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Research Article

Framing "men in feminism": theoretical locations, local contexts and practical passings in men's gender-conscious positionings on gender equality and feminism

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This article addresses some aspects of the "Man Question" in feminism, by way of the analysis of men's diverse gender-conscious positionings in relation to gender, gender equality and feminism. It builds on earlier work, making use of theoretical models in feminist literature combined with the micro-sociological concept of passing.

The article is primarily concerned with the theoretical and empirical complexities, contradictions and ambiguities of men's positionings, as when they are self-defined as "feminists" (or similar identifications) in radical or deconstructive ways. In this, a Swedish interview data is used. Sweden is considered particularly interesting, with a qualified societal consensus on gender equality and a broadly positive place accorded to men's relations with feminism.

The authors argue in the final section that there is a need to further dialogue between analyses of men/masculinities and the multidimensionality of feminisms, as well as a need for more empirical studies of men's different (pro)feminist positionings in order to elaborate the theoretical implications of different social contexts. The framing presented seeks to provide greater possibilities for such complex, nuanced and situated understandings of men's relation to feminism, theoretically, analytically and politically.

Keywords: Feminism; Gender Equality; Men; Masculinity; Passing; Positioning

Introduction

The "Man Question" in feminism – men as both objects and men as subjects of critique – has been addressed variously. While, according to some interpretations, feminist theory has not attended sufficiently to this (Hebert 2007), feminism has always been partly about men and what to do about men (see Friedman & Sarah, 1982; Hanmer, 1990; Gardiner, 2001). Moreover, the "Man Question" is not static or unified; it develops historically and differentially, partly as some men slowly become more interested in gender equality, albeit from diverse positionings. There is now a considerable critical academic literature analysing men's broadly positive positionings (Jardine and Smith 1987, Christian 1994, Digby 1998, Schacht and Ewing 1998, Pease 2000, Goldrick-Jones 2002, Ashe 2004, 2007). However, situated constructions of male feminist positions and men's dealing with the complicity of men would benefit from further theoretical, conceptual and empirical enquiry.

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This paper examines men's relations to feminism and gender equality, drawing on research on men "doing feminism" in Sweden (Hearn and Holmgren 2006, Egeberg Holmgren 2007). This research includes an interview study by Egeberg Holmgren with (pro)feminist¹ men on becoming and being (pro)feminist, and doing feminism in Sweden, a national context where men can be inserted "into feminism" as feministiska män ("feminist men"), feministkillar ("guy-feminists") or manliga feminister ("male feminists" 2). In Sweden the F-word is respectable to the extent that even a former male prime minister and the conservative male minister of finance can call themselves "feminist". The national and regional context is characterised by, amongst other things, state feminism and a qualified consensus on the value of gender equality as a political goal and general norm, which tend to generate a broadly positive place for men in and around feminism (Holli et al. 2005). So, how are positionings, of these men and men more generally, in relation to gender equality and feminism to be understood? To answer this, we identify the interrelations of theoretical locations, local contexts, and practical passings as (pro)feminist.

In the following discussion of gender-consciousness in men's positionings, we build on Messner's triangular conceptualisation for locating men's diverse gender-conscious positionings in gender debates. From there on, the Swedish data on men's positionings in relation to feminism is used to point to some complexities in such men's positions and negotiations. Both local and theoretical contexts are important. We conclude by examining these questions within analysis of men's different relations to feminism, and by arguing for greater contextualisation of theory and practices.

Mapping men's gender-conscious positionings

First, it is necessary to note that much of what men do is *not* seen as "about gender", related to gender equality or about making gender relations and gender divisions more or less equal or unequal – in fact it is not seen as *political* activity at all. Much of men's practices, in public and in private, are commonly not seen as gendered. They are often done, perceived and felt as (if they were) "normal". They are *not* usually *gender-conscious* activity: they "just happen"! In this, many men appear to deal with feminism by ignoring, hoping it will go away. Men's practices (re)producing gender inequality are heavily embedded in social, economic and cultural relations - so that men's dominant or complicit practices may often easily be equated with what is considered and counts as the "normal", usual, or even the official way of doing things (Martin 2001). There are several ways of understanding such practices by men, for example as homosociality (Lipman-Blumen 1976), cultural cloning (Essed and Goldberg 2002) or simply sexism.

In contrast, there has been a significant growth of men's more explicitly gender-conscious activities, often, though by no means always, framed in relation to gender equality. There are many reasons for this, even though men's relations to gender equality and feminism are often problematic, especially so in relation to sexuality and violence. A relatively early, explicit statement of positive reasons for men's engagement in gender change is given by Connell (1987) and Hearn (1987)³. Important forces for change also include gay movements, queer politics, and "new sexual movements". While generalising about these is difficult, they have emphasised desirability of (some) men to each other, public recognition of men through same-sex desire, and associated or implied critiques of certain heterosexual men's practices.

Having said this, men's gender-consciousness certainly is not necessarily progender equality. Anti-feminists and "male supremacists" are indeed gender-conscious in a different way, just as white supremacists are race-, ethnicity- or nationalism-conscious. There are many reasons why men might be interested in gender, gender equality and feminism.

In mapping men's gender-conscious positionings, we can recognise a form of continuum from those men actively supportive of gender equality onto those in favour, in theory, but who do not do anything in particular, to those "not bothered", onto those actively hostile (somewhat comparable to a left-right continuum). Earlier Norwegian and Swedish surveys found about a third of men as traditional and hostile to gender equality, a third in favour of gender equality and in some way active in their lives, and a third "in principle" in favour but passive and unaffected (Jalmert 1984, Holter 1989, Holter and Aarseth 1993).

But a single continuum can mask other aspects. Specifically, men may: on the one hand, be pro- or anti-gender equality in terms of the *gains for women*, but, on the other, be pro- and anti-gender equality in terms of the *gains for men*. Some men seem more interested in gaining more for *themselves* than in general moves to societal gender equality, with "gender equality" agendas appearing to offer opportunities to benefit men, without much concern for women.

To map such complications, the triangular framework of men's gender-conscious positionings and organising in the US proposed by Michael Messner (1997) is useful. The apexes of the triangle are: first, recognition of and opposition to men's institutionalised privileges; second, recognition of the "costs of masculinity"; and third, recognition of differences between and inequalities among men. In the first case, this includes men's gender-conscious activities that are broadly positive towards feminism. The second case can also be observed in academic, policy and activist contexts, such as men's rights and fathers' rights policy and politics. In the third case, there are men's gender-conscious activities that emphasise specificities and differences between men, by sexuality, racialisation, and so on, as most crucial.

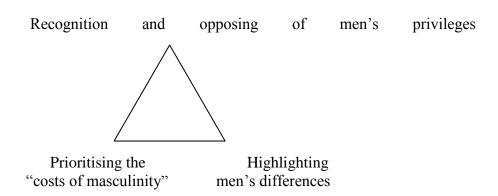


Figure 1. The triangle (adapted from Messner, 1997)

This way of framing produces a less either-or analysis, less of a continuum and opens up a range of possible positions. Messner himself advocates a position in the middle of the triangle, where different organisations' policies and ideologies can meet, but positions can be found anywhere within the triangle. Thus, this frame points to contradictions and ambiguities in positionings, especially around different kinds of inequalities, differences and "in-between" positions amongst men in different

societies. This kind of framework can also be useful in charting social movement changes over time.

The very term "men's movement" has itself taken on different meanings over the last thirty years or so (Hearn 1993). In the 1970s and early 1980s, the term was used to refer to the "anti-sexist men's movement"; in the UK and elsewhere there were considerable attempts to define the movement as "profeminist" and "gay-affirmative". It was also influenced by left, anarchist, welfare and green politics, and was active in national and regional conferences, gatherings, campaigns and groups -consciousness-raising, therapy or 'support groups'. Since the 1970s there have been various shifting forms of explicitly gender-conscious politics by men in relation to gender and feminism, not only from anti-feminist to feminist, profeminist or anti-sexist, but also in terms of differences by sexuality, racialisation, and so on. By the mid-1980s there was a loss of momentum in anti-sexist men's movements; many men either left these activities or tried to bring these issues into more mainstream and professional work. There followed the mythopoetic men's movement, emphasising questions of age and generation, the media creation of "new men", and then "new lads".

In Europe and elsewhere men's rights and fathers' rights organisations have grown - some confusingly called the "men's movement". In Sweden, men's movement organisations such as "Liberate the Man" moved from stressing the right to be human in the 1970s to the right to be masculine in the early 1980s (Hill 2007). In the Nordic state feminist countries, including Sweden, fathers' rights issues have been incorporated into gender equality politics as a part of realising feminist objectives (Klinth 2002). Interestingly, Hobson and Morgan (2002) suggest that Swedish fathers have most legal rights yet least responsibilities compared to other European countries. In addition, in various countries there is further development of more composite groups of men identified as men, such as "older profeminist men" or "black gay men".

Recently, there has been something of a revival of interest in some European contexts in projects which in different ways recognise men's privileges and men's positive relations to feminism.⁵ There have also been governmental initiatives, typically more ambiguous in relation to (pro)feminism.⁶ However, such institutional and policy-orientated developments can remain somewhat separate from the experiences of individual men who define themselves as (pro)feminists.

The triangle certainly opens up some political spaces, but the frame alone does not sufficiently reflect the complex aspects of men's (pro)feminist positionings. Thus we now turn to the question of how men present themselves in practice. In our empirical example the positions are to be found at the top apex of Messner's triangle.

Men in context – Feminism in practice

What happens when we try to apply theoretical locations in empirical studies? To illustrate how the context, locality and discourses of gender equality can be related to men's (pro)feminist positionings and practices, we draw on Egeberg Holmgren's study of (pro)feminist men in Sweden. Sweden is known for its significant development of state feminism and qualified consensus of gender equality (Stetson and Mazur 1995, Fehr *et al.* 1998, Bergqvist 1999). As noted it is not unusual that Swedish men politicians in high positions describe themselves as "feminist" and gender equality is part of general political rhetoric (Magnusson 2000). Men's positioning in relation to feminism(s) remains in some ways problematic and other

pro-gender equality men sometimes seems a larger problem when it comes to defining oneself as (pro)feminist than the ones who claim to be anti-feminist.

Such a local, national context may very well be reflected and traced in how men talk about feminism and present themselves as (pro)feminist. Moreover, the theoretical locations, as in Messner's triangle, may carry different meanings when positions of men are carried out in practice. In this article we focus on positions at the top apex, where the recognition and opposition of men's privileges are found. Since the political rhetoric promotes ardent advocacy of gender equality in Sweden, what happens when men put themselves in a subversive, deconstructive or somewhat radical (pro)feminist position? In what ways can such a position be practised or put into practice, and what are the theoretical outcomes or implications of such practice?

A study of men in feminism

An important theme in Egeberg Holmgren's study is the forming of a (pro)feminist subject position and the embodiment of (pro)feminist norms and practices. The empirical material comprises individual, pair and group interviews with 28 (pro)feminist men aged 20-34; carried out 2005/2006. The interviewees form a varied sample concerning sexual identity, place of birth, current occupation and organisation of living/intimate relations. Although class has not been clarified in all cases, most of them have some kind of academic degree and/or are identified as middle-class. None of them is a parent. The interviewees have an engagement in feminist issues in common although ideological influences, identity markers and theoretical perspectives differ.

The interviews have included themes of how (pro)feminism is "done" and what it actually means to identify oneself (pro)feminist. The interviews comprise topics such as norms, consequences, change and (pro)feminist commitment in relation to personal/private relations; sexual practices; masculinity and gendered experiences from feminist and non-feminist contexts. While empirically based, the interpretative onset of the material is theoretically exploratory and informed by an interactionist approach.

In this article detailed material from one of the group interviews is used. Four men, anonymised as Ruben, Hemming, Dennis and Sven, participated. They have all been engaged in consciousness-raising groups.⁷ From the more extensive data available this group was chosen as interviewees may be considered belonging to rather radical, deconstructive and proactive strands of Swedish feminist movement⁸. Moreover, the group interview dynamic in this case contributed to making the interviewees' statements eloquent.

Passing as "feminist"

The social and individual position, as a man, and even more complicated as a (pro)feminist man, turned out an important matter in the interview. To analyse what the manifold reflexive and retrospective narratives are all about, the sociological concept of *passing* is brought into the analysis.

The concept of passing is usually used for problematising issues of (trans)gender (Kessler and McKenna 1978) and/or stigmatising disability (Goffman 1990). An individual can possess an attribute which makes that person different from others in the same category of persons or the social context where s/he desires to be (Goffman 1990). Not passing in a social context means running the risk of being stigmatised, but it is important to keep in mind that an attribute is not an essential characteristic of the individual and thereby stigmatising in itself. Rather, in order to

become stigmatising, the attribute must confirm some kind of "normality" among others. Passing therefore requires social interaction. In this case the attribute of differentiation is gender. "Normal" within the context of the feminist movement is being defined as a woman and thereby being subject of subordination in a patriarchal social structure, whereas "male gender" or being a man – the subject and object of critique – indicates deviance. In this situation, how do men *pass* as (pro)feminists? When and according to whom? Is the (pro)feminist core to be found in *what is said, done, or experienced*? How do (pro)feminist claims and subject positions alter depending on social context?

Using the concept of passing accordingly, the key issue here is not to achieve a performance that deceives an audience to believe that one is what one is not (e.g. appearing to be a "(pro)feminist man" whilst one is not). Rather, passing means being recognised and accepted into the social context of feminism as "(pro)feminists". In the case of men doing feminism this can include, but is not limited to, achieving a level of competence in feminist theory (Egeberg Holmgren 2009). Thus, in order to answer such questions one has to consider matters of gendered spaces, positions and practices.

One of the most striking results when interviewees positioned at the top apex is the need for recognition from feminist women alongside distancing from other men, (pro)feminist or not. "Male gender" or being men becomes stigmatising when you are not able to get full social recognition in different feminist contexts. As we shall see, passing as (pro)feminist primarily takes place in the social context of the interview, although sometimes through narratives of passing in other social situations. Passing can be done in different ways, by: questioning credibility (own and others), being self-critical, accepting women's separatism, confessing inadequacy, and through the embodiment of distance and difference from other men.

Credibility – What are men to do? Where are men to be at?

What men actually can and should do is a recurring theme. A predominant perspective in the group is that men need to change. To create social change there is a need to "work on oneself" as an individual. Men's working together as a group is generally seen as something good by the group, but at the same time potentially dangerous in terms of (pro)feminist method. Ruben reflects the ambivalence of working on oneself in men's groups instead of doing the "real thing".

Ruben: Well, women in the 70s they occupied houses and I don't know all cool things they did, women have forced through their right to vote and everything, see, the women's movement have done all different kinds of impressive things during a period of time. And then a group of men comes along and like: well, we are working with ourselves in everyday life. [laughter from the others] Damn! What the fuck does that do for women?

Linn: Is that how it feels?

Ruben: Yes, I think it feels that way. It feels really good working with myself although I get frustrated because I can't quite see how...what would a men's movement of constructive character look like?

Ruben continues his thoughts on "male" or men's participation in the feminist movement by saying that it would be a catastrophe if men were to arrange (pro)feminist clubs, festivals and such for men only with the comment "What are [the men] going to do? Sit there masturbating in front of each other!?" This is said as a joke but it is also a serious matter. For Ruben, men within the feminist movement are thought of as somewhat narcissistic. There is a thin line between being satisfied with

working on one's own role, and being too satisfied with engagement of that kind, turning (pro)feminism into a question of personal development and gain. It is noteworthy that Ruben does include himself to this ridiculing critique. Humorous self-criticism can here work as a way to not make the suspicion too pretentious and at the same time distance himself from other (pro)feminist men who overstate their importance.

Despite criticism directed towards oneself, there is nothing as suspicious as other (pro)feminist men. This is significant when it comes to the radically positioned men in the study. It seems too easy to call oneself "feminist" in Sweden today from the group's point of view; many men's groups are simply not "for real" although they get a lot of media attention. It is considered frustrating that men may pass as (pro)feminists in the general public eye without having to prove anything. One interpretation of Ruben's statement is that he is distancing himself from those who see men's participation in the feminist movement as self-evident: a form of feminist stratification.

The dominant perspective in the group is that it is far too easy to get and to take "cred" when claiming to be a (pro)feminist man, a kind of (pro)feministic complicit masculinity. At the same time men's engagement in feminism is perceived as crucially important. The national, state-prioritised gender equality context seems to blur/obscure the interviewees' possibilities to position themselves away from the male crowd, as men and radical at the same time. The problem with such a gendered position becomes perceivable in this quote where Dennis challenges people with a more liberal approach than his own:

I sometimes feel that it is too easy to come [into feminist contexts], only if you claim to have the proper view of things. You can come quite far by just belching out the accurate opinions in those environments, in conscious groupings. But at the same time it's more fun and more of a challenge where those points of views are met with astonishment. As late as earlier today there was this big 'WOW' during lunch when I said; 'I think masculinity ought to be abolished' and they [in a lighter prude voice of elder woman]: 'But Dennis!'. [My women colleagues] thought I was totally awful saying this but we got a really lovely discussion out of it and I got the chance to make myself clear of what I meant.

One way of passing from a radical top apex position is by seeking acceptance from feminists in separatist contexts where men actually are not allowed and thereby distancing oneself from other (pro)feminist men, or the category of men, altogether. At an individual level, this is to direct the suspicion towards oneself and moreover confessing that one is not good enough, actually not good at all.

Due to the lack of a "normal" gendered subject position in feminist contexts (i.e. "woman"), being a man is a potential problem and stigma. To put the identity as male or a man forward can facilitate the questioning of men's (pro)feminist competence or credibility. Suspicion and self-criticism have its limits though, and there is still the possibility of practising your way into the movement. Sven for example, feels that he is no longer subject to suspicion as much as he used to be:

It feels as if I've been...welcomed into [laughs] the circle so to speak. You know, I've been 'feministing' myself⁹ for such a long time that...it seems as if there is a trust in me even though there certainly always is a particular scepticism since I *am* a man. But I think that's good. I think it ought to be like that.

Sven feels welcome "in spite" of his gender. He is passing by agreeing on that he deserves scepticism since he is deviant as a man.

Passing by not passing at all

Passing might best be illustrated with an example of not passing at all. In this Hemming shares an experience where he found himself guilty by (gender) association and physically unable to pass through a building as he was not a woman:

I was in a choir group and one time we had rehearsal at the same time as a feminist happening took place in the building next to the one of the choir. I was late for rehearsal and the entrance was locked so I couldn't get in, so I had to go through the part of the building where the feminist happening took place. I didn't know that this was taking place and just strolled on. There were two girls outside and they kind of: 'No, you're not allowed in here'. 'Well, I just need to pass through, I won't be seen, I won't be heard, I'll just slink through alongside the walls. I'm just passing through'. And I was *so* angry. I mean the argument that I couldn't go through the door because I was a man, I experienced as very provoking. And they became very angry with me for persisting. It all ended with me leaving the place and missing out on my choir rehearsal.

Recounting separatist encounters is a clear example of a situation where it becomes impossible for a man to pass as a (pro)feminist. However, Hemming passes in the context of the interview since he is describing a process of insight to the researcher and other participants:

Now, afterwards, I think the reason for me becoming so angry was that it was the first time that I experienced so evidently that my gender limited me.

Acknowledging women feminist separatism as an effective working method is another way of passing. Accepting and agreeing to be excluded because of your gender can be interpreted as excluding yourself to not be excluded at all. Although not physically allowed in, you become a part of a feminist separatist perspective. The passing takes place in what is said and thought, in the *telling* of experiencing gender rather than through more active action.

Feminist inadequacy: passing through confession

Confessions and stories of problems and failure in sticking with feminism are reoccurring: one is not good enough, there are no good men, there are "frogs constantly jumping out of your mouth"; interviewees carry a so-called "sexist rucksack" from childhood; they experience fear of what might happen if they break the rules of homosociality; they are in need of other people keeping an eye on them and they put a lot of effort into criticising themselves. There is this problem of "feminism-goes-on-vacation", as Ruben puts it. As a man you can always step out from the chosen (pro)feminist position and this is tempting from time to time. This example is understood as illustrating a discrepancy between what is said and done:

Sven: Of course, [having the courage to tick off others] doesn't necessarily mean that you have become a good man - or a good human being for that matter, which might be a more correct term, because there are no good men. But...only because you can criticise others doesn't mean you behave better yourself.

Sven quickly corrects himself here: turning out good is to cease being a man, or at least cease being gendered as one (Egeberg Holmgren 2007). This quote illustrates that a (pro)feminist position is no guarantee for a (pro)feminist practice in all contexts when traces of masculinity leave the ideal far-reached. Awareness and reflexivity by confession can be understood as a way of passing in itself. Telling the feminist

researcher that you are "not good enough" and that "there are no good men", is a way of constructing/presenting the struggling (pro)feminist "male" subject.

This is of course a matter of context; in other situations it is the (pro)feminist attribute, rather than gender, that may be deviant. The participants talk about being the boring member of the family, especially in relation to brothers and fathers. Dennis keeps giving his father and brother challenging "unmanly hugs" and says "you notice that the jokes aren't funny anymore. And you, yourself aren't that funny either, there isn't much you say that feels comfortable". Sven describes it as "you have become boring, and that's the thing – that we are *not normal* any more" [our italics]. Hemming tells about his father and how there is always something that exerts a pull on him to comply with demands that constitute a gendered relationship between father and son. At the same time he is eager, when looking for a job, to participate in "male-" or men-dominated environments in order to meet non-feminist men and make a difference as a (pro)feminist man.

It becomes difficult to pass as normal at family gatherings as well as in certain homosocial contexts such as the workplace or among friends. There are several stories in the material of unavoidably loosing contact with old friends and feeling estranged at work (Egeberg Holmgren 2007). Occasionally the feminist perspective makes it nearly impossible keeping those friends or fitting in without compromising personal beliefs.

Passing as an embodied counter-hegemonic practice

Passing can also involve embodiment of counter-hegemonic practices. Sven illustrates how breaking norms of masculinity as a bodily practice can self-verify (pro)feminist positioning. He speaks about a situation where he interacts with three other men working on gender equality issues, although he is the only one who claims to be (pro)feminist. Here, being (pro)feminist is thought of as something different and more rebellious than "just" being "pro-gender equality". In his narrative Sven is on a panel debate and a woman feminist friend of his in the audience becomes the gatekeeper who confirms his (pro)feminist identity:

Well, I feel that I challenge the norms of masculinity, not the least when I'm doing lectures and such things. I participated in a panel once and a friend of mine who's feminist was there to listen, and she told me that it was so obvious when we sat there, just observing how we were sitting and behaving while sitting there. It was so awfully evident with those three men I sat next to. They kind of sat [pushes his chair from the table] with their legs spread widely like this [spreads and accentuates crutch] and they kept holding their scrotum and kind of scratched their chests when they spoke, like gorillas, and were rumbling a lot. While I was sitting very shrunk up [crosses legs, put chin in palm and head on side], nodding silently and agreeing. She said it was so evident and that one can distinguish how men who are *not* outspoken feminists and yet in this [kind of work], how they *behave*, how they just gush out, like a big blob. Those are things you don't notice but surely... I mean I'm actually challenging something there, some kind of violence.

Touching the genitals is a "modern classic" among symbolic ways within popular culture of expressing masculinity, domination and even sexual violence. In the above quote it becomes an unconscious and implicit way of taking space and power from other participants in the panel. Violence is something more than physically injuring another person. Signalling violence symbolically is sometimes enough. Sven is telling us a story of how he passes as (pro)feminist through the eyes of his woman friend in a gender equality context, whereas the other men appears to be using hegemonic

practices and even signalling violence towards others. This is an example of how the feminist perspective materialises in Sven's way of sitting, talking, and so on.

Altering embodied practices, not just in the hugging of male family members, but also in sitting differently, developing strategies for not scaring women in dark parks or just becoming aware of how the own bodily presence in public milieux is perceived by women are all examples of challenging norms of masculinity. Learning to discern intuitively when the home is in need of cleaning is given as an example in the group as part of such (pro)feminist practice as well¹⁰, Interviewees also confront and change their practices within verbal contexts, exercise talking about feelings and question the own right to speak first.

Passing as a matter of context

The practices of passing need to be located in relation to the specific contexts of locality and dominant discourses of gender equality. Variations in men's positionings depend on men's relations to gender, gender equality and feminism, what is understood by these very terms, and their societal and local contextualisations. Generalised theoretical framings need to be supplemented by contextualised analyses of particular social situations and places. The politics and problems of passing are expressed in relation to different contexts and experiences, as in our Swedish example.

In the empirical material questions recur around how one can pass as a (pro)feminist in feminist spaces and at the same time be able to pass in homosocial relations and groupings. Passing in feminist spaces can include accepting and being accepted by (although not into) separatist groups within the feminist movement. Having said that, men's relation to other men becomes ambiguous; male gender and homosociality is something to benefit from, occasionally with relish, but more often unintentionally and reluctantly. At the same time some interviewees find themselves dependent on "male" or men's access to homosocial relations and groups in order to make a difference towards gender equality. Moreover, being interviewed about masculinity and feminist matters can also be considered within the framework of passing. By expressing suspicion against other (pro)feminist men during the interview and confessing inadequacies due to being or identifying as a man, the (pro)feminist position may become or be represented as more distinct, radical and authentic. At the same time, such activity could also be interpreted as part of more established, although paradoxical, patterns of competitiveness between men. This also highlights two different approaches to radicalism more generally: one prioritising personal vanguardist difference from others, even if that involves confessing inadequacies; the other emphasising the collective and thus similarities to other would-be radicals. 11

Overall, identifying oneself as a man and also becoming more and more intrigued by feminist questions on masculinity seems to make issues of one's own subject position ambivalent and contradictory. Passing as a (pro)feminist man requires being acknowledged as one by others, yet at the same time expecting to be defined as the problem to be solved. In men's relations to feminism contradictions and problematisations continue. Acting positively in relation to gender equality and feminism often involves men recognising positional dilemmas and ambivalences. To conclude, we outline two ways of thinking about these variations, in terms of theoretical locations and local contexts.

Theoretical locations and local contexts

It is now evident that it is difficult to analytically grasp the complexity of men's positions, thoughts and practices in feminism, considering the models of a continuum or a triangle, discussed earlier. Empirical situated aspects of *saying*, *doing* and *experiencing* create ambiguous positions not always caught by the researcher's or policymaker's eye when dealing with theories of men's participation in gender equality and in the forming of social theory and policy.

In focusing on men's positive relations with feminism put into practice, the triangle approach does not engage sufficiently with some further key *differences* within what is *actually meant* by gender equality and feminism. Here we highlight three different answers to the question of what gender equality and feminism might be - from (liberal) reform, (standpoint) resistance, and (deconstructive) rebellious positions. Combining the triangle with this elaboration gives a more complex picture of the theoretical locations.

In liberal reform feminism, gender equality might be seen as a matter of realising the potential of women and men equally, albeit within the context of current gender order and social structures. To quote Judith Lorber (2005b): "Gender reform feminists locate the source of gender inequality in women's and men's status in the social order, arguing that it is structural and not the outcome of personal attributes, individual choices, or unequal interpersonal relationships. ... An overall strategy for political action to reform the unequal gendered social structure is *gender balance*." (emphasis in original). In many ways this is the dominant position in much governmental, NGO and even some corporate gender equality politics. The implication is that men can contribute positively to (or can position themselves against) such a programme of change towards the *abolition of gender imbalance*.

Lorber continues: "Gender resistance feminists argue that the gender order cannot be made equal through gender balance because men's dominance is too strong." (2005b). Gender equality per se is not a feasible aim, as it is likely to end up with women becoming like men. A more radical transformation is necessary, with women's voices and perspectives reshaping the gendered social order in a more fundamental way, including the abolition of patriarchy. Men's positionings here are less certain; the implications are that men need to position themselves, for or against, or in some more ambiguous middle ground, in relation to the more radical project of abolishing patriarchy and patriarchal relations.

Gender rebellious feminism go further still, seeking to "take apart the gendered social order by multiplying genders or doing away with them entirely." (Lorber 2005b). Connections with other social divisions, differences and oppressions become central, as do deconstructions of the categories of sex, sexuality, and gender, and the dualities that are often produced and reproduced through them (see Lorber 1994, 2000, 2005a). Men, or rather "men", become an unstable, perhaps an outdated, social category (Hearn 1998, 2004), even a potential site of stigma (Egeberg Holmgren 2007). This third position may be the most radical conceptualisation of gender and gender equality. The implications for men are less clear still. Men's relations to this theoretical object may range from dismissal as irrelevant to immense uncertainty and humility to even a kind of social paralysis for some, or onto an awakening of renewed optimism of a "queer" future where gender is degendered, with the abolition of men as a social category¹². Some of the interviewees talk about deconstructing masculinity or abolishing manhood. But how is this done? In order to take a radical standpoint as "male" and "(pro)feminist" there is a need to place oneself in a position at the very margins of discourse where their own gendered position is, if not impossible, at least thoroughly ambiguous. This positioning resonates with long traditions in feminist and other critical thought on theorising from the margins (e.g. Collins 1990). Practices of passing are what make this ambiguous position conceivable in social situations.

Even within explicit (pro)feminist positions tensions persist between a more positive approach to men and men's potentialities and a more deconstructive approach that may even see the need to abolish men as a social category. This tension can partly serve to explain difficulties of successfully integrating rebellious positions into public political and everyday practice. Other tensions to be negotiated by men continue between local activity and international links and men's differential allegiance to different feminisms/feminists, such as less and more libertarian strands, and sameness and difference feminism. Such various positions can be occupied by individual men, groups of men, even whole organisations; they can operate in gender equality politics, in working life, at home, in personal relationships and even in bed.

Men may ask themselves individually and collectively about the importance and effort of changing self and others, but also in what ways one likes or dislikes being a man. Specific contradictions that men seeking to change in relation to feminism may face include what and how to learn from different feminisms without taking over women's space. This relates to how to recognise "being a man" without emphasising that status. More complicated is how to recognise "being a man" whilst stopping being a Man?

Rebellious feminism as an oxymoron in gender equality contexts

Taking gender equality discourse into account in our analysis, the "male"/men (pro)feminists represented in this material, positioned as rebellious at the top apex, seem to be what Goffman would call "deviant individuals". The stigma of having the attribute "male"/men gender is defined by the interviewees themselves. Not passing is being discredited by their surroundings, but they also *expect* to be discredited in order to fit in. To distinguish themselves, and maintain a radical position, there is a need to question other men who are interpreted as "only" pro-gender equality. This can partly serve to explain why the interviews come to deal so much with reflexive accounts of (pro)feminist positions and experiences of those rather than narratives of (pro)feminist practices outside the context of the interviews. The above analysis has mainly come to focus on the "(pro)feminist core" as what is said rather than what is done in practical public politics outside the interview situation.

In order to make sense of these various positionings one has to consider Swedish (Nordic) discourses of gender equality. The question of being a man positively and at the same time identifying oneself as "the problem" is highlighted. The notion of the "gender equal" Swedish man has become somewhat hegemonic in Sweden, with the broad consensus on gender equality. The idea of gender equality in Sweden as something important is well-established, but it also carries ambiguities since state feminism incorporates demands of the feminist movement into political structures still considered patriarchal (Gelb 1989, Mellström 2004). State feminism is firmly established with consequences for academia where gender research is often closer to gender equality politics than the feminist movement (Hearn 2002). Moreover dominant discourses of sameness and complementarity are non-unitary, and at the same time interweave with each other, co-existing in complex ways (Eriksson and Pringle 2006). Men are often welcomed into gender equality politics. Claiming to be (pro)feminist or having a feminist perspective is often enough but not necessary for men in order to be accepted in state feminism. Thus passing depends on context. In

several political gender equality contexts, masculinity can be a resource rather than a stigmatising feature, for example, several important gender equality positions in Sweden today have been held by men.

Taking a seemingly impossible position may be seen by some men as the only way of making a radical change in society where dominant discourses of gender equality has a hegemonic core of double emancipation; the idea that both men and women will gain equally from, and be liberated by, gender equality – as men and women (see Klinth 2002). "The Man" is nothing that is to be changed or emancipated; he is a mistake altogether. But putting oneself within feminism makes one's own position as a "feminist man" not only ambiguous: it becomes an oxymoron.

In this article we have developed a sedimented and contextualised analysis of men's relations to gender equality and feminism(s) by making use of theoretical models in feminist literature combined with the micro-sociological concept of passing. These different locations, especially the rebellious, raise practical complications and implications for men on what to say, what to do and how to be - as male (pro)feminists (or men with similar identifications). Thus, there is a need to further dialogue between analyses of men/masculinities and the multidimensionality and polymorphousness of feminisms – as well as a need for more empirical studies of men's different (pro)feminist, positionings in order to elaborate the theoretical implications of different social contexts. The framing presented here seeks to provide greater possibilities for such complex, nuanced and situated understandings of men's relation to feminism, theoretically, analytically and politically.

Notes

- 1. In Sweden there is often no or less apparent contradiction in men using the term "feminist"; indeed the term "profeminism" is sometimes viewed as somewhat academic, too specific or even unnecessary. This is also often the case in the academic literature on men and feminism and it was rare that the men interviewed found it important to refer to themselves as "pro-". At the same time we acknowledge the prevalence of different ideological and theoretical perspectives within feminism as to whether men could or should call themselves feminist. To bridge these contextual and conceptual discrepancies we will use the term "(pro)feminist" throughout the article, except for mere citations and encapsulations. For the sake of readability, "(pro)feminist" works as an abridgement for "feminist or profeminist". This will then include both how Swedish men usually refer to themselves and what in Anglophone contexts might be referred to as a "profeminist" position.
- 2. The sex/gender distinction used in English is not exactly paralleled in the Swedish language, as in many other languages. Terms that appears to have a broad correspondence to "sex" in English, such as "male" and "female", are often used in Swedish when referring to "gender". This raises some complications in the use of such words in English as "man", "male", "masculinity" and "manly". As a consequence, a notion such as "male feminism" can have a double connotation, suggesting that there could be both "(biologically) male feminism" and "manly feminism". For this reason, in the remainder of this article we use "male" in inverted comments along with the terms, "man" or "men".
- 3. R.W. (now Raewyn) Connell began the book, Gender and Power (1987), with five reasons why heterosexual men might detach from defence of patriarchy against entrenched interests to maintain it. For example the beneficiaries can come to see the oppressiveness of the system, wishing for a better situation in life for women and other men around them. In the same year Hearn concluded (1987) with six "material reasons for men to change against patriarchy": increased possibilities of love, emotional support and care for and from other men; benefits from increased contact and work with children; improved health; creation of conditions for transformation of capitalism; avoidance of other men's violence and fear of men, killing, being killed; reduction of the likelihood of nuclear annihilation.
- For example in the UK Men's Movement (UKMM) and the UK-based direct action group Fathers 4 Justice (F4J).
- 5. Examples include the European Profeminist Network (http://www.europrofem.org/); the Ending gender-based violence project (Ferguson et al. 2004); Critical Research on Men in Europe (http://www.cromenet.org); and the International Network for the Radical Critique of Masculinities.

- 6. The longest continuous government apparatus on men and gender equality is the Finnish Subcommittee on Men's Issues established in 1988 within the Council for Equality between Women and Men. The UN Division for the Advancement of Women has promoted "The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality" (http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/men-boys2003/). The Council of the European Union passed positive recommendations on men and gender equality in 2006. This theme was a priority in the 2006 Finnish EU presidency (Varanka *et al.* 2006). The UK government recently provided limited finance to the Coalition on Men and Boys in 2008 for a policy report on men and masculinities.
- 7. To get hold of interviewees a short text declaring the wish to get in touch with men who call themselves feminist/profeminist/anti-sexist was sent out to major Swedish email lists, both "non-political" and (party)political. Thereafter the call spread itself to smaller networks and through word-by-mouth. Interviewees hereby come from different parts of the feminist movement and are scattered geographically.
- 8. By using the term "radical" it is not intended to put the narratives into a uniform theoretical perspective or singular feminist ideology, rather it points to a more general aim at a thorough restructuring of society and a shift in the very meaning or existence of gender, rather than "merely" a levelling out of power relations.
- 9. In the Swedish language, it is possible to make verbs out of nouns by putting the letter "a" in the end of the word. This is somewhat difficult to translate since the verb for "to feminist oneself" ("feminista sig") in Swedish is not correct grammatically, although fully understandable in English.
- 10. In this interview Sven is the one to bring cleaning up as a concrete example up. It has its place as a in a broader discussion on the problem and lack of gender equality among heterosexual couples living together. Although a statement like this brought out of context could just as likely be interpreted (and criticised) to be a functional performance or cognitive reframing, in some cases within feminist discourse, taking more responsibility for household chores is one of the most frequent examples in the study of (pro)feminist practices in everyday life.
- 11. Since the analytical scope of this article is focused on (pro)feminist positions and passings as (pro)feminist in social settings, issues of doing masculinity (here through competitiveness) are not analysed further. For more critical accounts of gender, narrative performance and negotiation of control over the presentation of (pro)feminist positions in interviews, see Egeberg Holmgren (2008, 2009).
- 12. Such a positioning for men has a longer history than may often be realised. In the US context examples include *Unbecoming men* (Bradley & Danchik 1971), *Effeminist manifesto* (Dansky *et al.* 1977) as well as the more well-known work of John Stoltenberg (1989).

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