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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Masculine enjoyment problematizing subjectification through norm critique as a response to climate change

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Abstract

This article problematizes subjectification through the practice of norm critique. The study builds on interviews with some of the key initiators and participants in a project working norm critically with men and masculinity in relation to gender equality and climate change in Sweden. Through the psychoanalytical framework of enjoyment and fantasy, I develop a perspective on how and why a certain understanding of the norm-critical subject emerges. The analysis makes visible how the practice of norm critique, while challenging hegemonic masculine norms such as emotional stoicism, reinforces neoliberal ideals of individualized self-emancipation and the quest for authenticity and wholeness, which risks de-politicizing the issue of climate change.

Keywords Subjectification · Norm critique · Climate change · Gender equality · Neoliberalism · Fantasy

Introduction

Since 2015, when Agenda 30 was accepted by the UN member states, sustainable development has been a highly prioritized goal on the political agenda globally. In research on gender and sustainability, hegemonic masculine ideals such as dominance, independence, and risk-taking have been shown to be linked to both the causes and control of climate change (Hultman & Pulé, 2018; Nagel & Lies 2022). Previous research has highlighted the relationship between masculine identity and climate denial (Daggett 2018; Hultman 2020a), as well as how masculinity connects to lifestyle choices and consumption patterns that have a negative impact on the environment (Cohen 2014). Norms of masculinity affect how the climate crisis is understood, and consequently how it is responded to (MacGregor 2009; Nagel & Lies 2022).

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During 2019, MÄN, a feminist men's organization in Sweden, initiated a project aimed at bringing men and masculinity into discussions on gender and climate change. The initiative makes use of a norm-critical perspective on masculinity with the ambition of engaging men "as part of the solution" (MÄN, 2019: 6). Norm critique, also labelled norm-critical pedagogy or norm-critical perspectives, is a specifically Swedish concept. The purpose of norm critique is to challenge and change social norms that are viewed as oppressive, in order to influence people's behaviour and attitudes and achieve a more just society (Qvarsebo 2021: 165). In descriptions concerning the development of norm-critical perspectives, it has been argued that the concept has its roots in queer and poststructural theoretical perspectives, with Michel Foucault and Judith Butler frequently mentioned as key sources of inspiration (see for example Björkman et al. 2021; Alm & Laskar 2017; Henriksson 2017; Langmann & Månsson 2016). This theoretical perspective draws attention to processes of normalization. It aims to de-naturalize the normative and open up space for alternative ways of being and acting (Foucault 1990; Butler 1990). Building on a queer theoretical analysis, norm-critical pedagogy aims to shift the focus away from the marginalized and oppressed and instead to make visible the hierarchical norms that produce marginalization (Bromseth & Darj 2010).

Over the past decade, norm critique has grown into a well-established tool that is used to counteract discrimination within various different institutions and organizations in Sweden (Henriksson 2017; Qvarsebo 2021), a development which has been described in terms of a "norm-critical turn" (Alm & Laskar 2017). As a result of the rapid spread of norm-critical perspectives, a range of different interpretations and understandings of the concept have appeared. Proponents of norm-critical pedagogy have raised concerns that the radical potential of the concept might become lost when it is put to work within an individualized, neoliberal discursive context (Bromseth & Darj 2010; Alm & Laskar 2017; Björkman et al. 2021). Contrary to its intentions, the norm-critical project has been shown to assume and reproduce a modernist understanding of the subject and, thus, to present ideals of rationality and reason as the primary source of emancipation and change (Langmann and Månsson 2016: 88). Norm critique, as a practice of self-reflection, has arguably contributed to individualizing the responsibility for detecting and changing norms (Langmann & Månsson 2016) and critique has been directed towards the frequent lack of discussion about how a norm-critical practice inevitably produces new norms for what is right and wrong (Qvarsebo 2021).

While previous research has shown that a norm-critical practice, despite being influenced by poststructural theory, reproduces an essentialist understanding of the subject, the aim of this article is to direct attention towards the drivers of such subject formation. Through the psychoanalytical framework of enjoyment and fantasy, I develop a perspective on how and why a certain understanding of the norm-critical subject emerges. I am not questioning poststructuralist notions of power and resistance, neither am I denying the importance of challenging sexual and gender normativity. My aim is instead to problematize subjectification through a particular form of norm-critical pedagogical practice. The study builds on interviews with some of the key initiators and participants in an initiative working norm critically with men and masculinity in relation to gender equality and climate

change. I argue that the analysed initiative, which explicitly builds on a norm-critical approach, while not positioned within an educational setting per se, shares many similarities with, and strives to create, a kind of pedagogical situation similar to that of norm-critical pedagogy. My material thus serves as an empirical example of norm-critical pedagogy being put into practice.

Men, masculinity, emotions

Ecofeminist research has long highlighted the dangers of Anthropocentrism. A human-centred worldview, in which humans are seen as superior to and independent of the world around them, has led to the objectification and domination of nature (Merchant 1994; Braidotti 2013). Many feminist thinkers have critiqued the modernist version of the subject as built on a western, white, and masculine model (Irigaray 1985; Brown 1995). Thus, deconstructing normative understandings of the subject is an important part of the work for change towards sustainability.

The initiative upon which my analysis centres draws inspiration from prior research on men and masculinity in relation to sustainability, notably the concept of Ecological Masculinity introduced by Hultman and Pulé (2018). This perspective distinguishes masculinity into industrial-modern, eco-modern, and eco-logical categories. Industrial-modern masculinity, as the dominant form, aligns with climate change denial and perspectives valuing economic growth. Norm-critical workshops, as described by Hultman (2020b), facilitate a shift from industrial-modern to eco-logical masculinity, which is characterized by sensitivity, care, reflection, relational focus, and solidarity. Previous studies by the initiative's initiators also suggest that these workshops enhance participants' emotional and relational skills, as well as their engagement with gender equality and climate change (Hedenqvist et al. 2021).

In opposition to research suggesting that norm-critical discourse reproduces the idea of an essentialist subject, Henriksson (2017) argues that it assumes a relational, fragmented, and situated self, a subject position which he suggests sides with contemporary forms of power and requirements for emotional competence. According to Henriksson, aspects of norm critique encourage a rational approach towards emotions and emphasize self-surveillance of one's own actions (Henriksson 2017: 163). Following this, I understand norm-critical practice to be a form of emotion work. By viewing this work as a technology of the self, in line with neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility, I want to problematize the emancipatory capabilities ascribed to a norm-critical pedagogical practice.

As the broad research field addressing neoliberal governing has illustrated, neoliberalism emphasizes a certain form of subjectivity, structured around ideals of authenticity and self-optimization. Authenticity refers to "the quality of being true or real" (Cambridge Dictionary), a quality which in a neoliberal context is considered a prerequisite for change. This creates an entrepreneurial subject, who is individually responsible for his or her own personal development (see for example: Rose 1999; Brown 2015). Individuals exhibiting this form of neoliberal subjectivity, also referred to by some researchers as "psytizens", are preoccupied with self-optimization in their quest for happiness and inner truth (Illouz 2019). According

to Byung Chul Han (2017), the central role of emotions, which is characteristic of our time, derives from neoliberalism. Han argues that neoliberal technologies of power, under which the individual subject interprets interiorized power relations as freedom, cuts deeper than the disciplinary technologies of power, conceptualized by Foucault as biopolitics. Thus, Han instead refers to neoliberal technologies of power as "psychopolitics", a form of steering that thrives on the fantasy of an emotionally liberated subject.

Over the past few decades, emotion-based explanations for social injustices have come to dominate public discourse (Zembylas 2016). A therapeutic turn in education policy and practice has been discerned in several Western countries, including Sweden, resulting in a rise in therapeutic understandings of social justice (Ecclestone & Brunila 2015: 485). This increase in therapeutic pedagogies for social justice resonates well with the broader therapization of popular culture and everyday life, through which social and cultural problems are recast as psychological ones. In educational policy, psychologized interventions are used as "therapies" for social problems, thus transforming social injustices into an individual and psycho-emotional issue (Zembylas 2016; Ecclestone & Brunila 2015).

As research concerning the pedagogy of emotional life has shown, a diverse range of new techniques and methods used with the ambition of changing people according to ideals of emotional liberation and authenticity was introduced in Sweden during the 1970s (Tillema 2021). For example, a certain form of "sensitivity-training" courses was initiated by the Swedish Employer's Confederation, in which participants were expected to practice "open" communication, reveal their "true" selves, and express their emotions freely to each other. Similarly, courses in "Active Parenting" were introduced during the same period as a form of popular adult education by SV (in Swedish: Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan) as a method to teach parents to be "themselves" and communicate emotions in a "true" manner in relation to their children. Tillema refers to these methods as "technologies of authenticity" to capture how the proponents of these practices deliberately worked on themselves and their relationships (Tillema 2021: 16–18). As Tillema shows, while often interpreted as a form of counterculture, these methods can be seen as fabricated within, rather than in opposition to, existing social and political ideals, and they capture how subjects are governed and govern themselves through ideals of freedom and self-optimization.

Analysing subjectification through norm-critical practices

The analysed initiative was developed as part of a broader research project and has resulted in 10 men's groups getting together on eight separate occasions, a dinner with 50 participants, and approximately 20 seminars and workshops, both in Sweden and internationally, focussing on masculinity and the climate crisis (Hedenqvist et al. 2021). For my study, 12 interviews were conducted with some of the key initiators and participants in this initiative. Ten men and two women aged between 22 and 55 participated in the study. The interviewees represented quite a homogenous group and could be described as white, Western, middle-class individuals. They

defined themselves as well informed about issues relating to gender inequality and climate change. Four of the interviews, including the first two, were conducted at a place chosen by the participants. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the rest of the interviews, at the participants' request, were conducted via Zoom. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 min and included questions related to the interviewees' experiences of working norm critically with masculinity in relation to gender equality and climate change. (For example: What is included in a norm-critical approach, what norms of masculinity need to be changed, and why?) The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and thereafter organized into themes, which were identified through the lens of my theoretical framework.

My analysis did not focus on specific individuals, but on the discursive production of subject formations. Drawing on Butler's (1993, 1997) re-conceptualization of Althusser's notion of subjectification through interpellation, I theorize how norm critique, as an interpellative practice, functions as formative of subjects. We are called upon by discourse and, since answering this call is what makes us understandable as subjects, we must subject ourselves to discourse. Hence, the process of subjectification is not only restrictive but also enabling (Butler 1993: 22). This approach emphasizes power as being not just regulating but also productive (Foucault 1980). I understand the term "discourse" as consisting of practices (or sets of practices) and not limited to linguistics or text. Following Foucault, the term refers to knowledge, rather than to language (Bacchi & Bonham 2014: 174). I understand the construction of meaning as relational and contingent, rather than fixed. That is, while a certain understanding of the world is possible, it is not necessary (Laclau 1990).

For Foucault, resistance is inherent in any power relation. However, as other feminist researchers have suggested, there has been a perhaps over-optimistic appropriation of some of Foucault's ideas about resistance (see for example Bordo 1993; Huffer 2013; Wiegman & Wilson 2015) and I believe this can be made evident in relation to norm critique. As the following analysis will show, norm-critical practice challenges hegemonic masculine ideals such as emotional stoicism and strength and opens up alternative ways of expressing masculine identity. At the same time, a fantasmatic attachment to ideals of freedom and authenticity risks concealing the contingent character of meaning-making and the impossibility of reaching any final or complete representation of experience.

I have read the articulation of norm critique as a fantasmatic narrative. This means that I have tried to draw attention to the affective investments that subjects make in the stories they produce (Scott 2011; Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008). The concept of fantasy is tied to an idea of the subject as constituted by a radical split. Subjectification is never complete or total. The process of interpellation always fails to fully capture a subject's whole identity (Butler 1997:31). This generates a sense of lack in the subject. This lack of, and consequently a desire for, a fullness which it is impossible to achieve is what constitutes the subject (Lacan 1977). Subjects try to cover this lack by identifying with different objects; for example, subject positions or political ideals which provide the subject with enjoyment. Agency thus points away from the subject towards phantasmatic identification (Butler 1993: 59–60; see also Edenheim 2016: 291). This highlights

that changing oneself according to new masculine ideals is not only a matter of individual choice and free will but is also affected by discourses that prescribe what is desirable, and what is recognized as an appropriate way of being and acting (Butler 1997).

The concept of fantasy becomes relevant when studying norm critique as a tool for political change towards equality and sustainability. This is because norm critique, like many other political discourses, promises to deliver future enjoyment in terms of a "just society" (See Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008: 261). The role of fantasy is not to fulfil desire; instead, it structures desire and conceals the subject's fundamental lack by maintaining a promise of wholeness. One way of upholding this promise is by imagined obstacles that stand in the way of fulfilling desire (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008: 262). For example, in relation to the focus of this article, destructive masculinity norms are imagined as an obstacle to more authentic expressions of masculine identity.

The force of fantasy does not only rely on abstract fantasmatic promises of fullness, but is also linked to experienced enjoyment or, using Lacanian terminology, to a jouissance of the body (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008: 261). In the context of my study, the practice of transgressing norms by expressing emotions was experienced by the participants as enjoyment. It is important to note, however, that this enjoyment always remains partial. The experience of not ever fully achieving total enjoyment, of not ever being free despite participating in transgressive practices, is what provides desire with a motor. Tending towards fantasy makes it possible to illustrate how we are affectively attached to the promise of a future good life; for example, a sustainable world or an ego-logical form of masculinity, even though this promise simultaneously ties our hands behind us and stands in the way of change.

In combination, this framework makes it possible to theorize the link between subjectification and social fantasies, and I make use of the concept to focus on the force, rather than the form (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008: 261), of a norm-critical discursive practice. For example, through the conceptual lens of fantasy and an understanding of power as constitutive of subjects, neoliberalism appears to be something more than just a social structure or set of values. Fantasy illustrates how ideology works upon us via the currency of enjoyment (Hook 2017) and how the affective ties to norm critique's resistant and emancipating capacity might obscure an understanding of norm critique as being, at the same time, a site for normalization.

Masculine enjoyment: subjectification through the practice of norm critique

In order to approach fantasy in my empirical material, I have focussed specifically on identifying narratives that contain emotional elements in order to tease out the promises of enjoyment embedded within the norm-critical discourse. By means of this process, three themes were identified. In what follows, I discuss my findings in relation to each of these themes.

The emotional subject

The ambition of the initiative, as explained by the interviewees, was not only to make visible and question destructive masculinity norms but also to embody a norm-critical approach through the practices of listening, talking about and expressing emotions, and reflecting upon one's own position in relation to women and nature. A central idea is that traditional masculinity norms conflict with such practices and that this has consequences, not only for individual subjects but also for the possibility of achieving an equal and sustainable world. Expressing emotions and revealing vulnerability were thus described by the interviewees as a strategy to challenge such masculine ideals.

> […] When it comes to boys and men and masculinity norms, I think it's ... a big reason, if you think about the climate crisis, a big reason why so little is done in relation to what's actually required. It's not that we don't understand what's required, it's because we avoid feeling those difficult feelings, that we don't know how, yes especially boys and men are trained to turn off and not feel, avoid difficult emotions, or to stay with them and feel them, but rather men should turn them off, avoid them and… (IP 7)[1]

In the above quote, one of the interviewees speculates about why, despite our knowledge of climate change, so little is done to prevent it. Throughout the interviews, destructive masculinity norms were articulated as a hindrance to constructive actions in relation to both gender inequality and the climate crisis, due to their inhibitory effect on the ability to talk about and express emotions, seek help, or show vulnerability. Masculinity norms were understood as causing men to "turn off parts of ourselves" (IP2), which in turn affected their relationships with other people, as well as with nature. As one of the interviewees described it: "[…] the other position on the other side of the male layers, that position, I felt to be a position better suited to some kind of reasonable coexistence on this planet" (IP5).

The ability to talk about and/or express emotions was not articulated as something to be added to a blank slate, or as an essentially missing part of men, but rather as something that had been switched off or blocked. This view was shared by all the interviewees and builds on an understanding of emotions as something natural or true. From such a perspective, men have been suppressed and limited by masculinity norms and patriarchal structures, and men's capacity thus needs to be not so much expanded as restored. Norms of masculinity were described, for example, as affecting the ability to "express oneself genuinely" (IP6) or "to be a whole person" (IP3). They are something "we get lost in" (IP5) and which "stands in the way" (IP 4).

While emotional expressions were constructed in this way as a natural ability, talking about emotions was still considered something that one needs to learn:

[1] All the quotes have been translated by the author.

> And what's important...er...is to talk. Perhaps it's to highlight that a lot of men don't know how to talk about their feelings. Like, it's the worst thing that it's like this and it's their responsibility to learn it. But there are a lot of people, I think, who want to do it, but don't know how. (IP3)

As illustrated in other projects working with masculinity in relation to gender equality (Olsson & Lauri, 2022), the idea that men want to talk about their emotions, but do not know how, implies that men in general are suffering from false consciousness. In line with this, the interviewees described developing men's emotional competence as a tool to "raise awareness" (IP4), "become aware" (IP9), or "make visible" (IP10) the reality of things.

Emotional and relational competence were repeatedly articulated in opposition to men and masculinity, and were described as traditionally feminine, girly, or as something that women and mothers do. As one of the interviewees described it:

> Women, I mean God, I hate myself for saying this, but I think that in general… Yeah, I still believe that two girl friends or three girl friends who sit and talk, that you give each other that space a little more like and you might ask: "Yes, but how did it feel?" And there's a little more space to explore one's feelings and relationships. (IP10)

Cultural norms about masculinity and femininity, in which emotional expressions are more acceptable in women, were referred to as an explanation for why emotions had been closed off or hidden: "the really sad thing is that it's usually the most beautiful and important parts of boys and men that should just be cut off, thrown away and not exist. Because they're considered, well, feminine or girly or…" (IP7).

Besides being able to talk about emotions, aspects such as self-reflection, sharing personal experiences, relational competence, and the ability to listen were articulated as important parts of norm-critical practice:

> Take a step back, listen, what are your experiences and so on [...] But what I wanted to say in relation to norm critique is, I think it fulfils a very important purpose, especially linked to socialization processes, this that men's channelling, I think, is much more, much LESS [laughter], relational. So, we're not used to having that kind of group support or expressing emotions. So, those things I think are important, to sort of uh...break with norms about being tough and invulnerable and being sort of "alone is strong." I think that perhaps is the most important function of the group. But also, try not to have a sense of competition, try to just be there, listen. Maybe you should try, maybe it's ok, train yourself to take a more passive role or, how can I say it, not just take up space. (IP 6)

These traits were seen as challenging traditional masculinity. They were conceived as tools for transcending certain norms and hence as an "act in itself" (IP5). One of the participants described it like this: "For one thing, you can do norm critique, by doing things together that you might not, that might not be traditionally masculine" (IP2). Or, as another interviewee put it:

> the first step is that only men gather and talk about, it's not even about the content of the themes, but that men commit to talking about things that by definition fall outside the normal conversational topics of the stereotypical masculinity norm. (IP 4)

The above articulations serve as an illustration of how emotional expressions are tied to a fantasy of freedom. To act in opposition to the norm "opened things up psychologically" (IP5). Acts such as listening, or talking about emotions, since they are constructed as being in opposition to masculinity, formulate the norm-critical subject as non-normative and, hence, emancipated from oppressive norms. As captured in the above quote, what is important is not the content of the themes per se. Instead, being anti-normative serves a purpose in itself. In other words, the fantasy of freedom structures a desire for unconventionality. In this case, a desire to be emotional.

> Luckily [laughs], we all long for, and somehow, we know, that what we really need is relationship, contact, love. We're mutually dependent on both people and nature. And there is that reality [laughter] of longing and our needs, the real ones, are there to cooperate with as well. But all that other stuff gets in the way. And in the case of men and boys, they often stand in the way, the norms of masculinity [...] Yeah, and when you address those things, when you work norm critically, to see them [masculinity norms] and see how the hell they screwed it up for me, like, and then be able to actively choose contact and relationship and because other men also yearn for it and we can even support each other in it. Then…(IP7).

As illustrated above, the interviewees described how they themselves, or men in general, were lacking full access to themselves and how, by transgressing norms of masculinity, they aimed to become free from the constraints of these norms. Through the lens of fantasy, this transgression of social norms and expectations can be understood as "the staging of a relation between the subject (as lack) and the object (as that which always escapes socio-symbolic capture), thereby organizing the affective dimension of the subject, the way it desires and enjoys" (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008: 263).

The norm-critical practice of transgressing norms was experienced by the participants as a form of bodily enjoyment (jouissance). As formulated by one of the interviewees: "it felt so concrete, like: Wow! Could I be HERE? Instead of on the other side of those layers" (IP5). In transgressing norms of masculinity, norm-critical subjects "aim at that which appears to lie beyond the socio-symbolic horizon, and which holds out the promise of a full enjoyment" (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008: 263). Thus, the transgression of an ideal, in this case traditional masculinity, provides the subject with enjoyment because it offers the possibility to "live as if" (Scott 2011: 49) these norms have been transgressed once and for all, "as if" they were already liberated from the pressures of masculinity and able to express their true identity. However, this experienced jouissance remains partial. The momentary character of the subject's experienced enjoyment fuels dissatisfaction, thereby reinstalling in the subject a sense of lack as well as the fantasmatic promise of

recapturing enjoyment, and the desire to do so (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008: 262). The norm-critical practice produces a desire to act in opposition to cultural norms; for example, through expressions of emotional vulnerability. The focus on identity and emotional vulnerability resonates well with a therapeutic discourse in which different types of emotional expression are thought to act as a kind of therapeutic healing. However, as illustrated in research on therapeutic pedagogies, therapization never fulfils its promise and instead fuels a continuous striving for self-realization (Ecclestone & Brunila 2015: 497). This has implications for climate-change politics because it risks turning the recognition of individuals' emotional vulnerability into a socially just end in itself.

The authentic subject

As part of transcending traditional ideals of masculinity, the interviewees claimed that they were striving to get away from being "too solution oriented" (IP3). The reason given for this was that it is common in a group of men to focus on the so-called "big" issues, to generalize rather than to specify. The aim is thus to zoom in on personal emotions and experiences and to stay in those emotions. That is, rather than trying to explain or speculate on the reasons behind the current climate crisis, the attention should be directed towards how one feels about it:

> So, the small room is more from an I-perspective, the emotional...uh...and then the big room is more about the structure, social issues, like that. And the groups are still MOST focused on this small room. And then, especially in a group of men, it can be easy to start talking, generalizing, talking about the big issues...but now we want to try to keep it to: "What do I really feel?" "What are my experiences?" and "How can I stay there?" rather than sort of start explaining different events. "The climate crisis is happening because of this" or something like that, and instead, ask yourself: "What do I feel about the climate crisis?" Eh...and....uh...and I think that's very much needed and helpful. (IP 6)

The norm-critical sessions are structured around "the small room", where one is supposed to reflect upon one's own position and "the big room", where one applies a broader societal perspective. As several of the interviewees informed me, the sessions were primarily centred within "the small room":

> So, it was mainly to listen to the thoughts and experiences of the others and of course also get to formulate my own. But, speaking of masculinity, the initiative is very much based on the "small room" and on the rounds, so to speak. Very much on rounds. We once had one-on-one conversations, but then it was also like one person talks and the other one listens and not so much, there's very little discussion. (IP 12)

> But sometimes I can also think that it's quite an individual process, that it's like about getting in touch with parts of yourself that the standard

> masculinity doesn't approve of. So, some kind of vulnerability, some kind of openness to experience, more focus on listening and the relational aspect, being able to be in difficult emotions, so like those kinds of skills which I don't see as a strong ingredient of masculinity. Developing them, I think, is a very important part, and in a way that's very much what happens at the individual level, but also through this kind of group. (IP 4)

As exemplified earlier, acting in opposition to traditional masculinity norms was understood as an "act in itself". Paradoxically, to passively "be in difficult emotions" (IP4) signalled activity because it was seen as resisting traditional norms of masculinity. When emotionality is constructed as the opposite of masculinity, it grants men who express emotions the value of truth. This is because it rests on the idea of emotional men as free, and hence able to express a truer version of themselves. In this way, emotional men are constructed as more real than other, unemotional men. The norm-critical, emotional subject thus appears as the embodiment of authenticity.

Many of the interviewees described the focus as being on exploring individual emotions and needs, as one of them argues:

> People are where they are, but everyone needs a safe forum where they can explore where they are and where it's ok to be where they are. If you put a bunch of people with different climate awareness in the same room, well, then it dies quite fast. There's like no opening in that. If, on the other hand, you create a safe environment where you focus more on how people feel and what they need, then you remove this, like right and wrong, and the political, and then, then it is possible to meet in a different way and this creates much better conditions for change. (IP2)

Through norm-critical discourse, authenticity was constructed as a prerequisite for future change, both personal and societal: bringing the individual in to the starting point for political transformation. Another interviewee described this in relation to the norm-critical practice of talking about emotions:

> It can open up a much more personal approach to the issue. Which in the long run can stimulate commitment, it's a different form of conversation, what we call engaging climate talks. To sort of... try to motivate, mobilize. Find ways to make it easier for people to become active. (IP9)

The fantasy of authenticity structures a desire to become whole, to heal in order to save (to save oneself in order to be able to save others). Individual change was understood to "spread like ripples" (IP8) and the idea that "it starts with you" (IP12) was shared by all of the interviewees. Many described how participants were encouraged to be self-reflective, and the norm-critical practice as something that made it easier to "reflect upon one's own acting" (IP5) and to "increase personal motivation" (IP8).

> So, we usually ask people to reflect upon themselves. How am I a part of this? How is this linked to me? In what ways does the masculine norm of

> separation influence my actions? And then, yeah, but a bit like this: "Ok, now I've reflected on this, which was hard, but what am I going to do about it? What can I do? How can I get involved in this? How can I, like, change?" (IP 10)

While "being in difficult feelings" bears a resemblance to the feminist notion of "staying with the trouble" (Haraway 2016), it could also be read as producing an optimistic attachment to negative emotions. As Laurent Berlant (2011) has pointed out, the cruelty of optimistic attachment, or, in other words, the cruelty of fantasy, is precisely its ability to stand in the way of change *now*. Through norm-critical discourse, the moment of change is positioned in an imagined future in which the present obstacles of traditional masculinity have been overcome (Scott 2011). However, as Butler makes clear regarding the process of subjectivation: "One inhabits a figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency" (1997: 83). The fantasy of authenticity works to conceal this paradoxical, yet unavoidable, dimension of subject formation. When the impossibility of becoming a complete and true version of yourself is not acknowledged, it creates a desire for more authenticity. Expressing (negative) emotions is thus seen as a sign of being even more true or real. In this way, people risk becoming stuck in an emotional trap, where the search for their inner truth is a journey without end.

Norm-critical discourse produces a subject who is concerned with a kind of self-optimization, which is central to neoliberal psychopolitics. As previously mentioned, neoliberal governing effectively steers the individual subject by means of emotions. An understanding of emotional expressions as equivalent to free, unbridled subjectivity turns emotions into a sufficient medium for psycho-political steering (Han 2017: 79). Furthermore, the idea that it is possible to transgress norms rests upon the classic humanist conceptual split between body and mind. The norm-critical project thus risks becoming stuck in a double bind, where on the one hand the normative (men) is conceived as the oppressed oppressors—placing responsibility on a repressive outside. On the other hand, we find the rhetoric of choice and self-determination—privileging the individual's capacity to resist these repressive structures or norms (see Bordo 1993 for a similar discussion). The fantasy of authenticity and emotional liberation conceals this contradiction and makes it possible for the subject to practice restraining self-surveillance in the name of freedom and emancipation. This ties the norm-critical work for equality and sustainability to the neoliberal promise of private enjoyment, a promise which it is impossible to fulfil because it is constitutive of the subject (Swyngedouw 2022: 68). When the repetitive failure to enjoy is not recognized as constitutive, the norm-critical work for sustainability maintains the status quo.

The moral subject

The moral compass, provided through authenticity, was intended to guide individuals in their relationships with others. For example, when asked what is included in a norm-critical approach, one of the interviewees highlighted that the

approach aims to "materialize norms through relationships" and with "a strong focus on intervention":

> IP: […] Not only conversations about norms, but rather, how to materialize norms through relationships, for example.
>
> J: A kind of doing then?
>
> IP: Yes, yes. Or a strong focus on intervention. If you hang out with your dude friends and they start reproducing fossil masculinity norms, how can you intervene? How can you sort of transform it into an eco-friendlier form of masculinity? Directly through an intervention or by changing the agenda for the conversation or suchlike, there are lots of different techniques we work with there. (IP 4)

The above quote illustrates how norm-critical practice produces a morally superior subject position for the norm-critical subject to inhabit. This is a position from which it is *possible* to intervene.

Since authenticity was constructed as a moral good in itself, to express emotions, "to feel" or "be in the feeling", was understood as serving an ethical purpose in itself, as exemplified through the following quote:

> IP: What if the politicians like, in Glasgow, sat down and took a moment to feel and actually just let themselves be touched by reality and cry and ascertain: "We actually don't know what to do," like "What we're doing isn't enough." If you think about them actually sitting there crying [laughs] and making space for it.
>
> J: Mm
>
> IP: Then they wouldn't just be able to go away from there, pack their bags and say: "Yes, but we'll see each other again in a year or so, that should be enough." But then it's like: "No, we have to! This is serious, this is for real!." (IP 7)

Norm-critical discourse produces a moral subject whose ethical compass is directed towards the self. In order to do what is right, you need to be true to yourself. Or rather, if you are true to yourself, you will automatically do what is right. While almost all the interviewees expressed an awareness of the risk of individualizing responsibility, and emphasized the necessity of structural change, the focus was still firmly on men's personal emotions because these were understood to guide morally correct choices.

When asked: "What norms of masculinity need to be changed?" several of the interviewees articulated "separation" and "hierarchization" as connected to traditional masculinity and thought of this as a cornerstone of patriarchal structures. Masculinity norms were thought to "draw boundaries" (IP3), they were linked to being "self-affirming" (IP8), they "take up space at the expense of others" (IP12), and lead to "competitiveness" and "hierarchical thinking" (IP6). To bridge the two "great divides"—between women and men and between nature

and culture—the norm-critical approach was centred on transcending current ideals of masculinity, conceptualized by the interviewees as EGO-logical, and to instead inhabit a position as ECO-logical, from where the planet was to be cured, rescued, and restored. As formulated by one of the interviewees:

> V: Yes, yes! Exactly. We're talking about this going from ego to eco, from ego-logic to eco-logic. Ego-logical to eco-logical.
>
> J: [laughs] Clever.
>
> V: So, they're connected there. In the eco-logical, we're an ecosystem where everything is connected. Uh...and there's abundance instead of lack. If the patriarchal one is based on lack and consuming more in order to be satisfied sometime in the future, the ecological one is based on an abundance of what we really need. (IP 7)

The transformation from *ego-logical* to *eco-logical* was described by the interviewees in terms of progress. Thinking with Sven Anders Johansson (2022: 3), I argue that the articulation of norm critique can thus be read in terms of a saviour narrative. As the above quote illustrates, norm-critical practice aims to overcome the hierarchical divides and the exceptionalism that are assumed to have caused the climate crisis, by progressing into better and healthier versions of themselves. However, the desire to save the climate by shifting from ego to eco relies on an unconscious belief in the same ideals that it sets out to overcome. As pointed out by Johansson (2022: 3), the very idea of "saving" the planet can be understood as a continuation of human domination and control.

While the norm-critical approach was aimed at overcoming hierarchical divides, such divides were simultaneously constructed as caused and maintained by a certain kind of men. It was the "fossil men" (IP4), the "dinosaurs" (IP3), the "unaware" (IP11) and "more violent" (IP2), "traditional" (IP6), "destructive" (IP1) men of yesterday who stood in the way of change. As an effect of the articulation of the participants' ability to transcend human exceptionalism, the interviewees simultaneously constructed themselves as exceptional. Or, put differently, the participants constructed themselves as exceptionally good at transcending their own exceptionalism. When asked for their thoughts on who the initiative aims to reach, the interviewees argued that it was mainly those men understood to embody "progressive masculinity" (IP4) or "new masculinity" (IP3) who participated in the groups. These men were described in terms of being the "enlightened", "the aware", and "the already saved" (IP 8), or as the ones who: "do a great job for men in general" (IP3).

The fantasy of progression provides a convincing explanation for the subject's constitutive lack of total enjoyment by constructing ego-logical men as the evil Other who have stolen that enjoyment (Žižek 1997; Scott 2011; Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008). Norm-critical practice is supposed to fill this lack and give back to men their lost full enjoyment. However, since the construction of identity always takes place in relation to an outside, you are what you are not, in this case, the so-called ego-logical, industrial-modern men serve as the eco-logical

men's constitutive outside (see also Olsson J. & Lauri, 2022). In opposition to ego-logical men, the eco-logical men are constructed as free, healthy, and progressive. This, in turn, produces a split between those who are able to be self-critical, reflective, and emotional and those who are not, between eco-logical and ego-logical, between morally good and bad masculine subjects. The construction of the Swedish man as exceptionally gender equal has been made possible by a distinction between different types of men based on class, sexuality, and ethnicity, constructing *other* men as patriarchal, traditional, and unmodern (Gottzén & Jonsson 2012). A dichotomous relation between terms such as traditional and progressive masculinity (ego/eco) might contribute to an understanding of violence against women and nature as a character flaw of some men.

Concluding discussion

The aim of this article has been to highlight the drivers of norm-critical subject formations. I have shown how norm critique builds upon a fantasmatic attachment to ideals of freedom, authenticity, and progress and how it structures the subject's partial enjoyment through practices such as talking about emotions, listening, and being self-reflective. I have argued that norm critique involves a moral imperative to optimize the self in order to address gender inequality and climate change. Thus, a pedagogical move that was designed to resist the grip of power unintentionally ends up reinforcing neoliberal ideals of emotional and relational competence, as well as authenticity and individual progress, illuminating how the articulation of resistance might work in the service of normalization.

As discussed above, unlearning masculinist ideals is a precondition for change as understood by the interlocutors. Norm-critical practice provides an opportunity for individuals to inhabit a masculine position characterized by greater emotionality and vulnerability. As argued by Butler (2004), vulnerability could potentially enable change. Viewed as an ontological condition, vulnerability indicates the contingent and precarious status of identity. Hence, to be vulnerable can be understood as being potentially changeable (Mellström & Ericsson 2014). Norm-critical practice enables further discussions on the relations between men, masculinity, and climate change, where men are not perceived as a neutral category, but as a gendered one, and draws attention to gendered dimensions embedded within both the causes and effects of climate change.

Norm critique is about bridging divides and reducing difference and reveals how relational thought is needed if we are to contest human exceptionalism and hierarchies. However, as my analysis illustrates, norm-critical practice structures a desire to transcend difference by "transforming all excluded identifications into inclusive features—of appropriating all difference into unity" (Butler 1993: 116). This logic is made evident in how, rather than beginning with an understanding of the subject as *in itself* constituted by lack, this lack is constructed as a current predicament that can be overcome. A central aspect of the logic of fantasy is how the lack, constitutive of the subject, is both acknowledged and denied (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008: 262). When the focus is directed towards an external obstacle,

in this case destructive norms of masculinity or traditional men, it simultaneously constructs this lack as something that it is possible to overcome. However, since it is the very existence of a certain ideal that makes transgressing it possible (Butler 1997; Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008), the transgressive practice of norm critique might, paradoxically, sustain rather than challenge an essentialist, (masculinist) model of the subject, whereby men are continuously perceived as the norm.

The call to shift from ego-logical to eco-logical masculinity risks concealing the contingent nature of *any* identity, including the eco-logical one. Through norm-critical discursive practice, difference was articulated in terms of masculinity norms or patriarchal structures, and not as a prerequisite for subjectification. This, in turn, risks fuelling a kind of male exceptionalism by attributing all that is wrong with the world to men and, precisely because of that, also constructing (a certain kind of) men as capable of preventing the world's death (Swyngedouw & Ernstson 2018: 18). The production of an emotionally free and authentic saviour-subject de-politicizes any problem related to eco-logical crisis. If the survival of the planet depends upon the morality of the individual, there is no need for political measures (Johansson 2022: 5). Following Johansson's reasoning, it then becomes crucial to consider that it might not be either the climate or masculinity which is in crisis, but rather the modern ideal of eternal progress. As pointed out by Johansson, the insight of our own mortality, brought about by global warming, might, in fact, be what has actually caused the crisis. A crisis that the norm-critical workshops encourage their participants to process individually.

In line with the previous research on norm critique, my analysis shows that the poststructuralist premise, upon which the concept is considered to rest, is not fully implemented. From a poststructural perspective, the subject is understood as changeable and unstable. However, while insisting upon the constructed character of gender, I argue that the norm-critical practice which I have studied seeks to discern and deliver the truth about men. This is a truth that does not acknowledge the antagonistic and violent dimensions of sociability, but rather seeks to reinscribe the enlightenment idea of an unambivalent and inherently good human nature (Brown 1995; Mouffe 2000). Feminist poststructural thinking encourages us to allow for difference and conflict to shape the dimensions and possibilities of political life, rather than focussing on individual freedom and enjoyment. In the context of climate change, recognizing the failure of individual enjoyment (lack) as constitutive of the subject, instead of being external, could potentially open up space for a politicization of the work for sustainability (see Swyngedouw 2022: 68).

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