from these performative men, the interviewees usually engaged in boundary work applied internally within the feminist movement. By juxtaposing their own believed rich ideological commitment to feminism to the deceiving and unmoral nature of the performative man, they could gain a legitimate status as “true” feminists while simultaneously portraying other men as co-opting the movement, a fear that echoes traditional radical feminist critiques of “so-called” feminist men. Similarly, if one acknowledges the hegemonic authority of the national equality project and the notion of the “equal Swedish man”, then this can also be contextualized as a process of relating oneself to, and creating boundaries against, hegemonic concepts of masculinity that claim to be equal but fail to challenge patriarchal structures.

“I have several times felt an imposter syndrome, that I only say that I am a feminist but that I don't actually do anything, so then it is nice to have some external confirmation, for women to say to me that they think that I am a feminist. So I have actually thought about this, am I actually a true feminist, because sometimes I do things that do not feel 100% feminist”
(Arvid)

However, as becomes clear in Arvid’s reflection, the men at times expressed a fear of being associated with the out-group of dishonest men. By questioning their own principles and actions, the boundary work that the men applied to differentiate themselves from “performative” feminist men could thus fracture and become blurred, instead resulting in feelings of shame and guilt for not doing enough. As Arvid makes clear, this could be counterbalanced through receiving approval from women, who are ultimately seen as the true deciders of whether one is feminist or not.

“I probably would have been annoyed with myself if I had introduced myself by saying: Hi I’m a feminist. I would have thought what the hell kind of person are you” (Viktor)

Regardless, as Viktor illustrates above, this fear of association could decisively, and negatively, impact their willingness to actively label themselves as feminists, as they believe that performative men have tarnished the reputation of all feminist men. Once again, the men therefore believed that the best strategy to avoid being lumped together with these men was to signify their feminism through their actions.

5.1.3 Areas for practiced feminism

In order to further fortify the symbolic boundaries between themselves and “performative men”, as well as to fulfill the desire of being validated as “true” feminists by women, the men commonly cited two distinct practices in their everyday lives as pivotal, namely, the act of speaking out against sexism and the performance of unpaid household work.

“I have tried [speaking up] a couple of times, if someone says something that I think is sexist. So I have spoken up a couple of times, but then of course you get singled out as the problem all of a sudden, all the focus falls on you instead” (Arvid)

As the quote above articulates, the act of speaking up often functioned as a straightforward way of combating sexism. Yet, most of the respondents could agree that the act did not always go as plain sailing as they hoped, as they first had to muster up strength to acknowledge and challenge the perceived sexism and then handle the frequent counterreaction. As Arvid explained, one generally had to contend with the notion of being made into the problem, rather than the one who said something sexist, which in turn might deter the men from objecting in the future, as they did not want to be perceived as a nuisance to other men. As such, the act that was once understood as an easy way to indicate your feminism could be construed as the sheer opposite, as fears of experiencing public dismissal and even social exclusion crippled them. Such a “failure” could once again bring forth feelings of shame for being “performative” when push comes to shove.

Conversely, unpaid housework was conceptualized as a form of feminist action that did not automatically entail direct interactions with others beyond their partner. More specifically, by doing chores such as cleaning, cooking, and more, the men believed that they helped to challenge the traditional and normative view of unpaid housework as the woman's burden, and thus confronted patriarchal assumptions.

“I try to help with the cleaning and such as much as possible at home, we try to help each other out, we listen to each other, my partner and I, we want to have it as democratic as possible at home” (Kristoffer)

As follows, the home became a unique area where men could directly impact their own way of living and their romantic relationships with women, guiding them towards a democratic, and by extension, feminist, way of living. Similarly, those that had, or expected, children emphasized paternal leave to a high extent, as an active fatherhood was understood as a means of changing obsolete gender norms for both themselves and their child, especially if that child was a boy. For these men, this closer bond would enable both father and child to more efficiently develop a loving relationship based on mutual trust and the sharing of feelings.

Altogether, these arguments neatly followed the discourse of the Swedish national equality project (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011), as the basis for a feminist and gender-equal way of living was believed to be facilitated by transforming the “private life”, and the connected gender roles, of individual men. While some questioned if such an “individualistic” view of feminist action was sufficient as a means of opposing structural problems, this critique was rare, and most of the men celebrated an active family life as a way to ensure a feminist future.

Consequently, by reproducing cultural repertoires that highlight chores as an individualistic “quick fix” for grander structural problems, the men could become realigned with the ideas of the “performative man” who did not confront institutional patriarchal power directly, a character that they initially sought to distance themselves from through their boundary work. This could in turn have an adverse effect on their feminist initiatives, as by following preexisting societal expectations that are reified by the hegemonic discourse of the national equality project, they occasionally neglected to address structural problems that necessitated confrontation. In other words, their apprehension of conflict and their anxiety over

challenging patriarchal structures that exist beyond the comfort of their homes could elicit an unconscious alignment with local hegemonic masculinities.

Nevertheless, while these two examples of practiced feminism were used to signify their everyday feminist actions and to strengthen the symbolic boundaries against performative men, most of the men could not give clear practical examples of their “applied” feminism beyond these acts. Instead, and perhaps as their emphasis on housework and changing gender roles indicated, they regularly bound feminism to their own personal growth as men. Despite the fact that this personal aspect may contradict their insistence on action, it could also be contextualized as a form of feminist praxis specifically made available for men.

5.2 Emphasising the personal

For a long time, the broader feminist movement has employed the slogan “The personal is political” to symbolize the reciprocal and interconnected relationship between the so-called private and public spheres. Unsurprisingly, this tradition of critiquing previously unchallenged assumptions and norms about “private” life has greatly influenced the respondents' own way of thinking.

“ I think it's really a central part of my feminism, because I'm a man, I identify as a man, and the only way to really be progressive [as a man] is to question how these norms impact me and my personal life as well” (Felix)

While the slogan is frequently used to draw attention to otherwise overlooked adversities faced by women, the men, as shown by the quote above, incorporated the concept into their own lives as a means of critically evaluating their own identity as men, the ways in which their everyday actions may impact women negatively, and how they themselves may be burdened by unspoken norms regarding how to be a man. As such, by viewing their own personal lives as a field open for feminist critique, they became aware of how a more gratifying and compassionate private life and masculinity were possible.

5.2.1 Men as victims

One common way of examining their own personal lives through a feminist lens was to consider the potential negative consequences of the normative gender roles they believed they had been socialized into. Consequently, the men were able to analyze the possible ramifications for themselves in a patriarchal society by reversing the traditional feminist script and rejecting the notion that women are the sole emancipatory subjects of feminism.

“It's a bit of a taboo thing to say [that men are damaged by the patriarchy] ... but I absolutely believe it. It's a bit strange if you say that they aren't because so many more men kill themselves than women, which I think has a lot to do with patriarchal structures as well. And then you might also think about men's inability to express their feelings as a consequence of all that” (Dante)

As Dante indicates in the quote above, feminism could be broadened into a movement that hopefully would result in an emancipatory struggle for all, including men. More specifically, these men contextualize feminism as a means to change destructive and patriarchal norms that damage men in the long run, as a side effect of being privileged in the gender order is that you may become restricted emotionally.

In line with previous research (Ashe, 2004; hooks, 2000), the interviewees believed that this realization of undesirable consequences of patriarchal privileges can help men develop a feminist consciousness. By highlighting that men too have something to gain from abolishing the patriarchy, the men could emphasize their own personal stake in the feminist movements while simultaneously repeating, but also distorting, the radical feminist belief that men are naturally driven by their self-interests.

However, this argumentation also closely follows the hegemonic discourse of the Swedish national equality project, and more specifically its emphasis on a double emancipation for both men and women. In contrast to the men in Egeberg-Holmgren's (2011) study who vehemently rejected the premise, the interviewees adhered to its idea that a “new” form of freer masculinity was possible if they simply rejected the obsolete gender roles that they had learned. In turn, this assumption could possibly risk diverting attention away from the

emancipation of women and neglect the ways in which the lives of the men are enriched by patriarchal privileges, as men are construed as evenly oppressed.

Regardless, this transformative process of becoming “better” and “freer” men through the rejection of patriarchal norms was often underlined by the interviewees as a procedure that would be beneficial for both men and women. Therefore, the personal transformation of their own masculinity was deemed to be a political and feminist act of emancipatory self-actualization.

5.2.2 Reforming the self

By emphasizing the reformation of their masculine self as one specific goal of their feminism, the respondents wholeheartedly believed that men could change for the better. Consequently, the total abolishment of masculinity was not perceived as a prerequisite for a feminist consciousness, an opinion that contradicts the radical feminist belief that all forms of masculinity are inherently tied to a patriarchal logic that prevents progressive change.

Nonetheless, this goal of change does entail an acknowledgement that certain ways of being a man are closely tied to the reproduction of an oppressive gender order, but also that there exist other ways of expressing masculinity that challenge these patriarchal configurations and norms. By following a conceptualization of masculinity as multiple and changeable, the men thus come to a similar conclusion as certain previous research (Connell: 2005; Pease, 1999), namely that men are not one unitary fixed group with homogenous interests, experiences, and practices.

“The normative forces that I usually react to come from the more masculine sides, like these very masculine norms, that you should always be tough and strong, you should have to endure shit, and you should never whine. And that's why I also welcome feminism into my life, because as I understand it, it's more about being a softer and more caring man” (Arvid)

However, and as the quote above show, inherent with this hope of becoming a “better” and “freer” man was an apparent disidentification with the expressions of masculinity that they deemed to be bad and restrictive, a process similar to the demarcation between masculinities

described in Wasshede's (2010) and Goedecke's (2022) studies. The construction of symbolic boundaries that differentiate themselves from “normative” men was thus a core feature in their feminist reformation, which in turn could be likened to a process of disidentification from certain attributes traditionally connected to more overtly hegemonic expressions of masculinity, for instance, violence and toughness.

“Laziness, ignorance, allowing yourself to be constantly distracted, and a willingness to shut yourself off from information and new people that go against your worldview, these are some of the basic tendencies I see in not only sexism but in bigoted men in general” (Björn)

As Björn indicates, by denoting these other men through moralizing terms such as “bigotry” and “ignorance”, the respondents could juxtapose their own presumed ethical and morally justified masculinity to the immaturity and brutishness of others. As illustrated by Viktor below, some of the men further equated this form of lesser masculinity to a working-class mentality, hence reproducing the national equality discourse that situates progressive and “exceptional” men as middle-class.

“Just a few days ago I was at a club and I was talking to some working-class guys, and they had this toughness about them, and I knew that they were about to say the n-word. And then I had no problem mentioning that I'm a feminist to them, because I just think they have very bad ideas, those types of people” (Viktor)

As such, by bounding their own “reformed” masculinity to culturally valued traits, for instance, intelligence, progressivism, and being middle-class, the men could construct symbolic boundaries that separated themselves from the unmoral masculinities that were deemed to be responsible for the reproduction of the gender order.

For some of the men, this disidentification with patriarchal masculinity went one step further as they distanced themselves from all patriarchal practices. Although some clearly emphasised that they, as all individuals, were a part of a patriarchal system and did things unintentionally to uphold said system, others stressed that they lacked the qualities of the “normative” men that behave patriarchally. As the quote below indicates, these symbolic boundaries against patriarchal men hence enable them to deflect blame and the marking of an oppressor onto other men.

“I think that many people are stuck in that image, that it is all men. And that can make people feel threatened, because I haven't done anything, and that is important, because it really isn't all men, and you can only answer that claim by saying no, it's not all men, but there are other men” (Kristoffer)

Theoretically, this active disidentification from "traditional" masculinity could be construed as a sign of a hybridity, as their hopes for reaching a better masculinity involved a discursive distancing from oppressive masculinities while at the same time arguably trivializing their own gendered privileges, whether they meant to or not. This goal of reforming their masculine self could further be based upon the assumption that the masculinity traditionally available to them as privileged men was less worthy, that is to say, another core tenet of hybrid masculinity. To cope with this believed lack of meaning, they engaged in a strategic borrowing of attributes otherwise associated with marginalization, for example emotionality, and thus reframed themselves as more caring and emotionally richer.

This hope of reforming their personal masculinity into something “better” once again parallels the discourse of the national equality project described by Egeberg-Holmgren (2011). By following the central principles that men are gendered subjects that can be transformed through the emphasis on changing gender roles, the men believed that their reformation as men would result in a more feminist society and a richer self-hood that is still undoubtedly masculine. Likewise, the cultural repertoires that this hegemonic discourse establishes may sustain the symbolic boundaries constructed against other masculinities, as they are deemed to be non-conforming to its standards. As mentioned beforehand, such discursive distancing may result in a re-alignment with local hegemonic masculinity as they at times blur their own gender privileges and position themselves outside patriarchal power structures.

Nevertheless, while the importance of this “reformed” masculinity differed from man to man, all the interviewees agreed that this process was a positive endeavour that could result in lasting change. Similarly, all the men were in agreement that this change was made possible through a specific behaviour, namely the act of reflexive-work.

5.2.3 Reflexivity as a means for change

While reflexive-work could materialize itself in distinct ways for different men, one prevalent way was through the act of self-reflexivity. To engage in a dialogue with oneself and examine whether you may still gain some advantages from the patriarchy, or perhaps sometimes even act in a sexist way, was thus seen as a significant component of a male feminist consciousness, as expressed in the quote below.

“I think you can go a long way with these reflections, and by examining yourself, especially if you're a man, I think that this is really key. But then of course you shouldn't lose yourself in these thoughts either” (Felix)

In other words, self-reflection could be understood as a means of dealing with one's own presumed complicit masculinity, as although most of the men engaged in a disidentification with hegemonic and patriarchal positions, they still acknowledged that they could unknowingly act in a misogynistic way and gain from the patriarchal dividend. On the one hand, such a recognition could cause a reluctant association with the men who are perceived as more patriarchal, thereby weakening the symbolic boundaries. Alternatively, their willingness to amend such behaviours could function to strengthen boundaries against both non-feminist and performative-feminist men, as reflexivity can symbolize a morality and ethicality that “other” men lack.

While this process of recognizing what you have done wrong was contextualized as a moral obligation for feminist men, it was not always seen as an easy procedure. As Felix showed in the quote above, the men could simultaneously fear that too much self-reflection could be harmful in the long run, as a constant second-guessing could result in you “losing” yourself in self-doubt. For some, this doubt over whether your actions could be construed as harmful for others, especially women, resulted in a perpetual cautiousness regarding their actions, and in turn a belief that you are restricting yourself because of the fear of not being perceived as a feminist.

Whereas this self-doubt is tied to the believed excessiveness of self-reflection at times, others expressed the converse feeling of not reflecting enough. For these men, their reflexivity could

lead to detrimental feelings of shame and guilt for their believed failure to adequately amend their actions as men, as shown by Dante below.

“But then there's this other side to it too, that you start to kind of open yourself up to, and need to be receptive to, quite a lot of shame as a guy and a feminist. That you don't like certain things that you do, that you think is wrong” (Dante)

These feelings of shame over not knowing if you truly had changed your own masculinity for the better closely parallel the anxiety described by Norsted (2021) and Wasshede (2010) in their studies. However, in contrast to the men in Norsted's and Wasshede's studies, who mostly regarded these feelings as negative byproducts of a feminist consciousness, some of the respondents emphasised how a certain level of shame may be a prerequisite for the moral and feminist masculinity that they seek, as shame helps men realize wrongdoings.

Moreover, another way of engaging in reflexive-work was through a specific form of homosociality, oftentimes symbolizing a mutual reflexivity where men could discuss experiences with each other.

“Self-analysis can improve things quite a bit, but I think the most important action is not only self-reflection but also the interpersonal, that you talk to other people about this” (Björn)

As the quote from Björn demonstrates, some of the respondents highlighted that self-reflection can only get you so far, and that interpersonal interactions can facilitate a deeper transformation away from traditional masculine gender roles. More specifically, to go beyond a mere self-analysis, and to instead engage in a mutually beneficial discussion with others about what you have learned through your feminist journey of self-discovery was deemed as the natural next step of reflexivity.

Furthermore, these discussions oftentimes had a therapeutic characteristic to them, and similar to the findings of Goedecke (2022), the men stressed that this “healing” nature of homosociality provided them with a sanctuary where they could share their feelings and learn from each other. This form of homosociality could be likened to the collective consciousness-raising discussed by Pease (1999), as it functioned as a collaborative process

of feminist self-discovery where men could discuss both the troubles in their lives and how they may impact women negatively.

“I really believe that you can change societal norms in this way, if we stop talking about these usually boring topics, football and sports and stuff like that, because I think it's much more fun to talk about life stories, like how did you get to where you are today” (Arvid)

For Arvid, homosociality and consciousness-raising became a clear way of changing detrimental societal norms that impact men. Most importantly, he clearly differentiated between what he saw as meaningful and authentic conversations from “boring topics”, such as sports. Embedded in this argument is a disidentification with interests stereotypically associated with traditional masculinity, similar to how the men in Goedecke's (2022) study distanced themselves from laddishness. By juxtaposing talk about football with his desire to talk about feelings, Arvid strengthened the symbolic boundaries against normative men and their believed inferiority, as feminist men's ability to discuss emotions became worthy while stereotypical and normative masculine topics became lesser.

Critically, these forms of reflexive-work that the men lauded as a significant part of a male feminist consciousness, whether done individually or in a group setting, could easily be associated with the national equality project's view of the “new man” as a reflexive being that exists outside of systems of oppression, just as their emphasis on masculine self-actualization discussed beforehand could. Namely, the new “freer” man is believed to be a rational man who knows when he has done something wrong and is strong enough to amend it personally and change for the better. Moreover, one can question if this uniquely individualistic understanding of change, and its focus on the willpower of individual men to reject patriarchal norms, can risk impacting their willingness to address the ideological and institutional problems of patriarchal oppression that are not directly tied to the actions and personalities of individual men.

5.2.4 Idealizing the feminine

As the men described the believed patriarchal attributes that they tried to distance themselves from, for instance, toughness and insensitivity, they evidently believed them to be overtly

masculine and instinctively unfeminist. Alternatively, the traits that they themselves desired, such as being caring and soft, were believed to be qualities that men naturally lacked as a result of restrictive gender roles. However, and as the quotes below demonstrate, these qualities were deemed to be easily accessible for women, who in turn were perceived to be inherently feminist. As such, a common thread in the men's understanding of their feminism was an essentialized idealization of femininity, as they equated being a feminist with being more feminine.

“I think that we all have a feminist part of us, that you may have these traits, that you can handle your emotions better, and I interpret these things as more feminist than masculine, if we compare them” (Kristoffer)

“I think more about how to be inclusive and about care, about vulnerability, things that I associate with feminism, and then by extension also with feminine qualities” (Arvid)

Connected to the disidentification from certain masculinity was thus an active identification with a traditional view of femininity, very much akin to the desires of the feminist men Egeberg-Holmgren (2011) and Wasshede (2010) studied. Strictly speaking, the men followed a logic that dismissed the need for a masculine rescripting of otherwise traditionally feminine activities, as the mere affiliation with femininity was enough to underscore it as morally worthy. While this identification was conceptualized as a component of their feminist struggle for reforming themselves, it nonetheless led to an uncritical reproduction of an essentialistic gender dichotomy where certain qualities are masculine, and thus bad, while other traits are feminine, and therefore good.

Additionally, their eagerness to become more feminine could be interpreted as a component of a hybrid masculinity. This is due to the fact that their strategic borrowing of femininity does not challenge the notion that women are inherently emotional and caring, rather celebrating and embracing the concept, while also situating the "non-feminine" masculinities usually available to them as lesser. As such, this desire to occupy a somewhat subordinated masculinity through their embrace of femininity can have multifaceted consequences akin to hybrid masculinities. For instance, it can arguably reinforce boundaries against other patriarchal men as they situate themselves as symbolically less masculine. Furthermore, by

neglecting to critique the gender binary that underpins existing systems of inequality, they can risk fortifying an essentialized gender order.

Nevertheless, this process of ascribing femininity onto certain valued traits, and equating a feminist consciousness with a feminine identity, was much less common among others. On the contrary, some of the men highlighted a perceived need to move beyond terms such as masculinity and femininity, as they believed that these categories simply created undesirable dichotomies.

“I don't like to ascribe masculinity to anything, I think it's better to see the individuality of it ... and it would have been unfeminist if someone had said that you take care of people because you're so feminine” (Viktor)

As Viktor makes clear, he believes that we must be able to admire and praise the individuals who act in a caring and feminist way without feeling a need to ascribe a gender identity onto the acts. To do anything else is instead deemed to be unfeminist, as it would reproduce patriarchal stereotypes. These men thereby criticized the presumed essentialistic positions described above and at times even conveyed the radical desire to abolish all gendered categories.

In spite of this, most of the respondents preferred to let a traditional divide between masculine and feminine attributes dictate their meaning-making regarding gendered practices. Although these men praised qualities that they perceived as feminine, a significant number of them were, however, adamant that they could still behave in a "masculine" manner if the situation required it.

5.2.5 Not letting go of it all

As discussed in the previous section, the dualistic approach to gendered expressions that most of the men adhered to clearly impacted their conceptualization of a moral femininity while also impacting their judgement of masculinity. As such, the attributes that were believed to be tied to masculinity, for instance, anger, loudness, or selfishness, became synonymous with everything they tried to distance themselves from. However, as their hope for reforming

masculinity indicates, the men did not believe in a total disidentification from masculinity or, following their dichotomized framework, a complete embrace of femininity. Rather, they hoped to incorporate what they saw as the foundations of femininity into their reformed masculinity and personally reap the benefits of both sides. As Arvid highlights below, masculinity per se was therefore not deemed to be inferior and all forms of femininity were not deemed to be superior.

“But of course, not everything masculine is bad, and not everything feminine is bad either. You should take the good stuff from both sides and throw away the rest. Especially the things that don't benefit you personally” (Arvid)

When asked to describe the masculine attributes that were worth preserving, the men frequently cited the ability to stand up for themselves and be commanding when needed. These desired capabilities can be interpreted as reflecting culturally valued resources for men, such as personal strength, that correspond with certain hegemonic ideals and discourses on masculinity. In other words, by reproducing the notion that masculinity is inherently tied to rationality and authority, they not only situated femininity as naturally passive and overemotional, traits which they likewise idealized, but they could also unconsciously realigned themselves with hegemonic concepts of masculinity that situates stoicism and strength as desirable resources for men.

Conceivably, these contradicting sentiments could result in a complicated self-image that diminishes their symbolic boundaries against normative men, as they themselves too aspire to act in similar ways. Nonetheless, this association can be disputed through the fact that their incorporation of some femininity, as well as their extensive self-reflection, has enabled them to have both “softer” and “harder” sides of themselves, an aspect of sophistication that the “brutish” patriarchal masculinities are presumed to lack. However, as they highlight the masculine sides of themselves, they express a will to contest the conclusion that they are any less of a man because of their feminism. As such, their association with, and idealization of, femininity fades at times. This could in turn be indicative of the symbolic tourism that is common among hybrid masculinities, as they acquire the emotional depth that is believed to be tied to femininity and subordinated masculinities while not completely discarding their initial position as privileged men within the gender order.

While this factor was less questioned by some of the respondents, others saw it as a cause for concern, as they discussed how their wish to retain certain masculine traits could be combined with their feminism. For instance, one of the respondents admitted that he often had to cope with the question of if he could still be a feminist if he enjoyed being in “control” in relationships with women. For him, the act of being in control as a man was associated with a patriarchal worldview, which was believed to be the antithesis of the behaviour that a feminist man should exhibit. A similar dilemma for some was whether they could make jokes that perhaps could be construed as unfeminist and patriarchal, even if they did it ironically.

“When you're sitting around with a bunch of guys you joke around, we say such absurd things you know, because it's really funny. But if there's someone who really believes it, then it's not funny at all. Like an example, my friend-groups have started to call things gay again, just because it becomes somewhat post-ironic” (Viktor)

For Viktor, these jokes were often made at the expense of patriarchal men, but through an irony that mirrored sexist or homophobic statements. For example, although he and his friends jokingly refer to things as “gay” in a demeaning way, they do it because they find it funny to imitate and belittle “actual” homophobes, akin to the practices of the men in Goedecke's (2022) study. Nevertheless, Viktor also knows that these jokes could easily be construed as unfeminist by people outside his close friend-group. For this reason, he is clear to point out that they never do it in public and that it would not be funny if someone else made similar statements seriously. Viktor was also not alone with this dilemma, and a plethora of the men had to contend with their assumption that sexist or homophobic jokes were clear signs of a hegemonic and patriarchal masculinity while simultaneously believing that it should be okay to make “unwoke” jokes as long as everyone knows that you are joking. However, and as Goedecke posits, it is often difficult to distinguish between sincerity and irony for outsiders, and these ironic practices could result in a realignment with, and fortification of, hegemonic masculinity, as they function to undermine women or subordinated masculinities.

All in all, these practices may indicate that some of the respondents grappled with the question of to what extent their understanding of feminism, and in connection femininity, should dictate their masculinity and practices. For some, this question was already partly answered, as they described how their feminism was no longer as prevalent in their everyday

meaning-making as it once was. Consequently, this may be indicative of changing cultural trends, as frequent challenges against feminism and a resurgent belief in traditional gender roles have come to permeate recent times.

5.3 A changing culture

“It has pretty much been a given in Sweden. To describe yourself as it [feminist] was almost as if you said that you like Taco-Fridays, it really doesn't say much about you. But now I think that it can be considered a little more lame you know, like sure you followed the consensus but this trend is over now” (Mark)

By associating the act of being a feminist with the Swedish cultural tradition of eating tacos on Fridays, Mark illustrates how deep-rooted a feminist identity once was in the political image of Sweden. However, through this example he also expresses how feminism oftentimes served as a cultural symbol that lacked meaning in practice, as the national equality project created a social consensus around gender equality that often failed to manifest itself outside the discursive realm. As such, the act of calling oneself a feminist became as meaningless as mentioning that you liked tacos, a sentiment that everyone could agree upon in principle.

Yet, this consensus is believed to be a relic of the past, as feminism, especially among men, is believed to have gone past its social climax. In its place, different counterreactions have emerged, resulting in new processes of meaning-making for the “remaining” feminist men.

5.3.1 Understanding the new times

While all the respondents could agree that a negative cultural shift had occurred regarding people's perception of feminism, they addressed the reason for the change in different ways. For some, the growing influence of a right-wing and anti-genderist movement was perceived to be the main cause. Alternatively, others emphasised the reactionary element of this political development, as they conceptualized it as an explicit counterreaction against a form of feminism that emerged during the 2010s, which they believed impacted society, and especially men, negatively.

“Some people talk about how part of the problem was the “woke” movement, and also metoo, that people were perhaps a little too quick to find scapegoats, but that's probably not what I'm thinking about, because above all, it's this right-wing extremist ideology that has gained a lot of power” (Dante)

“I'm 100% sure that it comes from that 2015 tumblr feminism, it sounds stupid because it's so disproportionate from their side but I think it comes from there, that damage has been done” (Viktor)

As the quotes from Dante and Viktor illustrate, these two interpretations are similar but lead to two vastly different conclusions. For Dante, the rising right-wing movement is responsible for a growing anti-feminism, and “wokeness” is simply an easy scapegoat. On the contrary, Viktor comes to the verdict that it is in fact this form of “wrong” feminism that is to blame for the popularity of the right-wing movement. As such, the men who adopted this latter approach looked back on the past critically and believed that feminism itself may be accountable for certain regressive societal trends.

Specifically, those that used such arguments oftentimes focused on how young men have been led astray as a result of too many feminist demands, which in turn may have impacted the right-wing and misogynistic development among younger men in recent times.

“I don't think it's easy to keep up with the change, if you're like a 16 year old guy, how are you supposed to keep up with it? And then the women in your class are screaming that you should be a feminist” (Ruben)

As Ruben articulates, these younger men are believed to not have been able to adapt to the changes that feminist politics brought about. An explanation for what these difficult societal changes actually may be is, however, often missing in the argumentation, but it can be construed that the problem is no longer traditional gender roles but the change brought about through the rejection of said roles. As such, younger men are believed to have had to cope with the loss of gender privileges, or perhaps a perceived loss of gendered privileges, while simultaneously having to quickly adapt to the “unforgiving” demands of feminists, symbolized by Rubens's image of screaming women.

Arguably, these arguments at times echo anti-feminist discourses, as they situate feminists, and specifically feminist women, as bullies while men are believed to suffer as a result of a new gender system. Nevertheless, this “harder” rhetoric was more latent at times, and others instead emphasised that feminists must engage in discussions with these men through a more tolerant attitude. In spite of this difference, both perspectives use a similar softening stance in regard to how feminism should approach the topic of men and privilege, as they believe that men need to be thrown a helping hand to keep up. To what extent such a belief may impact a feminist focus on women's rights and emancipation is left to be seen, but it could be interpreted that it may situate men as victims of a changing gender order and demand a leniency towards them if they are to adapt to said changes.

Furthermore, this lenient approach toward men's gendered privileges may signify a hybrid masculinity, as while they adopt progressive stances, their opinions on men's declining social position may risk lessening the attention on, and in turn fortifying, a gender system that still operates on the institutionalized oppression of women. Similarly, as they contextualize men's radicalization as partially the fault of feminist women, they disassociate themselves from what they believe to be radical and harmful forms of feminism. This aspect clearly impacted their view of their own feminism and the meaning-making they initially did when they became feminists. As such, some of the men engaged in a reconceptualization of feminism that entailed a stronger dissociation from what beliefs that they saw as too radical.

5.3.2 Doing the “right” feminism

Interlaced in some of the men's arguments about modern counterreactions against feminism was an opinion that feminists should more concretely address the believed problem of how the movement has come to impact men's lives unfavourably. In other words, the question of feminism's positions towards men has become more prevalent for some of the respondents, and their initial disassociation from “radical” interpretations of feminism can be interpreted to be more prominent than it was originally.

“I also think that it is important that women don't use their power to say that all men are shit, because I think that doesn't create any change” (Kristoffer)

“There are feminists who hate men, and they are stuck in a lesser variant” (Ruben)

This opinion was often reinforced through an acknowledgement that certain feminists, or women in general, simply hate men and want to use feminism as a vehicle for their prejudice. As Ruben believed, this form of feminism was a lesser variant that situates the category of men as an inherent problem that needs to be dealt with, and ignores the ways in which men both can be supporters of feminism and suffer as the result of a patriarchal gender order. As such, this “harmful” feminism was instead believed to be counterproductive, as it alienated men, facilitated the rising far-right, and hindered lasting change. For Kristoffer, this obstruction of change was tied to the expression that “all men are shit”, as the women who espouse such ideas were believed to ignore the men who he considered unpatriarchal, including himself. Additionally, by tying this form of feminism to women, he asserts that it is feminist women, and not feminist men, who advocate for this lesser feminism.

Altogether, this dissociation from radical feminism, and the accusation that such feminism enabled the growth of a reactionary anti-feminism, indicate a symbolic boundary work once again applied internally within the feminist movement. However, these boundaries are not constructed against in-principle men who are deemed to be too negligent in their political commitment, but rather against women who are deemed to be too extreme. As such, some of the respondents engaged in a differentiation between feminists based on the moral value of compassion, as certain feminist women were deemed to lack empathy, a feeling otherwise associated with sought-after femininity. Feminist men were thus also believed to be able to judge who is “correctly” a feminist, contradicting their initial belief that women are more naturally feminist based on their experiences.

Moreover, when exemplifying the “wrong” form of feminism, the men at times utilized demoralizing terms rooted in stereotypes of women, for instance, the loud and screaming woman. This emphasis on loudness, anger, and power could perhaps otherwise be construed as an attempt to bind these forms of feminism to the traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity that the men distanced themselves from. Wrongful feminism thereby became synonymous with overtly masculine traits, while the compassionate feminism of the men became more feminine, which in turn functions to solidify the moral symbolic boundaries.

This emphasis on man-hating feminism could parallel anti-feminist remarks about the dangers of feminists, and therefore risk diverting attention away from the form of feminism that they themselves believe in. Similarly, as they take a stance against certain radical strains of feminism, while also at times implying that those feminists exaggerate the extent of their oppression, they could risk fortifying systems of inequalities that could be construed as the cause for the radical anger. Thereby, these men at times adopt a stance that asserts that not all men are patriarchal, but also that if feminist women ignore the progressivism of certain men it can deter others from changing for the better. This could be interpreted as a clear indication of hybrid masculinity, as they simultaneously combine a desire for gender equality with an apprehension of certain feminism and a conviction that it is partially responsible for the anti-genderist movement.

Lastly, this boundary work against, and aversion to, certain feminism did for some of the men result in a distancing from specific accompanying terms and ideas that were deemed to be too theoretical and counterintuitive, for instance, the patriarchy, identity politics, and intersectionality. Although they acknowledged that these concepts had been valuable in the past, women who use these terms nowadays might instead damage the stride for equality, as it can make men angry, confused, and victimized.

“I think we should abandon the word [feminism], not all ideas of course but it needs a rebrand, it’s a bad brand right now” (Viktor)

However, Viktor takes this belief one step further by suggesting that we should even abandon the term feminism itself, as he believes that it has been tainted and misconstrued. As such, by retiring the term feminism, a new movement that reverberates a hope for gender equality but is nonetheless adapted to a new post-feminist reality, and has perhaps specifically altered its position of the common man as an oppressor, could flourish. While this particular conclusion was not reciprocated by all, a latent dwindling identification with feminism was prevalent among some of the men's narratives. Consequently, feminism may have become outdated for these men, and it remains to be seen whether their grander belief in gender equality will suffer as a result.

6. Discussion

As the analysis above has shown, the interviewed men engaged in a multifaceted, and at times contradictory, process of negotiating between their positions as both men and feminists. More specifically, and to answer the thesis's first research question, the men to some extent acknowledged their status as outsiders within the field of feminism as a result of their masculinity, and they addressed this conflicting dilemma in different ways.

At first, by following an argument similar to standpoint theory, the men believed that women, as a result of experiences that men inherently lacked, could more easily become feminists (Ashe, 2004:189). This essentialistic belief situated women as a homogenous group that all share experiences of being oppressed, which all men naturally were believed to lack. To become a feminist as a man was thus often seen as a process of discovery and confrontation, as they negotiated between different feminist discourses, their views on men, and other gendered expectations. The question of how their masculinity would impact their feminism, and their feminism their masculinity, was thereby always prevalent. While at times difficult, they all nonetheless came to the conclusion that men could develop a feminist consciousness but that they must prove this deviation more thoroughly compared to women.

This could be done through doing things “behind the scenes” in their own lives which wouldn't necessarily take the feminist spotlight away from women, for instance, by speaking up against other men or helping their partner with unpaid housework. Furthermore, some of the men highlighted that their unique position of privilege in the gender order could enable them to use patriarchal power to advance feminism, thereby situating men as needed allies to feminism. Despite this, they at times had to deal with a unique guilt over not acting feminist “enough”, as they found it draining to consistently challenge the patriarchal assumptions that other men take for granted. However, such a fear could be combated through the approval of women, who ultimately were seen as the “de-facto” feminists.

Theoretically, their emphasis on how feminism should impact men's private lives, and direct relationships with women, parallels the discourse of the Swedish national equality project, as they held the belief that the main priority for feminist men was to aid the transformation of hegemonic or complicit masculine gender roles (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011:50-52). In

accordance with previous research (Bergman & Hobson, 2002:122-124; Gottzén & Jonsson, 2012:15-16), this individualistic belief that societal change can be fulfilled through the occasional rejection of patriarchal norms could risk impacting their willingness to confront patriarchal institutions that are not tied to their own direct actions, thereby unknowingly failing to address other external ideological and institutional sources of patriarchal oppression.

Similarly, just as the Swedish national equality project lauds reformation and reflexivity (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011:56; Olsson & Lauri, 2022; 237-238), the men emphasized that their own masculinity was often a subject of their feminism. Contradicting radical feminists who presuppose that all masculinities are tied to a patriarchal logic that prevents change, these men rather raised the question of how their feminism could impact their presumed complicit masculinity and reform it for the better (Gardiner, 2004:40; Wasshede, 2010:92-94). This question was often answered through the act of looking inwards, recognizing what they have done wrong as a man, and changing through the process of reflexive consciousness-raising. Self-reflection thus became conceptualized as a unique feminist praxis available for men, echoing similar findings in previous research (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011; Norsted, 2021). Additionally, this feminist process of amending their complicit masculinity could at times lead to crippling feelings of anxiety and shame for some, while others believed that these feelings of remorse are prerequisites for the development of a masculine feminist consciousness.

Perhaps most importantly, their masculine reformation entailed a disidentification from what they saw as hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously idealizing a perceived righteous femininity. Although certain expressions of masculinity were believed to be inherently tied to patriarchal and hegemonic behaviour, for instance, toughness, stoicism, and misogyny, the transformation of hegemonic structures and the emergence of a feminist masculinity was believed possible (Connell, 2005:75; Messerschmidt & Messner, 2018:38). This unpatriarchal masculinity would, however, not only benefit women. Rather, the men believed certain undesirable consequences of patriarchal privileges damaged men as well, and this acknowledgement often strengthened their commitment to feminism. Moreover, following their initial perception that women are more inherently feminists, the men oftentimes equated being a feminist with being feminine. By ascribing a feminine value to the attributes that a feminist and nonhegemonic masculinity should adopt, for instance, emotionality and being

caring, the men engaged in a common component of hybrid masculinity, which is to say that they aimed to strategically borrow from a traditionally marginalized femininity in order to compensate for the believed lesser forms of masculinity otherwise available to them (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014:252).

This viewpoint can be further interpreted as reproducing a clear gender dichotomy where some characteristics are essentialised as either masculine or feminine. Although this dualistic approach to gendered expressions was commonly used to disparage masculinity and praise femininity, it also led to a conceptualization of certain positive sides of traditional masculinity that were worth keeping. Consequently, their rejection of the belief that masculinity must be abolished, combined with their expressed will to not “become” feminine altogether, indicates a desire to demonstrate that they are not any less of a man because of their feminism.

Altogether, their negotiation of how they could act as a feminist while simultaneously being confident in their masculinity made it at times difficult for them to contextualize what feminist actions as a man should entail. However, an easier way to portray your reformation as a man, and to signify your feminism, was to discursively create boundaries against other men (Lamont & Molnár, 2002:170). To answer the second research question, the act of constructing symbolic boundaries between morally good men and immorally unjust men became paramount when conceptualising a masculine and feminist self-worth not always directly grounded in political action. For instance, these men may see a deeper connection with one's emotions as a sign of moral strength, while those who act violent or misogynistic toward women, or lie about their devotion to feminism, are perceived to be morally weak and cowardly.

More specifically, the two most important ideal typical men that they constructed boundaries against were the patriarchal/normative man and the performative man. While the latter was believed to be deceiving and dishonest, as they used the feminist label for their own good, the former did not try to hide their patriarchal nature and were believed to be overtly ignorant and sexist. As such, the symbolic boundaries between men were based upon a fluctuating scale of morality and other interconnected culturally valued traits, for instance, progressivism, intelligence, honesty, and sympathy (Lamont, 2000:3-6). Nonetheless, the men oftentimes realized that although they themselves believed that they clearly differed from these other men, they still shared one common feature, namely their identity as men. Therefore, they at

times feared that women would mistakenly associate them with one of these categories of men, resulting in an anxious feeling of needing to once again prove themselves as “real” feminists.

The process of transforming these symbolic boundaries beyond the discursive realm and “proving” themselves as feminists was, however, often challenging, as they needed to confront a gender system they nonetheless benefited from. This dilemma may even lead to an opposite effect, as symbolic boundaries could serve to conceal systems of power that are still integral within the lives of the self-described feminist men. While the distancing from hegemonic, or other complicit, masculinities may then question patriarchal structures within the discursive realm, the construction of masculine morality as a symbol of status and power may still function as a way to reinforce certain hegemonic masculine ideals and continue to reproduce the importance of strength in men's lives. Additionally, by constructing a masculinity that is perceived to strive for equality, they could position themselves outside the patriarchy and thereby risk ignoring their own privileges. This can once again theoretically be seen as a signifier of a hybrid masculinity, as their practices situated other men as the true bearers of patriarchal power and trivialized their own ways of reproducing systems of inequalities (Bridges, 2021:680-681).

Furthermore, this symbolic distancing and meaning-making is only made possible as a result of specific cultural repertoires and discourses that enable a systematic reproduction of what moral masculinity should be (Lamont & Molnár, 2002:171). The historical entrenchment of the Swedish equality project has hence produced certain discourses of masculine morality that do not always challenge patriarchal structures, while at the same time contributing to the notion of the “progressiveness” of Sweden. As previous research has discussed, these cultural discourses have possibly enabled the emergence of a unique local form of hegemonic masculinity, as a masculinity that espouses individualistic hopes for gender equality while at times blurring its own patriarchal power may occupy the position that most successfully claims the authority to obscure the effects of the patriarchy (Bergman & Hobson, 2002:122-124; Gottzén & Jonsson, 2012:15-16). Through asserting that the patriarchy no longer influences their lives and relationships, the men may thereby realign themselves with a hegemonic position.

Additionally, while the men acknowledged that a positive social consensus around feminism has permeated Swedish society for a longer time, this unanimity has deteriorated in recent times. Rather, emerging reactionary right-wing movements have coincided with a counterreaction against feminism (Karlberg et al., 2025:733; Off, 2023:452), and some of the men have pondered whether certain radical tendencies within feminism may be accountable for these regressive trends. In other words, the hegemonic position of “equality men” that was supported by the Swedish equality project may be evaporating, and the question of how feminism may impact men negatively has become more prevalent for the self-described feminist men.

Therefore, and in apparent contrast to the findings of previous research (Egeberg-Holmgren, 2011; Heath, 1987), some of the respondents distanced themselves from “radical” forms of feminism, as they were deemed to be harmful toward society at large and especially toward men. This attempted deradicalisation of feminism coincided with active boundary work against “man-hating” feminists who blamed all men for the oppression of women. By ignoring the existence of unpatriarchal feminist men, these feminists were believed to lack moral compassion, and at times exaggerated the extent of the patriarchy in order to subordinate men instead. In regard to the thesis's third research question, recent cultural trends and discourses have thereby led some feminist men to believe that feminism should soften up its criticism of men and perhaps even allow for the “return” of some believed lost privileges. Potentially, this more lenient approach to gendered privileges may in turn risk fortifying a system built on the oppression of women, as it could lessen the importance of women's emancipation and situate men as justifiable victims of a new feminist gender order.

In conclusion, the interplay between their positions as men and feminists frequently resulted in contradictory mental gymnastics, as they had to negotiate between different social discourses regarding masculinity and what it means to be a feminist in practice. More concretely, the men felt that they were compelled to simultaneously address the question of how feminism should influence their own and others' masculinity, as well as how their masculinity could influence their devotion to feminism. As these questions oftentimes demanded different answers, their hope of constructing a moral masculinity that is both feminist and masculine could result in a feeling of neither being masculine nor feminist “enough”. The interplay between being a man and a feminist was thus generally understood to be mentally burdensome. Consequently, despite the fact that all the men aspired to achieve

enduring change in the gender order, their constant negotiation between these different societal and feminist expectations could lead to paradoxical outcomes akin to the consequences of hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014: 246).

Moreover, and as Connell (2005) emphasizes, the interplay between feminist change and hegemonic reproduction is fine and multifaceted. In other words, although crisis tendencies within the gender order enable transformations, they also enable adaptation (Connell, 2005:84). Similarly, as all three described components of hybridity can be interpreted in the men's stories, namely a borrowing from otherwise marginalized gendered identities, a distancing from patriarchal positions, and lastly a fortification of systems of inequality, it could be argued that they engaged in a latent reproduction and obscuring of the patriarchy (Bridges & Pascoe, 2018:258-260). Nevertheless, such a realignment with hegemonic positions does not automatically entail an intentionality from the men, as while their motivation was to challenge hegemonic masculinity, the consequences could be the opposite.

A final question worth raising is thereby to what extent individuals actually can impact institutionalized structures beyond their direct reach without unintentionally reproducing the very same structures. As highlighted throughout the discussion, the men had mostly chosen to actively change their own behaviours in the hope that this would at least impact their surroundings positively. While this can be interpreted as possibly downsizing the problem of patriarchal oppression into a problem of mere personal attributes, as it can conceptualize the oppression over women as a personality issue of men and not an ideological and institutional problem, it may nonetheless be construed as an important first step. If this in turn can materialize into a grander collective struggle against systems of oppression is, however, left to be seen.

7. References

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8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix A

Starting questions

- Jag tänkte först börja med att fråga om du helt enkelt kan berätta lite om dig själv?
- Vad var det någonstans du såg att den här studien fanns?
 - Vad var det som fick dig att vilja vara med?

Early involvement with feminism

- Är det så att du kommer ihåg när du först började komma i kontakt med ord såsom feminism och jämställdhet?
 - Skulle du kunna beskriva något specifikt tillfälle?
 - Hur fick de orden dig att känna?
- Kommer du ihåg när du började kalla dig själv för feminist?
 - Varför började du göra det?
 - Hur reagerade din omgivning? Pratade du om det med familj och vänner?

Understanding of feminism

- Hur skulle du idag definiera feminism?
 - Vad tror du att det innebär att kalla sig själv för feminist?
 - Tror du att några av de här definitionerna har förändrats över tid för dig?
- Har du stött på andra definitioner av feminism?
 - Hur reagerade du på det?
- Tror du att din feminism påverkar ditt vardagliga liv på något sätt?
 - Skulle du kunna beskriva något specifikt tillfälle då det påverkade?
- Skulle du säga att din feminism har påverkat dig politiskt?
 - Har du engagerat dig inom frågor om feminism?

Men and feminism

- Tror du att feminism uttrycker sig annorlunda för män och kvinnor?
 - Tror du att män ibland kallar sig för feminister utan att leva upp till vad det innebär?
 - Tycker du själv att det ibland kan vara svårt att leva feministiskt?
 - Känner du ibland att du möter motgångar?
- Tror du att din identitet som man har påverkat din syn på vad det innebär att vara feminist?
- Vad tror du generellt sätt mäns roll inom den feministiska rörelsen borde vara?
 - Är det lika viktigt för män att engagera sig i frågor om feminism som det är för kvinnor?

Patriarchy

- Hur bekant skulle du säga att du är med ordet patriarkatet?
 - Kommer du ihåg när du först lärde dig om det och dess mening?
 - Hur reagerade du då?
- Hur skulle du personligen definiera patriarkatet?
 - Hur tror du att patriarkaten syns idag i samhället? Kan du ge några exempel?
- Skulle du säga att du är en del av patriarkatet?
 - På vilket sätt då? Exempel?
- Tror du att även män kan påverkas negativt av samhällets patriarkala strukturer?

Relationships with others

- Vad skulle du beskriva som typiskt manligt? Det kan vara allt från hobbies till åsikter och så vidare.
 - Tycker du att du själv skulle passa in i någon annans beskrivning av "typisk manlighet"? - Varför eller varför inte?
 - Är det något du har tänkt på?

- Tror du att andra skulle beskriva dina vänner och dina umgängen som typiskt manliga?
- Är det viktigt för dig att dina vänner delar dina åsikter om feminism?
 - Är det viktigare för dig att manliga vänner delar dina åsikter jämfört med en kvinnlig vän?
 - Har du någonsin brutit en vänskap på grund av skilda åsikter om exempelvis feminism?
- Skulle du generellt säga att du ofta pratar om feminism med andra i vardagen?
 - I vilka miljöer då? Hur tycker du att du allmänt blir bemött då?

Finishing questions and future implications

- Tror du att många män och killar idag kallar sig för feminister?
 - Varför eller varför inte?
 - Tror du att det har ändrats något med tiden?
- Tycker du att det är viktigt att prata om frågor om feminism och jämställdhet med män oftare?
 - Hur tror du att man ska göra det bäst?
- Finns det något du skulle vilja tillägga? Är det något viktigt som jag har glömt?

8.2 Appendix B



Information till forskningspersoner

Detta är en inbjudan till att delta i en masterstudie i sociologi vid Lunds universitet. I det här dokumentet får du information om projektet och vad det innebär att delta. I slutet berörs även skriftligt samtycke.

Studiens syfte och upplägg

Denna studie, som kommer att genomföras inom ramen för en masteruppsats i sociologi vid Lunds universitet, syftar till att få en djupare inblick i feministiska mäns egna förståelse över vad det innebär att vara feminist, särskilt i relation till att också vara en man.

Även om ämnet på senare tid har fått större uppmärksamhet inom den akademiska världen, är specifika studier inom den svenska kontexten fortfarande sällsynta. Studien skulle därför bidra till att bredda den redan existerande kunskapen och samtidigt främja ny kunskapsutveckling inom ett samhälleligt viktigt ämne.

Din frivilliga medverkan

Varje person kommer att medverka i en intervju. Deltagandet i intervjun är helt frivilligt och varje intervju kommer att ta ungefär en timme att genomföra. Att delta i en intervju innebär att delta i ett samtal mellan intervjuaren och intervjudpersonen, där intervjudpersonen uppmuntras att dela erfarenheter och perspektiv relaterade till feminism. Intervjuaren kommer att ha en förplanerad guide med ämnen att diskutera, men diskussioner om andra relevanta perspektiv uppmuntras. Intervjun kommer att spelas in om du ger din tillåtelse till detta.

Du är helt fri att avbryta ditt deltagande i studien före, under eller efter intervjun, utan att behöva uppge särskilda motiv för detta. I ett sådant scenario kommer all tidigare insamlad

data att raderas och därmed inte användas i den slutliga studien. Om det är speciella frågor du inte vill besvara under intervjun kan du avstå från att göra det.

Konfidentialitet och sekretess

För att säkerställa konfidentialitet kommer allt som möjligen kan identifiera dig, såsom namn, specifika geografiska platser och all ytterligare information som kan spåras till en specifik persons identitet, att anonymiseras. Din identitet kommer därför inte att avslöjas under några omständigheter, och alla svar som ges under intervjun kommer att förbli konfidentiella och anonyma. Dessutom kommer inspelningar och transkriptioner att lagras med största möjliga säkerhet, och allt ljud kommer att raderas när det inte längre anses nödvändigt att behålla det.

Skriftligt samtycke

Vänligen läs följande påståenden tydligt och signera de rutor du godkänner:

☐

-Jag har fått information om studien och är medveten om att jag kan ställa ytterligare frågor genom att kontakta Noah Hrelja (no2681hr-s@student.lu.se) eller handledaren Stina Bergman Blix (stina.bergman_blix@soc.lu.se).

☐

- Jag ger mitt samtycke till mitt frivilliga deltagande i studien.

☐

- Jag förstår att jag kan återkalla mitt samtycke när som helst.

☐

- Jag samtycker till en säker lagring av intervjumaterialet och till användning av materialet.

☐

-Jag samtycker till en ljudinspelning av min intervju

..... Deltagarens underskrift

..... Datum för underskrift

Stort tack på förhand!

Med vänliga hälsningar, Noah Hrelja