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Norm Critical Desire

On the limits and possibilities of feminist critique

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In this world of advanced global capitalism, we have fluidity:
freedom from the limits of of foundational essences:
freedom purportedly to choose, to change, to perform what we want to be.
At the same time, all of this freedom and flexibility is contained within a globe,
that smooth figure of totalization.
What triumphal figures, the fetish and the globe, the fetish offering
unalloyed foundationless freedom within a global sphere that forecloses all
alternatives and shuts the horizon by the curv of its arc.

Elizabeth Weed, 2016: 171

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Abstract

In recent years, norm critique has emerged as a central framework for addressing social inequalities in Sweden. Norm critical perspectives are widely adopted across educational institutions, workplaces, and organizations as a strategy for advancing feminist political goals, such as gender equality and more broadly for fostering social justice. The concept has also come to be viewed as closely related to feminist theory and gender studies research. By examining norm critique as an empirical example, this thesis explores the limits and possibilities of feminist critique. The aim is to analyze how, and with what effects, norm critique is articulated as a tool for social justice and change through a study of its own practices. To this end, three different fields that engage with norm critique are examined: national gender equality policy, feminist movements, and research practice. Each field represents an area which can be seen as formative for the articulation of contemporary feminist discourse in Sweden.

The study draws on a broad range of materials, including policy material, interviews, participatory guides and instructions, and scholarly publications, all related to the development and application of norm critical pedagogical perspectives. The material is analyzed using a discourse theoretical framework including psychoanalytical theories of subjectification. This way, the thesis not only explore how, but also why norm critique is articulated as a response to contemporary societal challenges. Thus, the study also addresses the driving force behind norm critique and contributes with a perspective on the affective dimensions of norm critique as a tool for social change.

The thesis analyzes how the articulation of norm critique takes place in relation to neoliberal and post-political processes. Unlike previous research addressing how the transformative potential of norm critique may be lost when implemented in a context characterized by neoliberal ideals of individualism and self-improvement, the thesis considers how such ideals are reflected and reproduced through norm critique as a discursive practice. A central conclusion of the dissertation is that norm critique, as a political project, rests on arguments that support the very norms it seeks to resist. The analysis demonstrates how these arguments relate to ideological fantasies of progress, enlightenment, and freedom, which risk obscuring how norm critique, contrary to its intentions, gives rise to new forms of exclusions and power hierarchies.

Keywords: Norm Critique, Gender Equality, Sustainability, Masculinities, Feminist Theory, Neoliberalism, Discourse theory, Psychoanalysis

Enkel sammanfattning på svenska

Normkritisk pedagogik eller normkritiska perspektiv har under det senaste årtiondet utvecklats till ett betydelsefullt svar på en rad olika samhälleliga problem i Sverige. Normkritik utgör nu normen för värdegrundsbaserade praktiker och rättvisearbete inom en mängd olika institutioner, företag och organisationer. Normkritiska perspektiv lärs ut inom ramen för (och ses ibland som likställt med) kurser i genusvetenskap och i den offentliga debatten har begreppet kommit att ses som nära sammanlänkat med feminism. I relation till begreppets ökade användning har ett flertal parallella och motstridiga diskurser kring normkritik och dess potential utvecklats. Medan vissa förstår begreppet som en del av ett växande (och problematiskt) feministiskt inflytande på politik och vetenskap är andra optimistiska kring normkritikens möjligheter att utmana och förändra maktrelationer.

Feministisk politik har ända sedan 1970-talet haft en stark ställning i Sverige där jämställdhet setts som en självklar del av den nationella självbilden. Samtidigt finns det också en lång tradition av inomvetenskaplig kritik inom den svenska feministiska forskningen. Den här avhandlingen bidrar till detta fält genom att studera hur feministisk politik och forskning representeras via normkritik. Genom att studera normkritik som ett empiriskt exempel utforskas den feministiska kritikens gränser och möjligheter. Normkritikens nära koppling till feministisk teori, liksom andra teorier vilka ofta associeras med det genusvetenskapliga fältet, möjliggör en analys av feministiska diskurser i Sverige idag. Avhandlingens syfte är således att analysera hur, och med vilka effekter, normkritik artikuleras som ett verktyg för social rättvisa och förändring. För att besvara syftet studeras tre olika fall innefattande tre olika områden (eller aktörer) som förespråkar och använder sig av normkritik som ett verktyg för förändring: nationell jämställdhetspolicy, feministiska rörelser och forskningspraktik.

I en första studie (Artikel I) undersöks normkritik inom ramen för nationell jämställdhetspolicy. Här analyseras jämställdhetsinitiativet 'Män och Jämställdhet', lanserat av Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner (SKR). Syftet är att empiriskt undersöka hur normkritik fylls med mening inom svensk offentlig sektors jämställdhetsarbete samt vilka underliggande logiker detta bygger på. SKR arbetar för att stärka och utveckla demokrati och lokalt självstyre. Organisationen stödjer svenska kommuner och regioner i dess arbete med jämlikhetsfrågor, så som jämställdhet, barns rättigheter och folkhälsa (SKR, 2024). Via SKR implementeras normkritiska perspektiv på bred front i svenska kommuner vilket gör det till en viktig

del av kommunernas fortlöpande arbete för ökad jämställdhet. Materialet består av ett mångsidigt policymaterial och inkluderar både kortare filmklipp och skriftliga dokument.

Vidare undersöks en ideell verksamhet som arbetar normkritiskt med män och maskulinitet i relation till klimatförändring. Denna andra studie (Artikel II & III) fokuserar på det konkreta görandet av normkritik som en metod och utforskar effekterna av en normkritisk praktik. Studien bygger primärt på intervjuer med initiativtagare och deltagare. Materialet inkluderar också de samtalsguider och instruktioner som ligger till grund för den undersökta normkritiska praktiken. Resultaten publiceras i två separata artiklar. Den ena centreras kring effekter i termer av subjektifiering och den andra fokuserar på hur klimatförändring som problem konstrueras via normkritik och vilka möjligheter och hinder detta i sin tur för med sig i relation till social och ekologisk hållbarhet.

Slutligen fokuserar den tredje studien (Artikel IV) på de teoretiska aspekterna och grunderna för normkritik som begrepp. Här ligger fokus på hur normkritisk pedagogik konstrueras genom beskrivningar av begreppets historiska utveckling och teoretiska ramverk. För att belysa detta undersöks centrala vetenskapliga publikationer som syftar till att definiera och utvärdera normkritisk pedagogik som projekt. De texter som valts ut för analys har skrivits av både forskare och praktiker inom genus- och utbildningsvetenskap och kan betraktas som centrala för hur begreppet har tillämpats både inom och utanför en akademisk kontext. Genom att studera konstruktionen av normkritik som ett begrepp kopplat till feministisk och genusvetenskaplig forskning möjliggörs ett synliggörande av vissa underliggande teoretiska konfliktlinjer och motsättningar.

Tillsammans erbjuder de tre valda fallstudierna en möjlighet att studera normkritik både som ett generellt fenomen och som en specifik formulering på olika nivåer. Analysen utgår från ett diskursteoretiskt ramverk där psykoanalytiska teorier om subjektivitet ingår. Denna analytiska utgångspunkt gör det möjligt att utforska såväl *hur* som *varför* normkritik formuleras som ett svar på samtida samhälleliga utmaningar. Studien riktas alltså även mot drivkraften bakom normkritik och bidrar med ett perspektiv på de affektiva dimensionerna av normkritik som ett verktyg för social förändring.

Avhandlingen analyserar normkritik i relation till nyliberala och postpolitiska processer. Till skillnad från tidigare forskning som har belyst hur normkritikens potential kan gå förlorad när den implementeras i ett sammanhang präglat av

nyliberala ideal gällande individens självförbättrande, undersöks hur sådana ideal speglas och reproduceras genom normkritik som begrepp och praktik. En central slutsats i avhandlingen är att normkritik som politiskt projekt bygger på argument som stödjer de normer den ämnar göra motstånd mot. Avhandlingen visar hur dessa argument relaterar till ideologiska fantasier om utveckling, upplysning och frihet vilket riskerar att dölja hur normkritik, i motsats till dess inkluderande intention, ger upp upphov till nya former av uteslutningar och makthierarkier.

List of papers

Paper I: Olsson, J. and Lauri, J. (2022). The fantasy of the new man – norm critique, vulnerability, and victimization. *NORMA*, 17: 4, 236-251.

Paper II: Olsson, J. (2024). Masculine Enjoyment: Problematizing subjectification through norm critique as a response to climate change. *Subjectivity*, 31, 79-96.

Paper III: Olsson, J. (2025). Male Melancholy: Problematizations of sustainability through norm critique as discursive practice, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 1-18.

Paper IV: Olsson, J. and Edenheim, S. (2025). Norm critique proper? The norm critical turn and the turn away from critique, *NORA*, Under review.

Introduction

In Sweden, often described as one of the most gender equal and politically progressive countries in the world, the concepts 'norm critical pedagogy' and 'norm critical perspectives' have, over the past decade, developed into a preferred response to a range of societal problems. Norm critique now constitutes the norm for value-based practices and social justice work in a variety of institutions, companies, and organizations, for example in the form of teacher training programs, inclusive recruitment processes, and gender equality policies (Björkman, 2024; Hill, 2021; Qvarsebo, 2019; Henriksson, 2017). Norm critique is a specifically Swedish concept and can be described as a set of pedagogical ideas and practices that aim to make unequal power relations visible and bring about change towards equality (Björkman & Bromseth, 2019). An important aspect is to shift the focus from those perceived as deviant and instead direct attention towards the norm and the privileges that comes with holding such a position (Alm & Laskar, 2017).

Norm critical perspectives are taught within the framework of, and is sometimes seen as equivalent to, courses in gender studies and research, and in public debate the concept has come to be viewed as closely linked to feminism. Ever since the 1970s, feminist politics has held a strong position in Swedish society, with gender equality as a given part of the national self-image[1] (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005/2020; Sager & Mulinari, 2018; see also, Towns, 2002). At the same time, there is also a long tradition of immanent critique within Swedish feminist scholarship. This research has critically analyzed the construction of gender equality (Törnqvist, 2008; Rönnblom, 2011; Tollin, 2011; Carbin et al., 2017), the reception and implementation of intersectionality (Carbin & Tornhill, 2004; Carbin & Edenheim, 2013; Hoffart, 2021), and the relation between feminism and neoliberalism (Johansson Wilén, 2019; Lauri, 2021). It has asked what kind of feminism that is allowed to take place in public space, what assumptions such feminism is based on, and scrutinized its connection to other hegemonic discursive practices.

This thesis contributes to this field by analyzing how feminist politics and scholarship is represented through articulations of norm critique. By studying norm critique as an empirical example, I explore the limits and possibilities of feminist critique. To be clear, all norm critique is not by necessity feminist, and all feminism

[1] The global rise of anti-gender and right-wing populist movements has, however, increasingly targeted feminist politics and scholarship, challenging its legitimacy and fostering a sense of uncertainty and crisis among gender scholars (Carbin et al., 2024).

is certainly not norm critical. However, norm critique has been highly influential as an approach for reaching feminist political goals, such as gender equality (Axelsson, 2023: 102). With its ties to feminist theory and other theories closely related to gender studies (institutionalized feminism), a study of norm critique offers a possibility to analyze the articulation of feminist discourses in Sweden today. Furthermore, the international positioning of Sweden as a leader when it comes to gender equality and other types of social justice issues makes it a particularly interesting case for studying norm critique as an expression of feminist politics.

Norm critique as an idea has had a significant influence in a variety of contexts and has been recommended by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2009/2016), among others. However, in relation to its increased use a number of parallel and disparate discourses on norm critique and its possibilities have developed. While many are optimistic about the potential of norm critique to challenge and change power relations (see for example, Björkman & Bromseth, 2019; Björkman et al., 2021; Reimers, 2023), the concept has also been subjected to extensive criticism and been the topic for heated media discussions. From the political right, norm critique is seen as part of a growing (and problematic) feminist influence on politics and science (e.g., Arpi & Wyndhamn, 2020). Swedish conservative politician Ebba Bush-Thor (2018) has, for example, argued that norm critique has "undermined society". From this perspective, norm critique is viewed as an ideological project that simply prescribes new norms for what is right and wrong.

Taking these critical aspects into account, why study norm critique—and why now? Has norm critique ever reached the hegemonic position I am referring to? And if so, has its moment not long since passed? The de-legitimization of feminist politics is a common tactic in neo-conservative mobilization where the concept of gender is framed as a distorted ideological construct supported by a cultural and economic elite (Gunnarsson Payne & Tornhill, 2023: 63). If there were ever a right time for a critique of feminist politics and practice, is that time really now? Following the political scientist Wendy Brown, the importance of critical theory in critical times is "to contest the very senses of time invoked to declare critique untimely" (Brown, 2005: 4). I read this as an insistence on contesting power whenever it poses as resistance, and on critically study the discursive practices that claim to oppose power in the name of justice. In the face of crisis, there is a risk of placing all blame outside one's own practice. This way, all efforts to respond to the crisis can be directed toward an external enemy, allowing for the injustices that inevitably exist within every community to be ignored (Swyngedouw, 2022b). Hence, in light of the

growing rise of neo-conservative and right-wing populist political movements, I believe that an immanent feminist critique of the concept is more important than ever.

Aim and research questions

In this thesis I explore and develop a feminist critique of norm critique as a concept and practice. The aim is to analyze how, and with what effects, norm critique is articulated as a tool for social justice and change through a study of its own practices. The analysis is guided by the following questions:

- What meanings are given to norm critique through its articulation within the fields of national gender equality policy, feminist movements, and research practice?

- What logics and underlying assumptions are immanent in these articulations of norm critique as a concept and practice?

- What are the constitutive effects and political implications of such articulations?

With political implications I refer to how the articulation of norm critique as a discursive practice builds on underlying assumptions about subjects and society as well as the relation between them. This, in turn, has political implications in terms of how, for example, the problems that norm critique seeks to address are represented in policy and by actors implementing a norm critical practice. The political implications of norm critique are thus not necessarily consistent with the intended ones, but rather, norm critique has effects which are constitutive of subjects and the social. Central to the thesis is to problematize how resistance and emancipatory practices, such as norm critique, may give rise to unintended exclusionary consequences that are driven by a desire for inclusion and community. I make use of a discourse theoretical framework including psychoanalytical theories of subjectification. This analytical approach helps me to explore not only how but also why norm critique is articulated as a response to contemporary societal challenges. Thus, my study also addresses the driving force behind norm critique and contributes with a perspective on the affective dimensions of norm critique as a tool for social change.

To pursue the aim, I have organized my research around three different fields that engage with norm critique: national gender equality policy, feminist movements, and research practice. Each field correspond to one of three cases examined and represents an area which can be seen as formative for the articulation of contemporary feminist discourse. They also serve as examples of how social justice issues, such as gender equality and ecological sustainability, are governed and given meaning as political problems in Sweden today. Studying how and why norm critique is articulated as a way to address contemporary societal challenges offers a way to explore the current political landscape and the relation between subjects and society. For example, I have analyzed how the articulation of norm critique takes place in relation to what scholars such as Chantal Mouffe (2008) and Slavoj Žižek (2001) have referred to as 'post-political' processes[2]. This situation is characterized by a moralization of society in which the link between ethics and politics is justified by an alleged need for consensus and shared values as a necessary foundation for democracy.

Previous research on norm critique has primarily concentrated on the educational and healthcare sector. With my study I want to extend the analysis to other arenas where such practices are developed and implemented. The fields I have chosen for my study all have an explicit purpose to educate the public; they want to change the way people see themselves in the world. Thus, I argue, it is of great importance to study how these actors relate to norm critique as a tool for achieving change in civil society. Furthermore, engaging men in equality efforts is a common strategy in Sweden. Consequently, a norm critical perspective on masculinity is promoted throughout civil society and the public sector as a means of addressing issues related to gender inequality, discrimination, and – more recently – ecological concerns such as unsustainable climate change. Taken together, this resulted in the choice to mainly focus on norm critical practices that address men and masculinities. In the following section, I will describe the chosen cases more fully.

Case I: Norm critique in national gender equality policy

The first case centers on the articulation of norm critique in Swedish national *policy*. Here, I analyze the gender-equality initiative *Men and Gender Equality,* initiated by Swedish Associations of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR). SALAR is not a state authority, however, Men and Gender Equality is initiated in alliance with, and partly funded by, the Swedish government. I thus consider it to form a part of national gender equality policy which produce knowledge about what gender

[2] Cultural geographer Eric Swyngedeouw (for example, 2011/2018/2022ab) has also written extensively on the topic of post-politicization, especially in relation to unsustainable climate change.

equality 'is' and how to best achieve it. SALAR is an employers' organization that works to strengthen and develop democracy and local self-government. The agency represents and supports all of Sweden's municipalities and regions in their work with equality related issues, such as gender equality, children's rights, and public health (SKR, 2024). SALAR is Sweden's largest organization focusing on a norm critical approach towards men and masculinity. Through SALAR, norm critical perspectives are widely implemented in Swedish municipalities making it a crucial component of ongoing community efforts to advance gender equality. The analyzed material for this first case study (Paper I) consists of diverse policy material, including films and documents, and serves as an example of the articulation of norm critique in Sweden's public sector.

Case II: Norm critique in feminist movements

The second case focuses on the concrete doing of norm critique and explores the application of norm critique as a feminist *method*. For this, I analyze an initiative by the feminist men's organization, MÄN, working norm critically with masculinity in relation to gender equality and unsustainable climate change. MÄN is a member based, non-profit organization which works to prevent men's violence against women in Sweden. As part of the global network *MenEngage*, the organization collaborates with and is involved in international projects and assignments with civil-society actors around the world (MÄN, 2025). Since 2014, MÄN has conducted work with a particular focus on the link between men, masculinity, and the environment. The specific initiative analyzed was established as part of broader research project in collaboration with Chalmers University of Technology. It was piloted in 2019 and has since resulted in several men's groups gathering both in Sweden and internationally (Hultman, 2020; Hedenqvist et al., 2021). The material for this second case study consists of interviews (Paper II & III) and a conversational guide instructing the content of the norm critical sessions (Paper III). As a civil society actor, MÄN plays an important role in the work towards societal and political change and provides valuable insight into how a norm critical pedagogy is put into practice.

Case III: Norm critique in research practice

Finally, the third case centers on the *theoretical* aspects and underpinnings of norm critique as a concept. Here, focus is put on the construction of norm critical pedagogy through narrative descriptions about the concept's historical development and theoretical framework. To tend to this, I examine some key scholarly publications centered on defining and evaluating norm critical pedagogy as a project. The material for this case (Paper IV) includes three academic anthologies (Bromseth

& Darj, 2010; Björkman & Bromseth, 2019; Björkman & Sotevik, 2023), two academic texts discussing the development of norm critique (Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2012; Björkman et al., 2021), five texts published by the Swedish National Agency of Education (Skolverket, 2009; 2011, 2013, 2014, 2016), and a Governmental White Paper (SOU: 2014). The texts chosen for analysis have been written by both researchers and practitioners within the field of gender and educational studies and I understand them as central for how the concept has been applied both inside and outside an academic context. Studying the construction of norm critique as a concept tied to feminist and gender studies scholarship enables me to draw attention to some of the theoretical tensions underpinning it.

Together, the three chosen cases provide an opportunity to study norm critique both as a general phenomenon and as a specific formulation on different levels. My decision about which areas to include in my study has been guided by their respective level of influence on how to address social injustices. The selected cases make it possible to discuss various aspects of norm critique as a concept and practice and offer insight into the possibilities and limitations of norm critique as a tool for change.

Outline of thesis

The thesis consists of five chapters and four appended papers. Following this introductory chapter, the second chapter situates my study in relation to previous research. Here, I summarize how it builds on, and contribute to, the fields of gender studies, feminist cultural studies, as well as research from the field of education. In the third chapter I outline my analytical framework and introduce the theoretical and methodological concepts which I use in my analysis. In chapter four, I give an overview of my empirical material, and I describe the choices I have made in delimiting and selecting this material. I also discuss some ethical considerations and reflections made, both in relation to my own research and in relation to gender studies as a field. In the fifth and final chapter I summarize the main findings from my studies in relation to the overall aim of the thesis. This chapter ends with a concluding discussion on how to understand the results from the separate studies together and within a broader political context.

Previous research

In this chapter I situate the thesis and discuss how it builds on, and contributes to, previous research. I position my study within a tradition of immanent feminist critique, and I view it as a contribution to discussions regarding the relation between feminist theory and practice as well as feminist knowledge production and its relation to ethics and politics. My contribution is partly empirical and partly theoretical and as such I engage both with empirical studies of norm critique and feminist practice, as well as with feminist theoretical debates with relevance for the articulation of norm critique.

The chapter is organized under three sub-headings. In the first section, 'Norm critique – Policy, Practice or Theory?', I account for previous research discussing the early establishment and development of norm critical perspectives in a Swedish context[3]. The purpose of this section is not to locate the starting point of norm critique but rather to draw attention to how the concept is described in somewhat different ways. To explore the limits and possibilities of feminist critique, I primarily engage with previous research developing a critical perspective on norm critique. In the second section, 'Critical perspectives on norm critique', I outline some of these perspectives and their relation to anti-discrimination and gender equality policy. Here, I draw on empirical studies from the fields of gender studies and educational science. In the third section, 'Critical studies of feminism', I discuss previous research on feminist politics and scholarship. I outline how my study builds on research made in relation to other feminist discourses such as gender equality as well as research centered on representations of feminist theory and the politics of feminist academic writing.[4]

Norm Critique – Policy, Practice or Theory?

This first section reflects how the establishment and development of norm critique is represented in previous research. The purpose is not to unequivocally determine the origin or definition of norm critique, but rather to point towards similarities and differences found within existing descriptions of norm critique as a concept and practice. The narratives outlined here are thus not to be read as conveying any neutral content or objective facts. However, these descriptions are important to

[3] Parts of this section have also been published in my separate articles.

[4] The previous research that I relate to in relation to my various objects of study, such as critical studies of men and masculinities, is discussed in more detail in the separate articles.

consider as they function to secure certain taken for granted assumptions in relation to norm critique and, by extension, to feminist theory and practice in a wider perspective.

In 2009, the National Agency for Education (Skolverket) started to recommend the use of norm critical perspectives to counteract discrimination and inequality (Skolverket, 2009; Björkman et al., 2021). As a result, the implementation of norm critical perspectives and pedagogical programs has been especially prevalent within educational policy in Swedish schools (Qvarsebo, 2019). Several scholars describe the impact and spread of norm critique as a response to the demands imposed by the anti-discrimination law which came into force in Sweden during the mid 00's (Qvarsebo, 2019: 165; Björkman et al., 2021: 184; Hill, 2021: 43). From this perspective, norm critique is defined as a sought-after tool used within schools, civil society, and other authorities to implement anti-discrimination policy in their everyday practice (Björkman et al., 2021: 184).

Historians of ideas and gender researchers Erika Alm and Pia Laskar argue that the development of norm critical perspectives can be traced to a small group of practitioners and researchers within the field of education during the early 00's (Alm & Laskar, 2017 see also, Björkman et al., 2021; Björkman, 2024). As they explain, a 'queer pedagogical network' was formed in 2007, where norm critique as a concept was formulated with inspiration from pedagogical programs and handbooks focusing on norms, such as 'Någonstans går gränsen' (RFSL[5]) and 'Bryt!' (Forum för Levande Historia[6]) (Alm & Laskar, 2017: 144–145; Björkman et al., 2021; Björkman, 2024).

In a text published by the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research (Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2012: 45), norm critique is described as a pedagogical method specifically tied to gender studies which have been developed to challenge dominance and discrimination, and to create a more inclusive teaching. In line with this, gender researcher Tobias K. Axelsson (2023: 103) argues that norm critique is not instituted as its own policy field but better understood as a pedagogical tradition with links to both Critical Freedom Pedagogy (Freire, 1973), Queer-Pedagogy (Kumashiro, 2002) and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) (see also, Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2012; Björkman & Sotevik, 2023; Reimers, 2023; Björkman, 2024). In

[5] RFSL is a Swedish non-profit organization founded in 1950 that works for the rights of LGBTQI people at local, national and international levels (RFSL, 2025).
[6] Forum för Levande Historia is a Swedish public authority that promotes democracy and human rights. Through exhibitions, education, research, and public dialogue, it connects history to contemporary issues to foster reflection and learning (Forum för levande historia, 2025)

narratives about its early establishment, norm critique is primarily defined as a response to earlier pedagogical methods centered on tolerance (Skolverket, 2009; 2011; 2013; 2014). Here, the focus on making power relations visible, instead of developing tolerance of the other, is considered a key aspect of norm critique (Björkman et al., 2021:183).

As pointed out by Alm and Laskar (2017: 157), norm critique as a method is established also on governmental level and throughout civil society. The educational scholar Lotta Björkman (2024: 16) draws attention to how norm critique, ever since it was recommended by the National Agency for Education in 2009, has had a significant breakthrough within areas such as the health sector, the Church of Sweden and throughout the Swedish sports movement. Municipalities have adopted a norm critical perspective in relation to education, violence prevention, health, and social care (SKR, 2021/2023). Diplomas and certificates have been handed out in its name (for example, RFSL[7]) and educational programs have been offered to companies and organizations from consultants such as Make Equal[8], Add Gender[9], and VKNA[10] (from the Swedish verb 'vakna', which translates as 'wake up'). The concept has also been developed within several academic fields such as Design (Alves 2016; Andersson 2023), Architecture, and Social Planning (Bonnevier 2007; Haugen & Gil Sola 2022), Health Science (Tengelin et al., 2021), and Communication (Widegren, 2017). Following this, it can be claimed that the concept, in a Swedish context, has been mainstreamed.

Norm critical pedagogy is considered to have had an 'enormous breakthrough' (Björkman et al., 2021), described as a 'norm critical turn' within academia, civil society, and on governmental level (Alm & Laskar, 2017: 137). While norm critique is predominantly depicted as a Swedish phenomenon, versions of the concept is also present in other Nordic countries. Within the field of education, Marta Padovan-Özdemir (2021, 2024) has, for example, written extensively on norm critique in a Danish context. The rapid popularization of norm critical perspectives has given rise to a range of different interpretations and understandings of the concept, with various actors referring to it as 'Norm Critical Pedagogy', 'Norm Critical Perspectives', 'Norm Creativity', 'Norm Awareness' or simply 'Norm Critique'

[7] RFSL Education (www.rfslutbildning.se) offers trainings, lectures, and consultancy services with a norm critical focus. They also offer LGBTQI-certification and support in norm critical processes.
[8] Make Equal (www.makeequal.se) is an organization that works with norm critical methods to promote equality and inclusion through training, campaigns, and organizational development.
[9] Add Gender (www.addgender.se) is a company specializing in gender equality and diversity, using norm critical approaches.
[10] VKNA (www.vkna.se) is a consultancy that applies norm critical perspectives to help organizations identify and challenge exclusionary norms and practices.

(Björkman et al., 2021; Axelsson, 2023). A more recent development is a version of norm critique referred to as *affirmative* norm critique (for example, Padovan-Özdemir, 2021; Staunæs 2017; Åkesson, 2019). This perspective is contrasted with so called 'negative critique' and aims to initiate a positive moment in norm critique (Nørgaard Iversen, 2024: 62). As such, an affirmative norm critique aspires to not only critique existing norms but also actively promotes alternative norms and values.

Parallel to the claim that the concept originates from outside of academia, within a more practice based and activist setting, arguments about how norm critical pedagogy has *left* the academic context are also present in narratives discussing the concepts development (see for example, Alm & Laskar, 2017: 137). This suggests, instead, that norm critique was first established as a theoretical tool within academia. In line with this, norm critique is conceptualized by some scholars as a theory in its own right, which overlaps with queer theory as developed in a U.S. context and where Judith Butler is assigned a key role. Eva Reimers, professor in pedagogy, describes norm critical theory as an expanded application of queer theory (Reimers, 2023: 299). As I illustrate throughout my case studies, multiple scholars emphasize the concepts poststructural heritage where influences from both Butler and/or Foucault are singled out as important (Alm & Laskar, 2017; Henriksson, 2017; Björkman & Bromseth, 2019; Björkman & Sotevik, 2023; Björkman et al., 2021; Nørgaard Iversen, 2024). In sum, there seems to be different views on what norm critique is, what theoretical assumptions it relies upon, and how it should best be defined.

Despite the popularity of norm critique, previous research has noted that relatively few studies analyze the effects of a norm critical pedagogical practice (Qvarsebo, 2019; Hill, 2021). The existing literature on norm critique is mainly directed towards furthering norm critical perspectives, especially within the fields of education (Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2012; Kalonaityté, 2014; Björkman & Bromseth, 2019; Björkman & Sotevik, 2023; Reimers, 2023) and care (Dahlborg & Tengelin, 2022). However, the concept has also been met with critical objections from various researchers. In the following section, I will discuss empirical studies that develop a critical perspective on norm critique in relation to anti-discrimination and gender equality policy.

Critical perspectives on norm critique

The decision to focus on scholarship that engages with critical perspectives is grounded in my overarching interest in examining the limits and possibilities of

feminist critique. Rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive overview of *all* research on norm critique, I highlight contributions that I see as particularly relevant for contextualizing and interpreting the findings of my study. The first part of this section centers on research that discuss some possible consequences of norm critique. In the second part I engage with studies that critically explore norm critique in relation to other contemporary discourses.

The norms of norm critique

Soon after norm critique was established as a concept, the educational researcher Lenz Taguchi (2011) argued that it fails to implement its poststructural understanding of the subject in practice. This critique is found throughout the literature on norm critical perspectives. For example, the educational scholars Elisabet Langmann and Niclas Månsson (2016) argue that the norm critical project, as it has been formulated within the framework of Swedish educational discourse, despite its ties to poststructural theory, relies on Enlightenment ideals of rationality and reason (Langmann & Månsson, 2016: 88). They argue that norm critique, as a practice of self-reflection, contributes to individualizing the responsibility for detecting and changing norms. Through what they refer to as a "logic of vision", norm critique becomes a matter of enlightening people where the norm critical subject is assumed as someone who can learn how to "see" and "become aware" of norms (Langmann & Månsson, 2016: 91).

This self-reflective aspect of norm critique is also discussed by the educational scholar Jonas Qvarsebo (2019). Qvarsebo analyzes literature and manuals for norm critical practice with a specific focus on material produced for Swedish pre-schools. Building on Foucauldian discourse analysis and governmentality studies, his analysis focuses on the governing of the subject through norm critical modes and techniques. Qvarsebo argues that norm critique establishes a moral regime targeting values considered traditional and stereotypical (Qvarsebo, 2019: 172). As he shows, norm critical governing aims at moral enlightenment, which is to be achieved through self-reflection and a questioning of norms perceived as harmful or restricting. The moral regime inscribed in the norm critical project thus produces self-regulated subjects who carefully monitors their own attitudes and behaviors (Qvarsebo, 2019: 166). Qvarsebo argues that while norm critique governs moral behavior it fails to acknowledge the moral dimension of its own practices. In questioning existing norms and exclusions, norm critique inevitably produces new norms and exclusions, yet this is not fully recognized (Qvarsebo, 2019: 175).

Similar concerns with unintended exclusionary and normalizing consequences of norm critical practice resonates with the work of Elisabet Langmann (2013) who approaches this issue from the perspective of norm critique's positioning in relation to tolerance education. In her thesis, Langmann describes norm critical pedagogy as a critical response to the problematics embedded within a tolerance pedagogical practice where the focus has been put on tolerating marginalized identities rather than problematizing constructions of normality. Instead of staying open to alternative ways of understanding difference, individuals should, from a tolerance pedagogical perspective, learn how to be tolerant subjects based on pre-given notions of what counts as normal, or deviant. This reproduces binary oppositions between us and them and fails to explore the unexpected (Langmann, 2013: 190–191). However, while Langmann understands norm critique to respond to these problems, she also remains cautious about simply replacing one pedagogical method with another (Langmann, 2013: 16). Following Langmann, the problem with standardized and pre-established methods is that they risk to 'immunize' rather than challenge status quo (Langmann, 2013: 191).

Acknowledging the critique raised against norm critique, Eva Reimers (2023) draws attention to some possible risks following from the normalization of norm critical perspectives. While Reimers mainly is optimistic about the potential of queer and norm critical perspectives, she also raises some concern that the naturalization of norm critical pedagogy might be de-politicizing in its effect and that it risks reproducing femo - and homonationalist assumptions (Reimers, 2023: 297). In short, she makes use of these concepts to illuminate how the idea of 'the good norm critical subject' sides with ideas linked to nationality. In Western countries, sexuality, feminism, and gender equality are implicated in the construction of appropriate citizens. From this perspective, norm critique might become a way for some people to position themselves as more gender equal and tolerant than e.g. immigrant others (Reimers, 2023: 300).

The appropriation of norm critical perspectives

A common argument found in previous research on norm critique is that the concept is easily appropriated by contemporary hegemonic discourses resulting in simplified or problematic applications of it in practice (see for example, Bromseth & Darj, 2010; Alm & Laskar, 2017; Björkman et al., 2021; Björkman & Bromseth, 2019; Björkman 2024). For example, the sociologist Andreas Henriksson (2017) understands norm critique as grounded in a Foucauldian conception of power and discourse. However, Henriksson argues that while norm critique facilitates what he labels as 'queer resistance' from within institutions, it also prescribes the norm

critical subject to rationally handle their emotions. Instead of suggesting that norm critical discourse reproduces an idea of the subject as stable and coherent, Henriksson argues that norm critique assumes a self that is relational, flexible and attentive to emotions and he understands this self to side with contemporary ideals and requirements for emotional competence (Henriksson, 2017: 162).

Furthermore, by examining the recommendations of the Swedish National Agency for Education, the historian of ideas and gender researcher Helena Hill (2021) shows how norm critique takes the form of a technical and easily implemented solution to discrimination. Hill understands this to be in line with what has been referred to as a 'technification' of gender equality politics, following from New Public Management's spread throughout the public sphere (Hill, 2021: 52 see also, Rönnblom, 2008/2011). Applying Carol Bacchi's and Susan Goodwin's WPR (What's the problem represented to be) approach for policy analysis, Hill illustrates how the articulation of norm critique by the Swedish National Agency for Education constructs the solution to discrimination and inequality as a matter of raising awareness and make norms visible. This way, social, economic, and structural inequalities risks being left unnoticed (Hill, 2021: 57).

Gender scholar Tobias K. Axelsson (2023) comes to a similar conclusion in his analysis of how norm critique is made intelligible in relation to Swedish pre-schools' gender equality mission. Through focus group interviews with local policy actors, Axelson finds that they understand norm critique to function as a 'revitalizer' of the gender equality mission (Axelsson, 2023: 109). As he concludes, this can be interpreted as either enhancing or as undermining gender equality. While the local policy actors themselves see norm critique as a way to make sense of, manage, and implement the (often quite vague) gender equality mission, Axelsson argues that it might result in a replacement of gender equality with norm critique (Axelsson, 2023: 110). Relying on the concept of norm critique to address gender inequality may inadvertently undermine and serve as a resistance to this work. As Axelsson argues, given the inherent ambiguous and contradictory interpretations of norm critique, together with its widespread adaption, this may result in norm critique being picked up as an overly optimistic 'one-size fits all' solution (Axelsson, 2023: 110).

In sum, the academic critique of norm critique includes its reproduction of enlightenment ideals, its loss of complexity, its depoliticized focus on individuals rather than structures, the tendency to see norm critique as a quick fix technique or simple method, and for creating new norms for how to behave norm critically correct. I contribute to this previous research by considering these aspects in relation

to neoliberalism as a form of governing. For this, I find the legal scholar Alexander Someks' analysis of European anti-discrimination law helpful in that it illuminates how anti-discrimination policy is tied up with a neoliberal political rationality (Somek, 2011). Unlike previous research addressing how the transformative potential of norm critique may be lost when implemented in a context characterized by neoliberal ideals of individualism and self-improvement, I consider how such ideals are reflected and reproduced through norm critique as a discursive practice. In the following section I discuss how my study draws on and contributes to research that studies feminist politics and practice, and their relation to contemporary hegemonic discourses.

Critical studies of feminism

This section frames my study within critical studies of feminism. I start by discussing research that explores feminism in relation to gender equality. This is followed by an overview of research that examine the relation between neoliberal politics and feminist goals and practices. Finally, I will discuss some critical approaches to feminist scholarship that I find relevant to my own study of norm critique.

Feminism as gender equality

The empirical part of my thesis relates to research that critically examines how gender equality is addressed and given meaning through policies and practices aimed at increasing gender equality. Within this field, gender equality is understood as a discursively produced concept that is filled with meaning in different contexts, which in turn is understood to have effects on political initiatives for change (see for example, Bacchi & Eveline, 2010; Rönnblom, 2011). The construction of gender equality within a Swedish context have been studied by multiple feminist scholars (Törnqvist, 2008; Rönnblom, 2008; Rönnblom, 2011; Tollin, 2011; Alnebratt & Rönnblom, 2016; Carbin & Rönnblom, 2012; Olivius & Rönnblom, 2017). For example, through a study of regional policy, political scientist Malin Rönnblom shows how gender equality is articulated as a matter of changing women, rather than the political organization. Gender equality is not depicted as a consequence of unequal and gendered power relations but as a non-conflictual, or in other words, a non-political, problem (Rönnblom, 2008: 127). Furthermore, Rönnblom problematizes the view of gender equality as a self-evident feminist goal where everyone is assumed to agree on that we want to establish 'more' gender equality (Rönnblom, 2008: 115).

Research from this field ask questions on how gender equality is defined and argued for and under what conditions gender equality comes to be accepted as a political goal. Analyzing debates related to gender equality politics illustrate how such debates, while framed as consensual, include competing and oppositional views and values. For example, sociologist Maria Törnqvist (2008) examines the conditions under which the gender quota proposal came to be accepted. As she demonstrates, a discursive shift was made possible by articulating this idea within an existing politics of consensus. A romantic rhetoric, which implied a close relationship between the sexes, allowed for an idea of a natural and biological difference between men and women to remain intact. This way, the gender quota came to be seen as a promising rather than threatening proposal (Törnqvist, 2008: 90). This framing of gender quotas also implies a kind of distinction between 'good' and 'bad' men. As argued by Törnqvist, the gender quota made it possible to criticize some men, while other men were presented as necessary to achieve an equal society (Törnqvist, 2008: 79, 80).

Public discourse on gender equality has long been characterized by a focus on engaging men and boys. In Sweden, the need for a new, more sensitive masculinity has been an integral part of gender equality policy for decades (Nordberg, 2005; Hill, 2007; Järvklo, 2008; Gottzén & Jonsson, 2012; Goedecke, 2018; Törnqvist, 2008). When studying the construction of gender equality and sustainability through a norm critical perspective on men and masculinity, I draw on research from the field of critical studies of men and masculinities. Previous research from this field highlights how the idea of a new, sensitive, and inclusive masculinity is tied up with certain underlying assumptions, which not necessarily challenge existing power relations (Bridges, 2013; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Greenebaum & Dexter, 2017), but rather reflect and reproduce postfeminist and neoliberal values (O'Neill, 2015)[11].

Research on the relation between neoliberalism and feminist politics is relevant to my project. Political scientist Katharina Tollin's (2011) genealogical analysis of Swedish gender equality policy, for example, illustrates how feminist objectives are articulated alongside neoliberal discourses. In her thesis she analyzes the underlying assumptions that have formed the basis for the political debate on gender equality between the years 1971-2006. The title of her thesis, 'Side by side', refers to how the articulation of feminist gender equality takes place in close connection to a neoliberal political discourse, characterized by management models, individual responsibility, and efficacy. Gender equality is framed as something achieved through

[11] My own conceptualization of masculinity is addressed in chapter four.

individualized efforts and solutions rather than structural reform (Tollin, 2011: 228-230). In the following section I will further discuss previous studies that consider the relation between feminist political ideals and neoliberal logics.

Neoliberalism and feminist politics

Many feminist and gender scholars have discussed the paradoxical relation between feminism and neoliberalism (for example, Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008; Fraser; 2009; Rottenberg, 2018; Fahlgren et al., 2016; Johansson Wilén, 2019; Lauri, 2021) through which feminist political goals such as gender equality tend to be de-politicized (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010; Rönnblom, 2008; Carbin & Rönnblom, 2012). In a Swedish context, Evelina Johansson Wilén (2019) analyses the effects of neoliberalism on feminist identities and practices, as well as the feminist movement's potential to bring about political change. Through interviews with self-defined feminists, Johansson Wilén accentuates the conflict between a collective feminist ethics and individualist neoliberal values. She argues that neoliberalism appropriates feminist beliefs and transforms them into marketable ideals, which risk undermining the larger political objectives of the feminist movement (Johansson Wilén, 2019).

As part of her study, Johansson Wilén analyzes how the practice of norm critique is made intelligible by the feminists she interviews. Johansson Wilén's informants describe norm critique as a political strategy centered on opening for alternative possibilities to live and not as a goal in its own right. She shows how, contrary to the focus on the individual, their descriptions of a norm critical practice are closely connected to ideals about collective political struggle and societal change (Johansson Wilén, 2019: 228-229). Wilén contends that while a collective norm critical practice, to some degree, might be limited and conditioned by neoliberal ideology, the informant's formulation of the norm critical project opens for a collectivization of feminist politics, which can be read as an alternative resistance to neoliberal ideals (Johansson Wilén, 2019: 231).

Moreover, gender scholar Mikael Mery Karlsson (2020: 15) analyzes contemporary political struggles centered on sexuality, intimacy, and functionality in the context of the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state and the restructuring of civil society in Sweden. Mery Karlssons ethnographic study focuses on how different political actors navigate and aim to change the neoliberal conditions in which their practice takes place. As part of this, Mery Karlsson identifies norm critique as a common strategy used by the groups he studies, where norm critique frequently is defined as closely related to knowledge. He suggests that norm critique often transforms when it shifts from being a tool for social movements to a method applied by state

employees within the welfare state (Mery Karlsson, 2020: 341). Yet, while the state has been involved in the formulation of their norm critical practice, the participants did not identify any clear risk of such state influence. Mery Karlsson understands norm critique as a potentially radical form of education with the possibility to open for new subject positions and new ways of making sense of the world. However, he also raises some concern that the flexibility of the concept might underwrite its critical potential. As he sees it, there is a risk that the concept will turn into an empty signifier making it perceptible for neoliberal influence (Mery Karlsson, 2020: 342-343).

Proponents of norm critical pedagogy have repeatedly raised concern that the complexity and transformative potential of norm critical pedagogy may be weakened when implemented and put to practice in a neoliberal discursive context (Bromseth & Darj, 2010; Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2012; Alm & Laskar, 2017; Björkman et al., 2021; Björkman & Bromseth, 2019; Reimers, 2023; Björkman, 2024). I explore this presumption throughout my studies, especially in my third case where I take this assumed misapplication as a starting point for analysis.

Since I am exploring the constitutive effects of norm critique, previous research centered on the construction of feminist subjects in relation to neoliberalism as a discursive context is of special interest to me (see for example, Oksala, 2013: 39; Rottenberg, 2018). As the political scientists Cathrine Esche and Bice Maiguasha (2018) argue, the academic debate on the relation between neoliberalism and feminism tends to (re)produce a dichotomy between co-optation and resistance where neoliberalism is seen as an external power affecting some feminist movements and subjects more than others (Esche and Maiguasha, 2018: 9). With my study, I wish to draw attention to, and problematize, the relation between neoliberalism and feminist expressions and virtues. My research differs from both Johansson Wilén and Mery Karlsson in that I consider the affective dimensions at play in the relation between norm critique and neoliberalism. Rather than depicting neoliberalism as *external* to feminist politics, I point to how ideology works on us through the promise of enjoyment (Hook, 2017).

This way of approaching ideology, from a psychoanalytical perspective, is also adopted by gender scholar Johanna Lauri in her thesis 'Feministiska Fantasier'. Here, Lauri explores various expressions of feminism and social change in a Swedish context. Her analysis centers the articulation of feminism in the crossroads between the market and feminist politics (Lauri, 2021: 54). Studying contemporary feminist discourses within the context of the state, the commercial field, entrepreneurship,

and activism, Lauri shows how a logic centered on ideas about an inherently good and ethical capitalism shapes the prerequisites for feminist organizing and activism where entrepreneurship comes to be viewed as a form of activism. She argues that when ethical practices are articulated as individual rather than collective, the work for feminism and social change is constructed as an individual project. Lauri illustrates how the feminist subject, in the crossroads between market logics and feminism, is constructed as an individualized and entrepreneurial subject, constituted by the desire to make correct moral choices (Lauri, 2021: 63).

Within an international context, several scholars have studied the manifestation of contemporary feminism in popular and media culture (McRobbie, 2008; Rottenberg, 2014/2018; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Scharff; 2023). Feminist cultural theorist Rosalind Gill (2007) has, for example, written extensively about what she refers to as a *postfeminist sensibility*. The term captures the ways in which postfeminism is expressed, received, and reproduced, moving away from understanding it as a temporal or historical shift, as a new kind of feminism, or as a backlash against feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020: 5). Gill understands postfeminist discourses to overlap with neoliberal rationality and as such tied to a language of individualism and personal responsibility (Gill, 2007). In line with this, literary scholar Cathrine Rottenberg (2014) draws attention to the rise of a specifically neoliberal feminism that produces a distinct kind of feminist subject. According to Rottenberg, this is not simply a *female* subject but a *feminist* one who strives for self-optimization (Rottenberg, 2014: 421-422). I understand this perspective as relevant for my study as it highlights how neoliberal logics also shape men's practices of self-monitoring and self-regulation within feminist politics.

As media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, a postfeminist sensibility has opened for a popularity of feminism, which is connected to 'media visibility, circulation and affective embrace' (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020: 4). Popular feminism is recognized by its prevalence and visibility as well as by its accommodating character, especially in relation to accommodating men (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Banet-Weiser (2018) also illustrates the interrelation between what she calls popular feminism and popular misogyny, showing how expressions of popular misogyny, such as anti-feminist men's groups, can be understood as a reaction to popular feminism, to ideas of expanding feminist achievements, to a perceived de-masculinization of society, and an increase in women's power (Banet-Weiser, 2018). I draw on this research when discussing the emphasis on men's engagement in norm critical discourse and in relation to feminist political goals, such as gender equality.

So far, I have outlined some critical perspectives on norm critique as well as research on feminist politics and practice with relevance for my thesis. I now turn to studies that focus directly on feminist theory and scholarship.

Critical studies of feminist scholarship

In my third case study, I investigate the construction of norm critical pedagogy in narratives about its own history. To do so, I draw on works that analyzes representations of feminist theory and the politics of feminist academic writing. In what follows, I will briefly outline some of the arguments made within this field that I see as relevant for my study. While these studies do not address norm critique directly, they engage with queer and feminist theoretical debates and thus provide important perspectives for analyzing the articulation of norm critique within contemporary feminist discourse.

As already mentioned, the narrative on norm critical pedagogy connects norm critique to a variety of theoretical concepts and starting points associated with feminist and gender studies research, such as critical theory, queer theory, feminist theory, and intersectionality. Proponents and critics alike also make clear its poststructuralist legacy, with Michel Foucault and Judith Butler being highlighted as particularly important (for example, Alm & Laskar, 2017; Henriksson, 2017; Björkman & Bromseth, 2019; Reimers, 2023; Björkman & Sotevik, 2023; Björkman et al., 2021; Nørgaard Iversen, 2024). Considering this, my study of norm critique relates to previous research made on the reception and interpretation of their work. While both Butler and Foucault undoubtedly have been influential for feminist and queer studies, several feminist and gender scholars have critically discussed the understanding and use of their work within some feminist research. One of the main arguments found in this literature is that there has been a somewhat over-optimistic appropriation of some of Foucault's ideas about resistance (see for example, Bordo, 1993; Huffer, 2013; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015; Jagose, 2015; Copjec, 2015) as well as Butler's concept of performativity (Jagose, 2015; Edenheim, 2008/2016).

As argued by these scholars, in many feminist critiques of feminism, Butler is perceived as 'anti-matter' or as reducing matter to culture. Such an interpretation, they suggest, is grounded in a reading of performativity as equivalent to change and subversion (Ahmed, 2008; Sullivan, 2012; Irni, 2013 see also, Edenheim, 2016). For example, queer scholar Ann-Marie Jagose understands the wide-spread appeal of Butlers (1990) model of gender performativity as connected to how it aligns with an idea of the anti-normative as having political force (Jagose, 2015: 41). Jagose argues that queer theory's critique of societal norms is linked to a celebration of the non-

normative where norm breaking subjects and practices have come to symbolize alternative political possibilities. The belief that the non-normative aspect of certain practices or identities characterize them as subversive has led for the non-normative as such to be viewed as equivalent to being political (Jagose, 2015: 27).

In the introduction to a special issue of feminist cultural journal *differences* on the topic of queer theory, literary and gender scholars Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson (2015: 2) ask what the possibilities are to articulate a queer theory without an allegiance to antinormativity, something they see as a defining aspect of queer studies as a field. They offer a new reading of norms with the aim to craft an alternative to what they understand as the oppositional character of antinormativity. One of their main arguments is that antinormativity implicitly suggests a movement *against*, rather than a turn or twist (i.e. a queering) of norms. As such, they argue, antinormativity paradoxically underwrites Foucault's repressive hypothesis (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015: 11), i.e. the idea that sexuality is repressed from the *outside* instead of understanding sexuality as constitutively repressed.

In a similar manner, queer feminist scholar Lynn Huffer (2013) calls for an anti-foundational definition of queer theory. From this perspective, queer is not conceptualized in terms of identity but as a *critique.* Queer as a concept is thus put to work as a deconstructive tool in relation to the normative, and as such, also towards political practices with a focus on identity (Huffer, 2013). This version of queer theory is influenced by thinkers such as Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida. Their work formed a central part of the 1980s 'sexual-difference feminism', particularly in the writings of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, whose analyses were driven by deconstructive and, especially, psychoanalytic modes of analysis (Huffer, 2013: 14). 'Difference', from this perspective, is not understood on the level of identity and representation but as an ontological irreducibility. According to Huffer, the shift from 'difference' towards 'differences' within feminist theorizing has gradually displaced this anti-foundational understanding of difference with understandings of differences as a sociological term that highlights identities as nuanced and complex (Huffer, 2013: 14-15).

Following Huffer, the rise of *intersectionality* in feminist scholarship and activism attests to this shift. Huffer argues that a Foucauldian conception of subjectivity is incompatible with intersectionality. She claims that: "Symptomatically, the emancipatory political aims of intersectionality have come to be embedded in the kinds of human rights discourses Foucault spent his life critiquing" (Huffer, 2013: 18). Intersectionality can be described as a dominant paradigm for feminist

scholarship and activism. Ever since being introduced by legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality has been the subject for extensive feminist debate. It has, for example, been described as women's studies "most important theoretical contribution" (McCall, 2005: 1771). However, intersectionality has also been criticized (see for example, Nash, 2008/2016; Puar, 2012; Salem, 2016; Carbin & Edenheim, 2013; Carbin & Tornhill, 2004). It has been shown to serve as an empty signifier, which lacks grounding in a specific theory of power and, as such, it can be used to create a problematic consensus within the field of feminist research (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013).

Of special importance to my study of norm critique is gender scholar Amund Rake Hoffart's (2021) analyses of metacommentaries on intersectionality. Drawing on Clare Hemming's genealogical approach, Hoffart identifies three common responses to the paradigmatization of intersectionality that are integral to the struggle to define a 'correct' meaning of intersectionality. While such metacommentaries often are critical towards the development of intersectionality into a paradigm, Hoffart reads these responses as both against, and as internal to, the process of paradigmatization. His study shows how the idea of an original 'true' version of intersectionality is constructed by putting it against wrongfully applied and additive conceptualizations. As he illustrates, the metacommentaries on intersectionality build on certain essentialist assumptions that serve to reproduce a binary between theory and practice, academia and activism, as well as between defenders and critics of the concept. This, he argues, goes against the inclusive intentions of the intersectional project.

In a similar vein, educational scholar Simon Nørgaard Iversen (2024) problematizes the theoretical origins of norm critique. He argues that the poststructuralist and dialectical tradition that it builds on are not easily reconciled. For example, he understands current attempts to formulate an affirmative norm critique as a move to abandon its dialectical heritage in favor of its poststructural influences. However, as he contends, the influence of poststructuralism is perhaps *least* suitable to offer an affirmative moment in critique, and he argues, instead, for finding this possibility by turning to the concept's dialectical tradition (Nørgaard Iversen, 2024: 62).

I draw on this research, discussing feminist theory and scholarship from an anti-foundational perspective, and I contribute to this field by considering how feminist politics and scholarship is represented through articulations of norm critique. By highlighting some of the theoretical tensions underpinning norm critique, my thesis adds to the debate concerning a politics of diversity on the one hand and theories of

difference on the other (see for example, Weed, 2024). As Huffer points out, the distinction between an empirically oriented equality feminism centered on *differences* and a deconstructive, psychoanalytically influenced feminism centered on *difference* is seldom made explicit and is easily obscured through generalized references to queer or poststructural theory. Where previous research tends to reproduce an idea of norm critique as a poststructural concept, I wish instead to problematize this assumption. In line with Hoffart (2021), I do not seek to charge norm critique for failing or to pin down what counts as 'true' and 'original' norm critique or poststructural theory. Rather, I want to point towards the need for explicit positioning within feminist practice and research.

In this chapter I have described how my thesis relates to previous empirical research on norm critique, especially within the fields of gender studies and educational science. I have also discussed critical perspectives on feminist scholarship. Where previous research mainly has focused on the practical application of norm critique, my thesis also addresses the theoretical dimensions of the concept. In the following chapter, I will outline my analytical framework and describe how it allows me to draw attention to some of the political implications of current articulations of norm critique.

Analytical framework

My analysis aims to answer what meaning norm critique is given through its articulation within specific fields, to identify the logics and underlying assumptions immanent in these articulations, and to explore the constitutive effects and political implications of such articulations. To study and discuss various meaning making processes and their effects, I use a discourse theoretical framework including psychoanalytical theories of subjectification. In this chapter I will elaborate on my analytical framework and discuss, in more detail, the theoretical and methodological concepts that I use.

Approaching the study of norm critique from this perspective means that I understand theory and method as intertwined. My approach is based on certain ontological and epistemological premises that do not allow for a clear separation between theory and method to be done (Howarth, 2005: 317). In other words, my view of knowledge affects the way I perceive my empirical material and thus inevitably has effects for how my research is conducted. In the same manner, the underlying assumptions about subjects and the social underpinning norm critical discourse effect how the problems that norm critique seeks to address are represented (Bacchi, 2009).

The question of critique

'Method' answers to the question of *how* research has been done. Etymologically method refers to 'way' or 'travel' and implies that one follows a certain way or course of action. So, how then have I analyzed my material? What choices and decisions have I made throughout my analytical process? Clearly, questions about method inevitably actualize questions about agency. The feminist historian Joan W. Scott (2011) figures the notion of agency as impelled by desire and she characterizes feminist agency, feminist desire, as critique. As a critique, she argues, feminist agency includes:

> […] the constant undoing of conventional wisdom; the exposure of its limits for fully satisfying the goals of equality. It drives us to unforeseen places. You never know what will next draw our attention or ire. Critique, as desire, provides no map. It is rather a standard against which to measure the dissatisfactions of the present. Its path can be seen only in retrospect, but its motion is undeniable (Scott, 2011: 43).

On a broad level, I position my analytical approach within a tradition of immanent critique. Immanent critique refers to a practice of critique that "start from the underlying assumptions of some work and then criticize it using these assumptions" (Stahl, 2013: 4). Immanent critique is a method for a critique of ideology that can be connected back to Georg W.F. Hegel and has been developed further by some members of the Frankfurt school, in particular Theodor W. Adorno. The concept of critique has itself been widely discussed by various thinkers, among them both Butler and Foucault. What kind of question does critique introduce? What is the difference between criticism and critique? What are the characteristics of critique? Its qualities? Its downsides? Its purpose?

Indeed, as Butler (2001) asks in the essay with the same name: '*What is critique?'* I understand critique as a practice different from finding faults and making judgments, and I view it instead as an attempt to acknowledge every totality as a fantasy. The psychoanalytical feminist Elisabeth Weed (2016, 165-170) discusses critique in relation to Louis Althusser's definition of symptomatic reading. Following Althusser, symptomatic reading can be understood as a practice of identifying contradictions, ruptures, impossibilities, and silences. In relation to this, Weed describes critique as a reading with an ambition to break with ideas of a coherent relation between latent and manifest meanings. In other words, this is a *reading of the unconscious*.

To be more specific, I use the term immanent critique to denote a particular mode of questioning that is central to the form of critical analysis I employ. This is a method that takes the underlying assumptions of some work, in my case the discursive practice of norm critique, as a starting point to develop a critique grounded in these assumptions (Hoffart, 2021: 44). By asking what had to be taken for granted for a specific norm critical practice to make sense as a way to address gender equality or sustainability, it is possible to discern such *underlying assumptions* (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010:124). For example, as I show in case studies I and II, targeting individual attitudes and behaviors by encouraging men to express emotions, assumes specific understandings about human beings as inherently good and as possible to enlighten or emancipate by way of emotions as a source of knowledge or truth. To further ask, what contradictions or conflicts do such assumptions obscure? For example, how does the reliance on a Western humanist (masculinist) conception of knowledge and the individual go together with the norm critical intention to redefine masculinity? And what makes such contradictions come across as logically coherent?

It is questions such as the ones above that actualize my use of the concept of *logics*. Discourse theoretical scholars Jason Glynos and David Howarth state that: "when we talk about a logic of a practice or a regime of practices, we seek to capture those aspects which make it tick" (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 135). Glynos and Howarth's *Logics of Critical Explanation* include the discernment of Social, Political and Fantasmatic logics where the identification of Social Logics answers 'What?', Political Logics answers 'How?' and Fantasmatic Logics answers 'Why?'. In my critical endeavor, I draw inspiration from their approach. This means that while I do not follow their method in any strict sense, their problematizing approach have helped me to formulate and pose critical questions to my material during the initial stages of my analytical process. Their method has also influenced the formulation of my overall research questions. With that said, let us now turn to the question of how a norm critical practice is made comprehensible. What meanings are given to norm critique through its articulation within the fields that I study? Or put differently, what makes norm critique tick?

Discourse, Power and Resistance

My first research question concerns the meanings attributed to norm critique as a concept and practice. However, to tease out the meanings given to norm critique not only adheres to the content assigned to it but can also be seen as an attempt to capture its underlying logics. I thus understand this question as relating directly to that of logics, and as such it overlaps with my second research question: What logics and underlying assumptions are immanent in the articulation of norm critique? The concept of *social logics* refers to the specific characteristics or 'rules' of a discursive practice. It highlights what defines a norm critical practice in terms of its structure and organizing features (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 139). *Political logics*, in turn, concern the emergence and maintenance of discursive practices and regimes. Identifying the political logic of a certain social practice shows its *contingency* i.e. its limits (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 143). To clarify, political logics are linked to the logics of signification, in other words the attempts made to stabilize the meaning of concepts and discourses, thus illuminating the political dimension of the social (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 134). Finally, *fantasmatic logics* analyze how subjects are shaped by discourses, highlighting the forms of enjoyment subjects derive from identifying with these discourses (Glynos et al., 2021: 4). To further tend to my research questions, I am assisted by some additional concepts that I will describe in more detail in the following sections.

Discourse

From a discourse theoretical perspective, the entire social field and thus all social phenomena are considered as produced by discursive processes (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014: 93). From this view, all meaningful notions of society are discursive. Hence, discourses are material in the sense that the material is constituted through discourse. The concept of *discourse* describes how different signs relate to each other, but unlike the concept of structure, the concept of discourse implies an understanding of signs as temporarily fixed. The fixation of signs in relation to each other is *contingent*, this means that they are possible, but not necessary (Whinter Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Discourse is a fixation of meaning that could always have been different. Following this, an 'equal society', e.g., cannot be understood merely as something that has not yet been realized, but rather as an impossibility (Laclau, 2015: 69). Just as linguistic signs acquire their meaning by being placed in relation to other signs, social actions also acquire their meaning by being different from others.

To capture how meaning is produced, the concept *articulation* has been a central analytical tool. Articulation denotes the process through which discursive elements are structured in relation to each other. It is through articulation that meaning is produced and altered (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014: 91). The concept captures the contingent and relational aspect of the production of meaning and has been useful to me in order to illustrate how for example 'masculinity' or 'gender equality' are produced and negotiated[12]. For example, when reading through the material, I have focused on localizing the privileged signs organizing a discourse, so called *nodal points* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014: 99). These signs are 'empty' in the sense that they acquire their meaning in relation to other signs. In Paper III, I treat 'sustainability' and 'nature' as such privileged signs, or nodal points, which are filled with meaning through *chains of equivalence*. In the material, Sustainability is for example, linked to Sameness and Safety and Nature is connected to Balance and Truth.

As explained by Laclau and Mouffe, the chain of equivalence works to suppress the difference between particular signs, for example Nature and Balance, constructing Nature and Balance as *essentially* the same (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014: 113). This simultaneously produces the idea of an outside to Nature, a so called 'constitutive outside'. From this assumption follows that we can only know what something is by knowing what it is not. In other words, nature *is* 'not culture'. This way, culture can be said to be *of* Nature, meaning that a negation of culture is immanent in how we

[12] With the term 'negotiated', I wish to draw attention to how subject positions may be accepted or disrupted. Importantly, however, this is not to suggest that any intentional intervention is made by an autonomous, choosing subject (Bacchi, 2021).

understand nature. However, the logic of equivalence is not, as pointed out by Laclau and Mouffe, only an affirmation of the logic of contradiction. Culture is not simply the opposite to Nature. Instead, through the logic of equivalence all positivity of the object is cancelled, making negativity representable (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014: 115). This reasoning illustrates how the very impossibility to establish a pure positive identity is that which makes any identity possible. Political logics is linked to Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization of equivalence and difference and can be used to examine how political boundaries are constructed or contested by positioning social demands and identities as equivalent or different (Glynos et al., 2021: 4). Taking these concepts as methodological tools have made it possible for me to analytically follow the construction of meaning throughout my empirical material.

I conceptualize norm critique as a *discursive practice*. This entails an understanding of discourse as practices (or sets of practices) and is not limited to an understanding of discourse in terms of linguistics or text. Following Foucault, the term discourse refers to knowledge rather than to language (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014: 174). In the logics approach, discourse and logics are not seen as separate. Instead, the concept of logics serves to characterise, explain, and criticise specific discourses. It highlights the underlying processes that shape and organize discursive practices and hegemonic regimes (Glynos et al., 2021: 5). Furthermore, since I am interested in exploring the possibilities for resistance and change immanent in norm critical discursive practice, the concept of power becomes crucial for my analysis. In line with a Foucauldian definition of power, I understand power as productive and relationally tied to the production of knowledge and "truth". Following Foucault, power and knowledge are not opposites, instead they constitute each other (Foucault, 1979: 192). In the following section I will turn to discuss some of the logics immanent in contemporary forms of power and politics.

The logics of power and politics

Relevant for my study is that the development and success of norm critical perspectives in a Swedish context is contemporary with neoliberal reformations (Johansson Wilén, 2019). Neoliberalism is a contested concept that can be understood in different ways. Political scientist Wendy Brown (2005/2015) conceptualizes neoliberalism as a *political rationality*. As I see it, the concept of rationality relates to that of logics. Brown draws on Foucault's term *governmentality,* which captures how a political rationality is turned into a technique or method for governing that produces subjects, ways of acting, and organizes the social world (Brown, 2005).

Following Brown, I consider neoliberalism as a political rationality, including a number of social logics with effects on the structuring of norm critical discourse. As argued by Brown, through neoliberal rationality, democracy (the political) has been merged with capitalism (the economic). In other words, this means that economic and market logics, i.e. the logics of capitalism, have been incorporated in the political sphere. This suggests an economization and marketization of society and subjects (Brown, 2005/2015). Under neoliberalism, market values run through every aspect of life where the political citizen has been replaced by an entrepreneurial and rational consumer. Theorizations of neoliberal governing (for example, Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1999; Brown, 2005/2015) have been important to me when analyzing the effects and political implications of a norm critical discursive practice. I view neoliberalism as constitutive of, not only our political ideas and actions, but also ourselves as political subjects (Oksala, 2013: 39). Theorizing neoliberalism as a political rationality, a 'govern-mentality', makes it possible to consider the constitutive relation between neoliberal ideals and our wants and desires.

Neoliberal rationality changes our understanding of the political and fosters a certain form of subjectivity structured around ideals of authenticity and self-optimization. Sociological researchers, such as Nicolas Rose (1999) and Eva Illouz (2007/2008) have highlighted how psychological and therapeutical discourses were increasingly established within multiple areas of society during the 1990's. They position such discourses at the center of self-optimizing ideals, characteristic of contemporary culture and understand the rise of therapeutic discourses as technologies (governing techniques) of the self, closely connected to neoliberal political rationality. These perspectives are important to me throughout all of my case studies, as they make it possible to highlight and problematize how norm critical practices target individual emotions and aim at developing emotional attentiveness as a form of resistance and to bring about change.

Ideology and resistance

The founders of discourse theory, political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, speak of society as an impossibility. Following this, society is best described as an unfinished and temporary fixation of meaning which does not exist as an objective totality (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014: 115; Laclau, 1990: 89ff). This, in turn, implicates an understanding of *ideology* which differs from a traditional Marxist conception of ideology as, on the one hand, a level of social totality i.e. a view of social structures as all-encompassing and total, or as on the other, a kind of 'false consciousness' (Laclau, 1990: 89). A view of ideology as equated with a false consciousness creates the illusion that it is possible to reach a truth behind the truth,

a knowledge free from power. However, for communication to be at all possible, meaning must be temporarily fixed. It is the attempts to establish an 'objective' reality that, according to Laclau, can be understood as the very ideological nature of society. As he argues: "The ideological would be the will to totality of any totalizing discourse" (Laclau, 1990: 92). Without this fixation of meaning, the social is incomprehensible and the ideological must therefore be seen as constituting the social.

As I show in Paper I and IV, norm critique relies on a logic similar to that of consciousness raising methods, where the norm critical subject is to be made aware of their 'true' nature, their destructive behavior, their privileges, and their relation to suppressive norms. However, the idea of a false consciousness is only made possible if the identity of the subject, the social agent, is assumed to be stable (Laclau, 1990: 91). The starting point of discourse theory is instead an understanding of the subject as constituted in and through surrounding discourses. As argued by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and socialist strategy:*

> From the point of view of a hegemonic politics, then, the crucial limitation of the traditional left perspective is that it attempts to determine a priori agents of change, levels of effectiveness in the field of the social, and privileged points and moments of rupture. All these obstacles come together into a common core, which is the refusal to abandon the assumption of a sutured society (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014: 162).

Following a discourse theoretical understanding of ideology, what is considered ideological is the illusion of closure. In other words, the ideological involves obscuring the contingent character of meaning. An ideological analysis and critique thus attempt to draw attention to the process and mechanism of closure through which contingency is concealed (Glynos, 2001: 198). To be clear, I do not trust theory to help me uncover any objective reality hiding behind a misleading surface. Instead, what it helps me to see are different meaning making practices, which at the same time make visible the contingent nature of objectivity.

Language and Subjectivity

The split subject: Desire, Enjoyment, Fantasy

Included in the discourse theoretical framework that I apply is a psychoanalytical theory of the subject (Stavrakakis, 1999; Laclau, 2005). Jacque Lacan's

psychoanalysis offers a theory of the unconscious, which provides a useful tool for ideological analysis and critique (Wright, 2000). As an analytical framework this approach does, as already mentioned, not only assist in exploring how but also why norm critique is articulated as a response to contemporary social challenges. In other words, this perspective makes possible an analysis of why specific practices and regimes take their hold on subjects (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 145). To understand the desirability of norm critique as a feminist strategy, why norm critique appeals to us, the concept of *fantasy* or *fantasmatic logics* is helpful. Fantasy allows me to direct attention towards what drives norm critique and contribute with a perspective on the affective dimensions of norm critique as an assumed tool for social change.

The way we understand the possibilities for change is connected to how we understand and conceptualize subjectivity. My understanding of the subject mainly borrows from feminist interpretations, and revisions, of Lacan's work. Language is a central aspect of Lacan's psychoanalysis since it is *through* language subjects are produced. To become intelligible as a subject, one must enter language or in other words, one need to subject oneself to the symbolic order.[13] This unavoidably produces a split in the subject between fixed identification and actual being (Wright, 2000: 20). In other words, the break between the signifier and signified leaves the subject with a sense of loss, of unfulfilled totality, and this sense of loss installs in the subject a *desire*.

From a Lacanian perspective, desire is primarily a desire for love, that is, for recognition by the 'Other'. Crucially, Lacan's notion of the 'Other' is not equivalent with another individual but refers to the symbolic order (Wright, 2000: 68-69). Complete representation within the symbolic is unattainable and the subject will always fail in their attempts to be recognized and fulfill desire. Despite the impossibility of achieving total recognition, the subject seeks to cover, or at least momentarily forget, this constitutive lack and it is here fantasy plays an important role. Fantasy operates as a structuring narrative that direct desire toward imagined scenarios of wholeness or satisfaction, providing the subject with a promise of future *enjoyment* (Glynos, 2001; Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2022a).

In my analysis of norm critical discursive practice, I consider enjoyment as a political factor (Hook, 2017; Stavrakakis, 1999). The Lacanian concept of enjoyment (jouissance) presupposes a lost object, an object which can never be attained since

[13] Lacan (1998) structures psychoanalysis in relation to the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. In simplified terms, the symbolic refers to the order of language, the real is the inarticulable field that constitutes the symbolic. The imaginary refers to fantasmatic closure and identification, hiding lack in the symbolic Other.

it is in the absence of the object which the subject finds pleasure. Following Lacan, the subject is constituted by a desire for a lost object. Importantly, however, the object must remain forever unattainable, in order to keep its desirable quality and allow the subject to experience enjoyment. In other words, desire can never be realized, because a realized desire is simply not desire anymore. Since the subject is constituted by desire, a fulfilled desire would also mean the end of the subject. To clarify, it is the loss that leads to enjoyment in the sense that it gives the subject something to strive for and thus the subject must suffer, rather than find pleasure, in its enjoyment (Swyngedouw, 2022a: 55). This relation between enjoyment and loss is what defines a politics of enjoyment (Hook, 2017). As argued by the psychoanalytically inspired cultural geographer Eric Swyngedouw, subjects are bound to hold on to their loss and the suffering it entails (Swyngedouw, 2022a: 55). I make use of the theoretical concepts *enjoyment* (Paper II) and *melancholy* (Paper III) to analyze norm critique in relation to the neoliberal promise of freedom as enjoyment. As argued in these papers, the subject constantly seeks to satisfy its desire for enjoyment, and this is consequently where neoliberalism finds its psychic and affective attachment (Swyngedouw, 2022a: 55).

The function of fantasy is to structure desire and conceal the subject's fundamental lack. In other words, fantasy assists in maintaining a promise of wholeness (Glynos, 2001: 72). From this perspective, fantasy is not the same as an individual illusion, instead fantasy is what obscures the political and conflictual character of our discursive practices by presenting them in a logically coherent way (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). The concept of fantasy provides a useful analytical tool since it helps me explain how conflicting narratives can come across as logically coherent. For example, as illustrated in Paper I, this perspective makes it possible to draw attention to the paradoxical relation between individual freedom and responsibility or, as in Paper IV, how seemingly incompatible epistemological and ontological assumptions are brought together as a coherent theory. It also helps me to illustrate how binary divisions between men and women, humans and nature, theory and practice keep getting re-produced despite the ambition to narrow such gaps.

In Paper I, I structure my analysis around the logic of fantasy. However, fantasmatic logics are important in my analysis of all material. A central feature of a fantasmatic logic is that it has a dual structure in which both a beatific and a horrific dimension are at play. It can be described as a staging of a scenario in which both the fulfillment and the consequences of that fulfillment are imagined. Fantasy makes possible the construction of a narrative of future fulfilled (or stolen) enjoyment following from

a specific action or situation. An example of this is the promise of future equality following from the construction of a new and ecological masculinity.

Gender, performativity, and the agency of negativity

The norm critical practices which I study in case I and II, are initiated as a way to address gender inequality and unsustainability by way of changing norms of masculinity. To understand how gender is conceptualized in norm critical discourse is thus central to my analysis. Following the historian Joan W. Scott, to capture the meaning of gender is not to answer what gender *is* but to contextualize it and to see its role in the production of other seemingly unrelated fields such as class, power, politics, and history (Butler & Weed, 2011: 3). Scott's theory of gender turns gender into a question, or in other words, into a critique. In the introduction to Scott's work in '*The question of gender',* Judith Butler and Elizabeth Weed argue that:

> To consider gender or to try and gauge the usefulness of the category is to ask first and foremost, how such categories have been formed, through what means, and with what meanings? Perhaps most importantly, what do they themselves produce? (Butler & Weed 2011: 4).

Following this, I do not consider masculine identity as a truth to be defended but rather as a question to be posed. I do not understand masculinity as a set and stable category, nor do I believe that there are different types or versions of equally set masculinit*ies*. Instead, I find it more useful to speak of masculinity in terms of positions, as I believe that this better captures the fluidity and openness of the term (see also, Goedecke, 2018).

According to Scott, the use of 'experience' as a starting point in the struggle for social justice risks naturalizing identity and she suggests instead a historicization of experience (Scott, 1992: 25-6). Scott's view on experience as an historically specific construction has been useful in my analysis of a norm critical practice in which an exchange of experience and personal stories is in focus. If we consider that power not only has political effects, but that we ourselves are an effect of power, then change and resistance is not a question of getting rid of power or to free oneself from power. Instead, this draws attention to how norm critique, understood as a discursive practice, produces specific kinds of subjects and certain relations of power.

To further address my third research question, which concerns the constitutive effects of the articulation of norm critique, I also draw on Judith Butler's theories of

subjectification and agency. Butler's psychoanalytical approach allows me to theorize and discuss the conditions and possibilities for feminist political change and especially why change might be so difficult to achieve. In this regard, the concept of *performativity* is of special importance to my analysis. Butler's argument that gender is performative does not mean that a pre-given gender is expressed by certain actions, gestures, or speech (Butler, 1997: 144). Instead, the illusion that subjects have an inner gender core is produced retrospectively through the performance of gender. This perspective highlights the understanding of the subject, not as an autonomous individual *with* experience but as a subject constituted *through* experience.

Following Butler, I understand the concept of performativity to describe a continuous and compulsory repetition of norms. As Butler makes clear, the performativity of gender is not to be misunderstood as freedom of choice or simply as referring to theatrical performance (1993: 59). Instead,

> Where there is an 'I' who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that 'I' and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus, there is no 'I' who stands *behind* discourse and executes its volition or will *through* discourse (Butler, 1993: 171).

The performance of gender identity is an attempt to evoke an essence, but it will always fail since there is no essence or reality to represent in the first place. In fact, it is the failure (impossibility) of full representation which makes us representable (Butler, 1993: 31/1997: 197). From this follows that while the subject is understood as produced in and through discourse, language does not reflect the truth of identity. Neither does this suggest that change is made possible merely at the level of language (Weed, 2024: 35). For example, when the interviewees in my second case study describe themselves as more emotional than traditional men, I do not automatically interpret this as evidence that norms of masculinity have changed or progressed, but rather as a reflection of their desire for an identity free from power. In other words, while the concept of performativity draws attention to how descriptions of reality is part of producing reality, it also serves to illustrate how the use of language has effects, independently of any individual intentions. More importantly, this perspective makes it possible to illuminate what is (already) constructed as wanted or ideal behavior through norm critical discourse.

In Paper II, I make use of Butler's (1993/1997) critical revision of Louis Althusser's theory of *interpellation*. By considering norm critique as an interpellative practice, I analyze how it functions as formative of subjects. Althusser theorized that

individuals become subjects through being 'hailed' by the law. That is, when the policeman, representing the law, calls out to us and we answer to that call, we become recognizable as subjects (Butler, 1993: 81-2). Butler develops this idea by including the psychic aspects of subject formation. Subjectivity is not only imposed from the outside, by ideology or the state, but involves a psychic attachment to subjection itself. For Butler, power is not simply internalized by a pre-existing subject, but the subject is understood as an ambivalent effect of power. In other words, the subject also desires or becomes invested in the very norms and structures that dominate it (Butler, 1997). This perspective is crucial to me when analyzing the articulation of norm critique as a practice of resistance. It highlights that feminist critique does not occur from a position outside power but is always entangled with the norms it seeks to question.

To further illustrate the ambivalent character of the subject, Butler turns to Freud's concept *melancholy*. For Butler, melancholy describes a process in which the subject internalizes the idea of a lost object, whether that be another person or an ideal, and denies that any loss has occurred (Butler, 1997: 167). Mourning differs from melancholy in that it acknowledges loss. In melancholia, by contrast, the object lost is foreclosed, meaning that what has been lost is not simply repressed but excluded from the symbolic order and hence impossible to mourn, that is, impossible to let go of. Instead of grieving and letting go of the object, a relation to the lost object is kept through the subject's melancholic attachment to it (Butler, 1997: 172-3). This process produces the experience of an internal psychic space, the ego, through which the subject maintains a relation to what has been lost. As Butler explains, "The turn from the object to the ego produces the ego, which substitutes for the object lost" (Butler, 1997: 168). The ego is not to be conflated with the subject but can, instead, be understood as instituted as a defense against loss (Butler, 1997: 169). In other words, the ego can be described as *the idea* of oneself as a whole and unified subject, a function that conceals that the subject is split.

These aspects of subject formation are important to me when theorizing the possibilities for agency and change prescribed by norm critical discourse. In paper III, I make use of *melancholy* as a theoretical tool to analyze the relation between norm critique and other hegemonic discourses. I show, for instance, how liberal and humanist ideals, including the idea of a stable, positive identity, are kept intact by way of a melancholic attachment to the loss of those ideals in the present. Butler's account of melancholy highlights norms and fantasies as intimately produced by each other and provides a possibility to theorize the link between subjectification

and social logics. The ambivalence that defines melancholy also connects to Butler's broader account of subject formation as both constraining and productive.

Butler argues that while we must subject ourselves to discourse, the process of subjectification is not only restrictive but also enabling (Butler, 1993: 83). As I interpret Butler on this point, constraint (i.e. subjection) enables the subject precisely by providing it with a limit. Following Butler, constraint does not limit performativity but "impels and sustains it" (Butler, 1993: 60). In other words, the failure of the big Other (the symbolic order) to fully constitute me, becomes the condition for my constitution (Butler, 1997: 197). The limit of representation is experienced as lack within the subject, providing it with the drive/desire to constantly *perform* fullness through fantasmatic identification (Butler, 1993: 58ff). Lack, understood as negativity, produces desire and provides the subject with agency. From this perspective, the point is not to heal lack but to recognize its productive role. In sum, Butler's theories of subjectification help me to analyze the relation between the individual and the social. The ontological premise embedded in this approach, that it is impossible to fully separate between the subject and the social, allows for a problematizing of the assumptions underpinning norm critical discourse.

In this chapter I have outlined the analytical framework guiding my thesis. I have shown how discourse theory, together with psychoanalytical theories of subjectification, make it possible to examine the articulations and logics that sustain norm critique as a discursive practice. Together, these perspectives provide me with the concepts needed to analyze how, and with what effects, norm critique is articulated as a tool for social justice and change.

Material Selection, Research Choices, Ethical Ambivalence

In the following section I will describe my empirical material and the choices I have made in delimiting and selecting this material. I will also provide insight into how my research and analytical process have been carried out in practice. I end by discussing some ethical considerations and reflections made, both in relation to my own research and in relation to gender studies as a field.

As already mentioned, I study norm critique through three specific cases: national gender equality policy, feminist movements, and research practices. I consider the selected cases as part of in the production of the discursive formation of feminism in Sweden today. The areas I have chosen for my study all have an explicit purpose to educate the public; they want to change the way people see themselves in the world. Thus, I argue, it is of great importance to study how these actors relate to norm critique as a tool for achieving change in civil society. They all contribute to the production of knowledge about how norm critique, feminism, environmental sustainability, gender equality, and gender studies should be understood and developed.

For research conducted from a discourse theoretical perspective, a case-study design is especially suitable since it considers the production of knowledge as dependent on contexts (Howarth, 2005: 330). The chosen fields enable me to explore the link between norm critique as a pedagogical tool and the society in which norms are produced. In case I and II, I have chosen to focus on norm critical practices specifically in relation to men and masculinities. There are several reasons for this. First of all, engaging men in gender equality efforts is a central strategy in Sweden. The idea of the Swedish gender equal man has played a significant part in the construction of Sweden as modern and progressive (Nordberg, 2005; Hill, 2007; Gottzén & Jonsson, 2012; Järvklo, 2008/2022), and the Swedish government repeatedly emphasizes the importance of including men in gender equality efforts (Regeringen, 2025; SKR 2021/2023). To scrutinize the effects of this strategy is thus important. Furthermore, norm critique is a common tool used within Swedish schools and pre-schools. To be able to study how norm critical practices are understood and implemented in a broader societal context, I decided to extend the analysis to include other arenas. Norm critique aims to direct attention towards the norms which cause oppression, whereby hegemonic masculinity is identified as problematic within a norm critical framework. A norm critical perspective on men

and masculinities is currently promoted across civil society and the public sector to address various social problems, including high rates of suicide, drug abuse, homelessness, low academic achievement, gender inequality, sexual assault, and violence (SKR, 2023). Destructive or 'toxic' masculine norms are also linked to contemporary expressions of wright wing populism, anti-feminism, and climate denial and efforts to disengage with such masculinities is therefore framed as necessary in the pursuit of an equal and just society (see for example, Waling, 2019). This makes it especially important to examine the articulation of norm critique in relation to men and masculinities. Considering this, I chose to conduct interviews with practitioners who apply norm critique with a specific focus on men and masculinities, rather than with school children or other more vulnerable groups.

Despite the specific focus on norm critical perspectives on men and masculinities, my study builds on a broad variety of material including policy material (paper I), interviews (paper II and III), participatory guides and instructions (paper III), as well as scholarly metacommentaries (paper IV), all related to the development and practice of norm critical pedagogical perspectives.

Policy material

The empirical material used for paper I consists of national policy documents produced by SALAR as part of the initiative *Men and Gender Equality*. Men and Gender Equality was launched in 2018 in alliance with, and partly funded by, the Swedish Government. Following this, I view the chosen material as state-initiated policy documents. SALAR influence decision-makers both nationally and internationally (SKR, 2024) and was selected based on its role in producing knowledge about what norm critique and gender equality 'is'. In the policy documents, suggested interventions, strategies and measures are discussed and thus serve as a concretization of Swedish gender equality policy (Rönnblom, 2011). This specific initiative was chosen since I consider it to play a central part in constructing the meaning of social justice and change in terms of gender equality as well as how this is best achieved.

An analysis of policy material serves as appropriate when it comes to tease out the logics, affective dimensions, and arguments underlying the articulation of norm critique. The material includes a range of different formats. In total, five written publications, 14 short films and four information sheets were included. The publications define possible strategies for developing gender-equality work in relation to masculinity norms and include: 'Masculinity and Psychological

Health', 'Masculinity and Gender-Equal Parenting', 'Masculinity and Gender-Equal Education', 'Men and Violence: Strategies for Development, and 'Masculinity and Gender Equality'. Furthermore, four information sheets (1-2 pages), summarizing the content of the publications produced by *Men and Gender Equality* have been included in the material. During the initiative, SALAR also produced 14 short YouTube films (*Redefining Masculinity*) about challenging and changing norms of masculinity. For the purposes of my analysis, the films were transcribed and treated as textual documents. All the included material was downloaded from SALAR's website and selected based on its relatedness to norm critical perspectives on masculinity and its relevance to my research questions.

Interviews

Interviews comprise a significant part of the thesis empirical material and is used in paper II and III. In total, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with some of the key initiators and participants in the initiative *Men in the Climate Crisis*. The initiative was launched in 2019 by the feminist men's organization MÄN and is based on a norm critical approach to men, gender equality and unsustainable climate change. The organization MÄN started as a movement during the mid 90's and is now a recognized feminist actor in Sweden (MÄN, 2025). This specific initiative was selected based on its attempt to broaden the scope of norm critical perspectives by focusing on the connection between environmental unsustainability, gender inequality and masculinities norms. Since my study centers on the articulative construction of norm critique, I wanted to gain insight into how a norm critical practice was defined and argued for by people implementing it. Interviews thus offered a way to study the meanings that were ascribed to norm critique as well as how these meanings were negotiated by its users (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015).

The interviewees represent a quite homogeneous group of white, middleclass individuals. While the initiative is specifically targeted at male participants, some of the initiators identify themselves as women. In total, ten men and two women, aged between 22 and 55, were interviewed. I have consistently chosen to anonymize the interviewees statements when presenting excerpts from the material (I will return to discuss this in more detail in the section *The ethics of critique)*. The interviewees were selected based on their involvement in the initiative. A first contact was made with a couple of the initiators via email. The method of snowballing was then used to get in contact with additional people who had somehow participated in the norm critical workshops. I started off by sending the initiators some information about my research and asked if they were interested in participating in the study. They later

informed me of other people involved in the project, both initiators and participants, and how to get in contact with them. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and included questions related to the interviewee's experiences of working norm critically with masculinity in relation to gender equality and climate change (such as, what is included in a norm critical approach, which norms for masculinity need to be changed, and why?) I also asked questions about how they perceive the relation between masculinity, gender equality, and climate change.

Due to the covid 19 pandemic, the main part of the interviews was, on the participants request, held via Zoom. The digital format surely affected the dynamic between me as an interviewer and the people participating in the study. It goes without saying that digital meetings differ from so-called real-life meetings, still it is impossible to know how the dynamic between me and the one I interviewed would have been in a different setting. Power inevitably effects interview situations as well as the relationship between researcher and interviewees. This ads to the importance of adopting flexibility in relation to methodical and ethical decisions throughout the research process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014; Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). The people I interviewed generously shared their thoughts and experiences and I did not get the sense that the online format was a hindrance.

While I study norm critique in relation to men and masculinity; I consider my object of study to be power relations rather than identity. In other words, I understand the interviewees narratives about their experience as constructions, affected by surrounding discourses and power relations (Scott, 1992: 25-6). From such a horizon, what is relevant for me to study is not their experiences, per se, but rather how these stories are constructed and in turn what effects they might have. The interviews offer an opportunity to explore underlying logics and assumptions expressed through the interviewee's articulations of a norm critical practice, but also how subjects are produced as well as how problems such as gender equality or climate change are constructed (see for example, Bacchi, 2021). In contrast to policy material, which presents a finalized product, interviews offer a more direct possibility to grasp conflicts, contradictions, and ambiguities in the interviewee's reasoning. This way, interviews also make it possible to illustrate the contingency of the logics immanent in the articulation of norm critique, which is not as easily captured by studying policy documents.

Participatory guide and instructions

My selected material for case II mirrors both how norm critique is articulated by the initiators and how it is interpreted and put into practice by the participants. For paper III, I wanted to further explore the relation between policy and practice and thus, rather than treating the conversational guide as background information, I decided to include the guide as part of the analyzed material.

The guide consists of 86 pages and is structured around four different themes: 'The relation with nature', 'Men and environment', 'Our future' and 'Conclusions and ways forward'. Each theme contains information aimed at educating the participants about the connection between gender and climate issues, instructions for how to organize the sessions as well as hands on norm critical exercises. Each theme begins with an introductory text suggesting ways for the group leader to start the session. The participants are asked to reflect on different themes or situations related to the topic of the session. Examples of questions to reflect on and discuss are: 'What do you think ego-logic has to do with masculinity norms?', 'In what way am I part of the ego-logic in my everyday life?', 'How does it feel to make decisions that are good for me economically, despite the fact it might harm the environment?' (Guide, 2019: 18). The guide is described as a continuation of what is referred to by the initiative as 'After #metoo'. The 'After #metoo' guide is distributed to the participants separately and has not been analyzed but has served to increase my knowledge about the project. By including the guide as part of the empirical material, I managed to get a broader understanding of the interviewees reasoning and on what premises their arguments were based. It also offered the opportunity to consider the relation between the instructive guide and its implementation to a greater extent.

Scholarly metacommentaries

The concept of *norm critical pedagogy* is in focus for paper IV. Here I examine some key publications on norm critical pedagogy with specific attention to *descriptions* (narratives) of norm critique's historical development and theoretical framework, especially in relation to its claimed poststructural influence. The kind of texts that I analyze here can be described as belonging to the genre of scholarly metacommentary (Hoffart, 2021). These are texts that attempts to outline a descriptive and evaluative overview of how the concept of norm critique is approached and as such they necessarily need to adopt a meta-perspective on norm critique. What is distinctive about this kind of texts is that they both explicitly and/or implicitly frames norm critique as *a project* invested with a clear temporal structure of the past, present, and future (see also, Hoffart, 2021: 37–8).

The chosen texts have been published between 2009 and 2023. The selection of texts has been guided by their respective engagement with *the concept* norm critique. This specific timeframe was not decided in advance. Instead, by following the references in texts related to norm critique I was able to map texts described as important for its development. The final selection of texts was then guided by their descriptive and evaluative character. The selected material includes three academic anthologies (Bromseth & Darj, 2010; Björkman & Bromseth, 2019; Björkman & Sotevik, 2023), an academic article (Björkman et al., 2021), and a book chapter published by the National Secretariat for Gender Research (Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2012), all discussing the development of norm critical pedagogy. In addition to this, a selection of national policy documents was selected, including five texts published by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2009; 2011, 2013, 2014, 2016) and a governmental white paper (SOU: 2014). I conducted an initial mapping of text's published by Skolverket between the same time period. In these publications the search words 'norms', 'norm critical', and 'norm critique' were applied to get an idea of their level of engagement with norm critical perspectives. Based on this, five texts were included in the empirical material.

The academic texts chosen for analysis have been written by researchers and practitioners within the field of gender and educational studies and I understand them as central for how the concept has been introduced to a broader audience and applied both inside and outside an academic context. The claim that the travelling of norm critique, from within academia to the wider public, has caused it to lose some of its critical potential serves as a starting point for the analysis. Material from both contexts, to compare, is thus needed. The non-academic policy documents have been chosen because I understand them as indicative for how the concept has been interpreted and put to use outside an academic context.

The practice of research

The development of my project started from an interest in how feminist political goals, such as gender equality, was articulated through various approaches. Initially, the thesis was not specifically directed towards norm critique but rather motivated by what I saw as a need to problematize the conditions for feminist political change. In my first case, I study how gender equality is constructed via a norm critical perspective on men and masculinities. After this study, my project increasingly turned towards studying norm critique as a specific expression of feminist politics and scholarship.

My analysis is largely guided by my three overarching research questions which have allowed for a somewhat different focus in relation to the separate papers. For example, when conducting the analysis for paper II, I was intrigued by the participatory guide and the explicit instructions guiding the norm critical workshops and I wanted to explore this further. I wanted to study the *process of subjectification* through a norm critical practice, including *its effects* for how gender equality and environmental sustainability is made intelligible as political problems. These aspects subsequently led me to present the results from the second case study in two separate articles. However, and as already mentioned, I understand all of my questions to overlap with each other. Consequently, all the articles relate to all research questions in one way or another.

It should come as no surprise by now that I view myself as a co-creator of the reality which I study. In an attempt to further formalize my research strategy, I am inspired by Glynos and Howarth *retroductive* approach (Glynos & Howarth, 2007/2018) which considers the co-constitutive relationship between subject and context. The use of this kind of anti-essentialist strategy implies that "any social science account can only ever aspire to an equilibrium that is reflectively and constitutively temporary and unstable" (Glynos & Howarth, 2018: 11). In actual praxis, my research can be described as an *abductive* and *iterative* process where my material is read with and through theory and theory read with and through my material (Åkesson, 2024: 57).

For example, when conducting the analysis for paper III, I started by reading through the guide and familiarized myself with the different themes included in it. I then returned to the interview material and read this together with the guide which enabled me to see how they were linked and responded to each other. By looking at proposals for change, implicit representations of what is perceived as the problem can be detected. Treating norm critique as a proposed solution to gender equality and environmental unsustainability enabled me to illustrate how a norm critical discursive practice constructs different representations of the problems it addresses (Bacchi, 2009). For example, the seemingly straightforward and common goal of reaching gender equality involves several conflicting and competing ideas about what gender equality *is*. From this perspective gender equality and environmental sustainability is thus understood as something which is *done* (Rönnblom, 2011). To analyze how problems and visions is articulated discursively, Carol Bacchi's och Joan Eveline's method for policy analysis, 'What's the problem represented to be' (2010), served as a source of inspiration and assisted me in the initial stages of approaching

the material. It helped me to structure the material and to organize it into different topics[14].

Along the research process, I often felt that more questions were raised than answered. What started with the seemingly simple question—what is norm critique?—soon evolved into a myriad of other queries: What is the difference between norm critique, norm critical perspectives, and norm critical pedagogy? Or between norm critique and other terms such as norm awareness and norm creativity? Is there a norm critical theory, or is norm critique equivalent to queer theory? Is norm critique, perhaps, better understood as a specific branch within the queer theoretical field? And what is queer theory anyway? How does it differ from feminism and feminist theory, and what is their respective relation to poststructuralism? Does gender or queer theory define itself solely on the grounds of its object of study, or does it consider other identity categories as well? And how does intersectionality fit into all of this? Questions such as these paved the way for the perspective explored in paper IV.

The ethics of critique

While the hope of norm critique, as a practice which can challenge and change existing power relations might indeed be experienced as empowering for individual subjects, I see it as important to problematize on what grounds such hope is crafted. Here, I want to make explicit how the aim of my study is not to point towards individual failures or bad intentions. Reflexivity is at the heart of feminist research and especially, I would suggest, a poststructural and psychoanalytical feminism. It takes, as a starting point, the split subject folding back on itself, placing conflict and reflexivity as a pre-condition for subjectification and separation as necessary for any relation. During the research process I have repeatedly found myself living this truth. Forever caught between narcissistic self-admiration and deep doubt, hope and despair. Despite aligning myself with those who argue for the irreducibility of difference, I believe that a possibility to think sameness opens through this insight. This we all share. The ambivalent and paradoxical experience of being:

[14] As Bacchi remarks, topics are different from themes in that they do not require the same process of coding as in thematic analysis (Bacchi, 2023).

> Indeed, there appears to be no 'one' without ambivalence, which is to say that the fictive redoubling necessary to become a self, rules out the possibility of strict identity (Butler, 1997: 198).

Perhaps it goes without saying that the desire and fear of Sameness is not something I, as a researcher, can position myself outside of. I interpret the ethical position provided by thinkers such as Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Joan Scott, or Elizabeth Weed as an insistence for the ethical subject to navigate the inevitable ambivalent character of ethics, rather than holding on to foundation. This would be an ethics built around the relational tie between me and the other, a recognition of how we constitute each other. In other words, borrowing a term from Zygmunt Bauman (1991), to acknowledge the Stranger in me[15]. To stress the inherently ambivalent characteristic of ethics, has thus been an important part of my research process.

However, what does such an ethics of critique translate to in practice? What reflexive choices have I made? An ethical issue does not necessarily need to be a dilemma but can be characterized as moments that demands a choice being made of how to deal with those, often unexpected, situations that arise (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004: 264). Throughout my research process I have been faced with situations that have demanded such choices being made. An example of this is how the small size of the initiative I study in case II makes the individual participant easier to identify. The decision to be open with information about the specific initiative is based on a wish to provide contextual clarity and enable readers to understand the organizational and social setting in which the participant's statements were made. At the same time, I recognize that naming the initiative may increase the risk of indirect identification. To reduce this risk, I have taken steps to anonymize quotations, and I have avoided including details that could be linked to specific individuals.

My research follows the guidelines offered by the Swedish research council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). Once the initial plan for my research project had been formulated, I applied for an ethical review from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. Before conducting the interviews, information regarding the project along with a consent form were sent to the interviewees. The interviewees were then given the possibility to read and ask questions about these documents before giving their consent. I asked for approval to record our conversation and informed the participants that they could contact me, should any questions arise after the

[15] I understand Bauman's concept of the Stranger to be in line with what Kristeva (1980) terms the Abject. The reason for using Bauman instead of Kristeva is that the concept of the Stranger has been discussed in previous research on norm critique and I wanted to pick up on this in relation to my own analysis (see, Langmann & Månsson, 2016).

interview. They were also informed that they could choose to end their participation at any time and for any reason. The focus for my thesis is not specific individuals, but rather the discursive practices which these people are invested and included in. To protect the interviewees, I have anonymized their stories and refer to them as Interview Persons (IP) when using extracts from the interviews in my articles. The recordings were stored with care and kept separately from the transcripts. The empirical material collected in connection to the initiatives had been published online and in public forums. Still, careful measures were taken to anonymise individual people.

Different empirical material means different ethical challenges. As a researcher in the interview situation, I am in a position of power. However, as a PhD Student in relation to other more experienced researchers invested in the practices which I am critiquing, I am not. My ambition has been to inhabit a critical position in a respectful way and to do justice to other researcher's work. I argue that my study did not include any great risks for the participants and no other obvious negative consequences. However, I see it as my responsibility to recognize and assume accountability for whatever unintended consequences it may give rise to. Since I understand myself as invested in, and part of, the practices I am studying, the critical arguments I make inevitably includes myself.

This also means that I have devoted a significant amount of time towards privileged self-reflection which, considered through the lens of my theoretical framework, has led for yet another paradox to unveil itself. The reflexive aspect of neoliberal governing rests on a notion of the individual as malleable and flexible. Through the belief in the individual's ability to learn to become free and rational, critical reflection (norm critique) can also, as literary scholar Anders E. Johansson (2017: 118) points out, be easily incorporated into what is desirable. The current order of things rewards my ability to be reflective and self-critical because this keeps me busy with myself. In his book *Capitalist Realism*, cultural critic Mark Fisher (2014) uses the concept of *Reflexive Impotence* to illustrate how, in parallel with the awareness of capitalism's many betrayals, we feel that nothing can be done to change the prevailing capitalist hegemony. This, Fisher argues, leads to a kind of cynical paralysis and self-conscious hopelessness.

Following this, the problem is not, as I see it, a lack of knowledge (of our situation) but rather that we already seem to know everything (Weed, 2016). We are, like neoliberal capitalism, aware and open with our mistakes and failures. And that protects us. Fisher's concept of reflexive impotence directs suspicion towards my

project and my ambition to problematize resistance. Is my thesis merely an effect of capitalist realism? Reflectively impotent in its claim? Actually, it is not a question so much as an obviousness. At the same time, the purpose of my thesis has not been to argue for the impossibility of change but instead, and in agreement with, for example Weed (2024: 124), to make visible how the very possibility of change lies in the impossible. While my search for the impossible has often contributed to feelings of resignation, now at the end, I can actually see that my project also is emancipatory in its claims. To enable change, or at least illuminate the conditions for change, has been and remains a major motivation for me. This brings us back to where we started, to the question of critique. Following the arguments made by multiple feminist and critical scholars, perhaps the practice of critique is at its best as a question posed and not resolved. A permanent, foundationless uncertainty. Always searching for a tear in the fabric. Looking for a loophole.

Overview of appended papers

In this section I will give an overview of the thesis four papers and summarize the main findings of each of them. I will then return to these findings in the concluding chapter where I discuss them in relation to the overall aim of the thesis.

Paper I

The fantasy of the new man: norm critique, vulnerability and victimhood

In paper I, co-authored with Johanna Lauri[16], we analyze the Swedish government initiative *Men and Gender Equality*, which was run in partnership with the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) between 2015-2018. The aim with this paper is to empirically examine some of the affective dimensions at play in the ways in which a norm critical perspective on masculinity is articulated as a solution to gender equality.

The analyzed material consists of five SALAR publications, fourteen short films from the YouTube series *Redefining Masculinity*, and four short information sheets summarizing the overall project. These materials address topics such as masculinity and psychological health, parenting, education, violence, and gender equality. The material is analyzed using political discourse theory. We also make use of the psychoanalytical concept of fantasy to explore the affective appeal and internal contradictions of a norm critical discourse. Our main focus is put on identifying 'fantasmatic narratives' that serve to present contradictions as logical.

Our analysis shows that the fantasy of the new man promotes an ideal male figure who is emotionally competent, communicative, caring, and self-aware. We discuss how the beatific (utopian) dimension of this fantasy promises broad social benefits such as improved health, reduced violence, greater equality, and economic gains. We also show that the main obstacle for reaching this vision is framed as 'traditional' or 'toxic' masculinity. This obstacle can, in turn, be overcome through self-reflection, communication, and emotional openness. This, we argue, aligns with neoliberal and

[16] As the first author I had the responsibility for deciding on and collecting the material. The analysis was a joint effort. I wrote a first draft on the main parts of the text. We then worked together to develop the text by way of reading, editing and commenting on each other's suggestions.

therapeutic ideals of self-governance where structural change is secondary to individual transformation.

Alongside this utopian vision, we also identify a horrific dimension to the fantasmatic narrative of the new man. The horrific narrative warns that failure to reform masculinity leads to various crises such as violence, extremism, addiction, ill-health and social decay. This illustrates how a norm critical perspective on masculinity also relies on a fantasmatic narrative of victimization which constructs men as victims, both of traditional masculinities norms and gender equality. This, we argue, reflect post - and anti-feminist arguments and ideas of feminist values as either already accomplished or as taken 'too far'. In sum, our analysis reveals ambivalences operating within SALAR's use of a norm critical perspective. Despite the initiative's intention to offer men the hope of emancipating themselves from destructive masculinities norms, the articulation of norm critique end up potentially reinforcing certain assumptions and aspects of present inequality.

Paper II

Masculine Enjoyment: Problematizing subjectification through norm critique as a response to climate change

In paper II, I problematize subjectification through the practice of norm critique. The analysis is based on interviews with key initiators and participants in a project working norm critically with men and masculinity in relation to gender equality and unsustainable climate change in Sweden. Drawing on Judith Butler's re-conceptualization of Louis Althusser's notion of subjectification through interpellation, I theorize norm critique as an interpellative practice that function as formative of subjects.

My analysis indicates that the discursive practice of norm critique produces an emotional, authentic, and moral subject aligned with neoliberal ideals of individuality and self-governance. Practices such as listening or speaking about emotions, because they are framed in opposition to masculine ideals of stoicism, competitiveness, and autonomy, position the norm critical subject as non-normative and thus emancipated from oppressive norms. The interviewees emphasis on 'being in difficult emotions', rather than seeking political solutions signals a departure from action-oriented problem solving typically associated with masculinity. While this might encourage reflection, I argue that it simultaneously reinforces the idea that political change begins with individual transformation, thereby locating

responsibility for issues such as unsustainable climate change in personal emotional authenticity.

In my study, authenticity appears, not only as a personally valuable ideal, but also as inherently moral. This way, moral authority is granted those who embody authenticity. The production of an authentic and moral masculine subject feeds into a savior narrative in which 'enlightened' men are constructed as uniquely capable of countering destructive 'ego-logical' masculinity in the service of 'eco-logical' ideals. While the practice of norm critique aims to dismantle hierarchical divides, this risk reproducing new hierarchies and forms of male exceptionalism. Moreover, this articulates climate change as a problem to be solved through individual moral choice which de-politicizes the issue of unsustainable climate change.

Paper III

Male Melancholy: problematizations of sustainability through norm critical practice

In Paper III, I examine how social and ecological sustainability is problematized and given meaning through a norm critical feminist perspective on masculinities. The study builds on interviews with key initiators and participants in a Swedish feminist project working norm critically with men in relation to gender equality and climate change. Drawing on a discourse theoretical framework, the study considers norm critique as a discursive practice shaped by neoliberal ideals of individualism, self-reflection and emotional literacy.

I identify three central norm critical strategies: 'Active Hope', 'Establishing a relation with nature', and 'Sharing experience'. These practices encourage men to shift from ego-logical to eco-logical masculinities by engaging emotionally and challenging traditional masculine ideals of stoicism and dominance. This, I argue, can provide individual subjects with hope and a sense of belonging, and potentially foster empathic relations to nature. Yet, as I show, norm critical practice articulates the solution to unsustainability in terms of sameness, safety, and inclusion. This produces a de-politicized representation of gender equality and sustainability, where nature is fetishized and functions as a container for an ideological fantasy of sameness and unity. In line with previous research on men and masculinities, my analysis show that men are simultaneously positioned as both the problem and the solution, where unsustainability becomes tied to the attributes of certain men.

While norm critique is described as rooted in poststructural understandings of power, I argue that it can rather be read as a structural critique of patriarchy and violence against nature. However, while intending to oppose individualistic and masculinist structures, I illustrate how the articulation of norm critique builds on the same assumptions as that which it resists. With its emphasis on individual attitudes and behaviors, it resonates with consensual climate discourse (Swyngedouw, 2011; 2022) and neo-liberal ideals of self-improvement. Thus, I argue, neoliberal rationality is not external to norm critique but immanent in it.

Drawing on Wendy Brown's (1999) notion of *Left Melancholy*, I show how subjects remain affectively attached to a vision of a harmonious and sustainable world. This melancholic attachment preserves the status quo by fetishizing nature and emotions as sites of truth while masking unequal power relations and conflict. Such a 'repression of repression' (Zupančič, 2024) risks sustaining unsustainable structures. Following Mouffe (2000), I argue that the reliance on consensual politics not only blocks change but has contributed to the rise of illiberal populist movements. I conclude that rather than seeking consensus and sameness we should recognize difference and conflict as constitutive of the political.

Paper IV

Norm critique proper? The norm critical turn and the turn away from critique

Paper IV is co-authored with Sara Edenheim[17]. This article offers a critical reading of the concept of *Norm Critical Pedagogy* through narratives of its historical development and theoretical framework, especially in relation to its claimed poststructural influence. In Sweden, norm critique has grown into a well-established tool used within several different disciplines, organizations, and governmental agencies to counteract discrimination and inequality, and has come to be associated with feminist theory and gender studies research. Inspired by Clare Hemmings (2005) analysis of Western feminist storytelling, we investigate the political implications of norm critical stories, including the impulse to defend the concept against presumed misunderstandings.

[17] As the first author, I had the responsibility for deciding the design of the study in regard to choice of method and theory and collecting the empirical material. The analysis was conducted in a dialogical manner where the co-author contributed with comments, discussions and input to the conclusions.

In line with previous research on intersectionality (Hoffart, 2021), our analysis illustrates how the narrative of norm critical pedagogy, through boundary drawing strategies, reproduce essentialist notions of a 'proper' norm critique. We argue that this narrative promotes a discourse of consensus and optimism about the possibilities for social change and as such a turn away from critique towards identity and affirmation. For example, we show how 'poststructural theory', as a nodal point for norm critical pedagogy, function to obscure conflicts and differences within feminist theory and gender studies that risks de-politicizing the issues which norm critique aims to address.

Previous research has problematized how norm critical pedagogy, *despite* its poststructuralist heritage re-produce a certain modernist understanding of the subject as rational and possible to enlighten (Langmann & Månsson, 2016; Hill, 2021). We argue, instead, for the absence of a poststructuralist conception of power, knowledge, and subjectification in the concept's theoretical underpinnings. Norm critique is not *first* poststructuralist, then appropriated or misinterpreted, but rather, we contend, reflects and reproduce the normative assumptions that underlies the injustice it aims to resist.

Conclusions

In this thesis I aim to analyze how, and with what effects, norm critique is articulated as a tool for social justice and change. To answer to this aim, my analysis is guided by three overarching research questions: What meanings are given to norm critique through its articulation within the fields of national gender equality policy, feminist movements, and research practice? What logics and underlying assumptions are immanent in these articulations of norm critique as a concept and practice, and what are the constitutive effects and political implications of such articulations?

In this final and concluding chapter I will return to the overall findings of my three separate case studies to consider them together as a whole and point towards some of their implications in relation to social justice work and gender studies as a field. The separate studies each reflect a specific field in which norm critique is articulated to address social justice issues. When put together and analyzed through the lens of my theoretical framework, these findings also provide insight into the meanings ascribed to norm critique, as a concept and practice, on a more general level.

As the name 'norm critique' itself implies, to be norm critical is to call into question the universalized norms which maintains difference and hierarchization. Interpreted this way, a norm critical practice is always in a position opposite to those in power, perceived as a counter hegemonic resistance against hegemonic norms. However, the central argument of my thesis is that the norm critical project, contrary to its intention, relies on arguments in support of the norms it claims to resist. In this chapter, I want to direct attention to these arguments and show how they are tied up with ideological fantasies that sustain the current organization of society. What I am offering is not a corrective. There is no 'true' or 'correct' version of norm critique to arrive at on the other side of my analysis. Instead, my analytical approach points in the direction of desire and enjoyment, that is, to the unconscious dimensions of norm critique as a discursive practice. In other words, my interpretive focus is put on reading the traces of that which escapes symbolization. As such my analysis contributes with a novel perspective, not only on how but also *why* norm critique is articulated as a response to contemporary societal challenges.

Norm Critical Desire

The function of fantasy is to structure desire. Desire itself does not have a content. Ultimately, what desire seeks is an *impossibility,* that of full recognition from the Other

(Copjec, 2015: 36). However, by tending to fantasy in critical analysis it is possible to access the structure of desire and enjoyment (Glynos, 2011:72). Fantasy allows me to direct attention towards what drives norm critique and highlight the affective dimensions of its articulation as a tool for social change. Considering my combined findings, I will now propose norm critical desire as structured by primarily three different fantasies that are made apparent throughout the studied contexts: the fantasy of Progress, the fantasy of Enlightenment, and the fantasy of Freedom.

The fantasy of progress

As my analysis in paper II and III shows, norm critique is articulated as a means of addressing issues of gender inequality and unsustainable climate change through the construction of a new, emotionally aware, and psychologically healthy masculine identity. For example, by shifting from ego-logical to eco-logical, the norm critical masculine subject is articulated as a potential solution to both social and ecological sustainability. The norm critical practice is oriented toward an imagined future state of harmony in which past and unwanted norms have been dismantled. I suggest that this illustrates how norm critique, as a discursive practice, is tied up with what could be referred to as a *fantasy of progress*. Such a fantasy depends on the idea of linear temporality and is made visible in the interviewee's visionary descriptions of future sustainability. In the future, in 'seven generations from now', a norm critical perspective will inevitably have made us (humans) progress into better versions of ourselves. The understanding of time as linear constructs the present as more enlightened than the past and thus the future becomes a site of assured improvement. As argued by Edenheim (2011: 64-5), this model of time serves to naturalize certain identities and ideologies and to exclude everything not in support of a reproductive future[18]. The idea of linear temporality obscures how time always and necessary is 'out of joint.'[19] [20]

This fantasy of progress also becomes evident in how norm critique is contrasted with earlier pedagogical methods, such as those grounded in the principle of tolerance. As I discuss in paper IV, the kind of narrative found in stories about the development of norm critique, constructs norm critical pedagogy as evolving into a more inclusive approach than previous similar pedagogics. For example, the storyline which describes a shift *from* tolerance *to* norm critique, or descriptions of

[18] Lacanian queer theorist Lee Edelman (2004) refers to this as a politics of 'reproductive futurism'.

[19] In this context, Claudia Lindén's (2012: 10) discussion of feminism's constructions of time is also of interest. Lindén points, among other things, to how the feminine, in narratives of modernity, is coded as the older in a negative sense, as the conservative obstacle to masculine modernity.

[20] See also Edenheim, S. (2010) for a discussion on liberal time in relation to Swedish identity politics.

norm critique as a pedagogy which will assist in 'taking important steps forward', implicates the idea of a linear progression resulting in increased awareness about, and inclusion of, more identity positions.

Following this, and as I argue in Paper IV, the fantasy of progress *structures a desire* for classic liberal values such as enlightenment, consensus, and rationality, as well as for humanist conceptions of humanity as inherently good (see also, Edenheim, 2010/2011). For example, as shown in paper III, irresponsibility in relation to nature is linked to a lack of knowledge about who men truly are - behind or beyond social norms and structures. This furthers the idea that knowledge about, and confession of, their own histories will make them progress into responsible members of society. Furthermore, the norm critical discursive practice articulates norms as something external which the individual can choose to liberate themselves from, on rational grounds or, as I show in paper II and III, based on an eco-logic.

This way, the discursive practice of norm critique makes it possible to link destructive or unwanted behavior to external, structural norms while placing the ability to adapt and change on the individual. This maintains a logic where men are constructed as, at the same time, innocent victims and as responsible for their own personal development and growth which, in turn, is articulated as a pre-requisite for social change. In paper I, for example, the articulation of norm critique constructs nationalist, right-wing extremism as an effect of *some* men's failure to adapt to new ideals. Previous research has shown how this kind of distinction between progressive, gender equal men and traditional others rest on differences in relation to class and race[21] (Törnqvist, 2008: 79-80; Tollin, 2011: 166; Goedecke, 2018: 176 see also, Gottzén & Jonsson, 2012). In line with this, the fantasmatic logic immanent in the articulation of norm critique individualizes responsibility and obscures conflictual interests and power relations underpinning social injustice. Responsibility becomes, in line with a liberal definition, a matter of making the right individual choices, where those who fail to do so are seen as lacking the will to take responsibility (Edenheim, 2011: 50).

Furthermore, I argue that the fantasy of progress reveals a certain optimism regarding the possibilities for change. However, as I discuss in Paper II, this is a 'cruel optimism' which risks producing an affective attachment to injury or negative

[21] Törnqvist (2008) and Tollin (2011) show how a distinction is made between 'good' and 'bad' men, where problematic masculine values are linked to specific groups of men, described as 'the lads' (grabbarna) or 'the old guys' (gubbarna). In her study of male friendship, Goedecke (2018) also illustrates how one's own gender equal position is constructed in relation to what is referred to as 'laddishness', which is associated with more traditional expressions of masculinity, such as watching sports, drinking beer, or struggling to show closeness to male friends.

emotions. As Laurent Berlant (2011) has pointed out, the cruelty of fantasy, is its ability to stand in the way of change in the present. The articulation of norm critique positions the moment of change in an imagined future in which the present obstacles of traditional masculinity have been overcome. Fantasy enables the norm critical subject to blame the past i.e. traditional values while at the same time postpone responsibility to the future. For example, as discussed in paper I, some men's destructive behaviour, such as the expression of a so called 'nostalgic masculinity', is articulated as being a result of the implementation and efficiency of Swedish gender-equality policy. This way, the fantasy of progress aligns with a postfeminist discourse (Gill, 2007; O'Neill, 2015) where feminist political goals such as gender equality are constructed as something which we have already accomplished or inevitably will accomplish in the future.

The fantasy of enlightenment

My analysis also indicates that norm critique rests on a *fantasy of enlightenment*. The fantasy of enlightenment *structures a desire* for true or certain knowledge and can be exemplified by the norm critical practice of self-reflection. As I illustrate in paper IV, the idea that norm critical practice inevitably will lead to a form of crisis when faced with one's own privileged position, implies a view of the subject as coherent and stable. This is a subject which can be 'made aware' and learn how to 'see' things for what they 'truly' are (see also, Langmann & Månsson, 2016). This, I argue, highlights norm critique as reliant on a view of power as oppressive rather than productive and implies that people expressing an unwanted behavior suffer from false consciousness. Such an understanding of power belongs to a structural rather than poststructural theoretical framework. An important conclusion drawn throughout the studied contexts is that norm critical practice does not fully implement the poststructural theoretical premises that the concept claims to draw upon.

Furthermore, as illustrated in Paper II and III, the articulation of men's emotional and caring capabilities as hindered by destructive masculinities norms ('we are victims') implies a certain truth about men's gender identities. A truth which they can be made aware of through introspection and self-reflection. This 'true knowledge' (identity) will then serve to transform men, turning them into better, more caring, and responsible people. In line with neoliberal subject formation, the norm critical subject is thus provided with an inner, stable core which at the same time is understood as endlessly formable and flexible. Elizabeth Weed (2024: 33) argues that under neoliberalism, the *truth about identity* has been replaced by *identity as truth*, no matter how fluid or ambiguous this identity may be. As she claims, "Even

those who acknowledge – or defend – identities as ascribed, grant those identities a legitimacy as strong as any authorized by natural divine law" (Weed, 2024: 25). I argue that the norm critical practice's which I have studied, risks turning knowledge about oneself into a fetish where recognition of one's identity serves as replacement for political action.

The idea that it is possible to reach a true and certain knowledge about oneself is congruent with what Weed refers to as 'a cultural logic of knowing that is fetishistic' (Weed, 2024: 37). Following Weed (2024), the fantasmatic identification with an ecological masculine position can be understood as a fetishistic way to refuse the irreducibility of difference (castration). In other words, the fantasy of enlightenment makes it possible to refuse the unknowable and replace it with certainty. By talking, sharing personal emotions, and experiences the confession of our injuries becomes the truth about our identities. And, since truth is always on the side of the underdog, to inhabit a position as norm critical grants the individual a morally superior position. It offers a solid ground of knowledge from which to oppose power. As has been argued by Wendy Brown (1995), political identities of late modernity are strengthened by injury which in turn works in support of neoliberal naturalization of identity (Weed, 2024: 25).

As argued in Paper III, the problem with gender inequality or unsustainability, which norm critique answers to, is articulated in terms of a lack of knowledge. Previous studies of Swedish national gender equality policy show that the proposed solution to gender equality is often formulated as a matter of increasing knowledge. Gender inequality is assumed to result from a lack of knowledge about gender equality, an assumption that leads to a kind of circular reasoning through which knowledge is positioned as both the problem and the solution (Rönnblom, 2011:43). As my analysis makes clear, the practice of norm critique is mainly centered on turning inwards, to learn how to express emotions, communicate, and share personal experiences. In line with previous research, my results thus indicate that feminist expressions, such as norm critique, is at risk of turning into a knowledge-oriented political project aimed at changing individual attitudes of themselves and others rather than bringing about structural changes (Johansson Wilén, 2019; Lauri, 2021; Mery Karlsson, 2020).

Norm critique makes it possible for the subject to hold on to the fantasy of reaching true knowledge, untouched by power, while at the same time secure a solid ground from which to make judgements without having to argue for *why* such judgements should be considered better, that is, with moralist rather than political arguments. It

is good because it is true. If it is true, it must be good. As I discuss in Paper III, the fetishization of knowledge allows for a simultaneous acknowledgment and denial of ones' own involvement in 'sustaining unsustainability'. The Slovenian psychoanalyst Alenka Zupančič (2024) conceptualizes this in terms of *disavowal*. She argues that today, the declaration of knowledge function as a fetish, in the sense that in order to be able to ignore something, I must first openly acknowledge that I know about it. In relation to norm critique, this risk being translated into: I know very well that I am privileged or that I behave badly towards others and this is also *why* I can go on ignoring it.

The fantasy of freedom

As discussed above, the focus on critical self-reflection inscribed in the norm critical project, as well as the central role of emotions, point towards a belief in the individual's capacity to learn how to become better, more caring individuals. This relies on the idea that the individual can liberate themselves from the strains of unwanted norms through increased self-awareness. As already mentioned, neoliberalism's reflexive governing rests on an idea of the subject as endlessly formable and flexible (see for example, Rose, 1999). In line with this, my analysis suggests that norm critical discourse provides the individual with unrestricted performative agency. As argued in Paper III, the performance of an alternative, eco-logical masculine identity is presented as a strategy for changing existing norms of masculinity. The participants are encouraged to perform the future they want to inhabit as this is believed to 'create the society we want instead'. Following Butler (1993: 59), the concept of performativity is, however, not to be mistaken for freedom of choice or theatrical performance. It is thus not entirely up to the individual to simply choose to express or perform an eco-logical masculine identity.

In other words, my analysis shows that norm critical discursive practice articulates personal experience in terms of true knowledge, and this knowledge will serve to liberate the subject from undesirable norms. This, I argue, relies on a perception of ourselves as separate from the power that produces us and illustrates how norm critique ties into the 'neoliberal promise of freedom as enjoyment' (Swyngedouw, 2022a: 55). As argued by Swyngedouw, the subject is driven by its desire to satisfy enjoyment. Neoliberal discourse frames freedom itself as a form of enjoyment, it articulates freedom as an *individual* lack, and in doing so, offers the subject a source of satisfaction. Yet this freedom always remains unattainable, which compels subjects to continually pursue freedom. In this way, neoliberalism sustains itself by continually promising freedom.

Following discourse theory, the ideological is conceptualized as the unwillingness to recognize the impossibility of closure (Laclau, 1990). The norm critical practice analyzed in Papers II and III promises to fulfill the participants sense of lack, that is, their sense of being constrained by external norms and thus not free to inhabit or express themselves fully. In other words, the participants sense of alienation is identified as a problem to be overcome in order to progress into a better and healthier version of oneself. This new and enlightened individual is imagined to reduce current hierarchization and differentiation between humans and nature, men and women. However, as I illustrate in Paper II, the sense of lack that the norm critical practice seeks to fulfill is tied to the process of subjectification and is therefore not something one can get rid of or escape through sheer willpower. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the subject is constituted by lack, and it is precisely this lack of fulfilled desire that provides the subject with agency (Butler, 1997).

According to Lacanian theorist Joan Copjec, to read desire is 'to read what is inarticulable in cultural statements' (2015: 14). My reading of norm critical desire suggests that what is inarticulable in norm critical discourse is difference. Taken together, the fantasies in support of a norm critical discursive practice can be said *to structure a desire for sameness*. In other words, within the framework of norm critique, constitutive lack is foreclosed[22]. In the following section I will turn to discuss some possible effects of this foreclosure.

Norm Critical Strangers

As I argue throughout my case studies, a central aspect of the fantasmatic logic underpinning norm critical discourse is that one's own lack of jouissance (enjoyment) is interpreted as caused by the other. In Paper I, for example, I discuss how SALAR's norm critical perspective on masculinity constructs men as victims of both traditional masculinity and gender equality. I show how both women as well as men with attitudes and opinions that are in line with 'traditional' masculinity are constructed as hindering men from achieving their full potential. In a similar manner, ego-logical men are constructed as the ones who stand in the way of change. In Paper II, this is for example made visible through articulations of certain men in terms of 'fossil men', 'dinosaurs', 'unaware', 'more violent', 'traditional' and

[22]Zupančič refers to this as 'the repression of the repression' (2024: 126). A politics structured around the fantasy of unlimited freedom leads to a situation where everything stays the same. If the limit to our consciousness (i.e. the unconscious) is not acknowledged, then it is possible to know *everything*. Society is thus turned into a closed totality of structures and relations which are possible to map, and which are immanent to itself. As argued by Weed (2024: 123), the defining feature of capitalist discourse is the foreclosure of castration.

destructive'. The same mechanism is visible in my analysis in Paper IV which shows how the idea of a 'proper' or 'original' norm critique is constructed in relation to other, mainstreamed versions, thus reproducing a binary logic between right and wrong attitudes.

The unwillingness of replacing sameness with difference, consensus with conflict or truth with politics results in a moralist response grounded in *ressentiment* (see for example, Brown, 1995: 43). The Nietzschean notion of ressentiment gives rise to a morally superior position by making reason dress in powerlessness or dispossession. Ressentiment generates a desire for truth, a knowledge untouched by power which can be used to oppose power (Brown, 1995: 44). As in the case with the men's initiative working norm critically with masculinity, the participants emotions and experiences serve as such a truth. Following from a ressentiment logic is the figure of the other as responsible for my suffering. Drawing on Browns reasoning in *States of Injury* (1995), Elisabeth Weed argues that this way of making sense of ourselves as victims is produced and promoted by the state since it directs our attention away from structural injustices towards the relational other: "Why look to *structural* injustices when the *relational* other is so close at hand, the other that is both essential for my identity (I am not that other) and the source of injustice" (Weed, 2024: 26).

Similarly, Alenka Zupančič (2018: 4) notes that an emphasis on affectivity and emotions obscures how an issue, like injustice, demands radical structural change. It redirects attention away from confronting the underlying structural causes and work to sustain certain logics and mechanisms. Under neoliberalism, our traumatic experiences are reconfigured as potential social capital whereby our emotional responses are commodified (truth/knowledge commodified). As a result, political struggle and protest risk being reduced to the mere expression of emotions or declarations of suffering. As argued by Weed: "What matters in neoliberal discourse is not the ground, the truth or even the verisimilitude of a statement, but its affective transactional value" (Weed, 2024: 25). This is not to suggest that emotions or personal experiences should not be expressed or talked about. The point is rather that they should not serve as replacement for political argumentation. This because, unlike arguments, they cannot be countered (see also, Edenheim, 2018: 3).

The starting point of any argument should be something that can be debated for or against. This is not possible when the work for change is anchored in individual feelings, identities, or experiences, as it shifts the discussion to the register of morality rather than the political (Mouffe, 2000). Following Weed, I argue that the knowledge that authorizes norm critique is 'unapologetically subjective' (Weed,

2024: 33). In norm critical discourse, the language of difference and multiplicity is clearly present, for example through the implementation of intersectional perspectives (Paper IV). However, as my analysis shows, the articulation of norm critique simultaneously builds on a discourse of certainty where subjective experience serves as truth. The conceptualization of difference in norm critical discourse thus resonates with Huffer's (2013: 14-15) claim that difference has shifted from being understood as an irreducibility to being articulated in sociological terms at the level of identity.

As already discussed, the norm critical focus on creating safe spaces by way of emotions and personal experience points to the influence of neoliberal logics embedded within norm critical discourse. As my analysis indicates, the fantasmatic logics underpinning norm critical discourse does not account for unequal power relations and conflictual interests but rather structures a desire for consensus. The term *post-political* (Žižek, 2001; Mouffe, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2011/2022a) suggests a displacement of the political in terms of conflicts, disagreements, and oppositions, replaced with moralist solutions based on the idea that a correct way of dealing with political problems can be rationally established. According to Mouffe, this moralization of society is the result of neoliberal hegemony where politics become a matter of creating consensus (Mouffe, 2000: 85-6; Mouffe, 2008).

The political consequences of ignoring the antagonistic premises of the political is a risk of reinforcing these dimensions. Difference and conflict are necessary for the political. The problem, as Mouffe sees it, is that this difference is structured around the moral categories of 'good' and 'evil' rather than political distinctions (Mouffe, 2008: 76). The consequence of ignoring constitutive difference is thus that difference is turned into splits, to binary friend/enemy oppositions. Following Mouffe, the contemporary uprise of conservative, populist movements is strongly correlated to the consensus model underpinning liberal democracy and neoliberal politics. When the irreducibility of conflict is not acknowledged and no alternatives between political ideologies are offered, excluded or disaffected groups seek other ways to express discontent. Moralism thus leads to a situation where authoritarian and right-wing extremism is turned into the only option for those with 'wrong' desire.

The moral inversion between presumably 'good' and 'evil' values is especially interesting when considering the relationship between the good, norm conscious citizen and those who are assumed to be the evil i.e. traditional or climate-denying forces that stubbornly uphold outdated norms. Following discourse theory and the logics of equivalence and difference, identity is constituted *in relation* to that which

escapes representation - "I" am not that other. From this follows that what "I am" not, is also "of me". "I am" an emotional caring feminist in relation to that which such position rejects or forbids, for example a climate denying, Trump voting misogynist. In Paper IV, I highlight how Bauman's notion of the 'Stranger' allows us to maintain the belief that we bear no responsibility for the injustices or harms associated with these figures. As I argue, it is important to draw attention to how the stranger is inevitably also *of me*. We are alienated even from ourselves. As argued by the philosopher Todd McGowan, we cannot, and should not, try to escape our sense of alienation. Instead, 'alienation *is* emancipation' (McGowan, 2024: 9). Alienation is what makes change possible.

Furthermore, when norm critique is conceived as unproblematically equivalent to feminist theory or gender studies, and promoted and defended by way of moralist arguments, a feminist self-critique is made increasingly difficult. As with the value given to other values, such as for example inclusion, human rights, sustainability, or gender equality, norm critique is not something one can unproblematically question without risk being called off as irrational or evil. The norm critical position is a position which grants the subject the satisfaction of feeling morally superior. However, this is an unproductive position since it preserves status quo. As Zupančič notes, our investment often lies less in changing existing conditions than in reaffirming, again and again, our alignment with the 'good' side (Zupančič, 2018).

In line with previous research on norm critique (for example, Qvarsebo, 2019), a central finding that runs through all of my studied cases is how norm critique produces a specific kind of morally enlightened subjects. As I argue in Papers II and III, norm critique produces a masculine subject characterized by emotionality and vulnerability. However, it also fosters a certain exceptionalism where the norm critical masculine subject is constructed as someone who is exceptionally good at overcoming their own exceptionalism (see also, Goedecke, 2018). Like Hegels 'beautiful soul' this is a subject that is quick to identify evil and immorality in the world around them but fail to consider how they participate in the preservation of the same order of things (Zupančič, 2018). There is thus a risk that the norm critical practice works to obscure how we are all part of the world that we want to change.

Critique as a political ontology for gender studies?

To conclude, I want to return to the question posed by Elisabeth Weed: how to read the impossible of our times? Is it possible to transcend the fundamental fantasies that sustain and legitimize the current order? Or can we, for lack of a better term,

find ways of queering them? Ways of, as Wiegman and Wilson (2015) suggests, moving across rather than against them? Following the psychoanalytical theorist Luce Irigaray (1985) the dominant way of structuring gender relations (man: woman) leaves the woman nonexistent. From this perspective, the feminine can never be spoken or figured within the patriarchal system other than as the other. She is his envelope, his place and mirror, but not the other way around (Irigaray, 1993). According to Irigaray, Western knowledge production renders ethical relations impossible since the woman only exists as 'the other', as the opposite to the Same. In other words, the feminine serves as the constitutive outside to the masculine universal.

I read Irigaray's *Ethics of Sexual Difference* as an insistence to think about 'difference' in other terms than as oppositions, and I understand this position as linked to the argument Mouffe (2008) makes in relation to the political. For Mouffe, the project of radical democracy includes crafting ways to channel constitutive antagonism through agonistic encounters. Or, as the environmental philosopher Frederic Neyrat puts it: "it's not separation that we must fight, but splits" (Neyrat in Johnson, 2014). A relation is not possible without separation. Without separation, what we have instead is a fusion, an absolute immanence, where everything stays inside, a move which makes sure that the hu/man norm is kept intact. From this perspective, we thus need to acknowledge difference but think about it differently. The challenge, however, is how such theoretical re-conceptualizations of difference relate to the everyday realities of practitioners, whose work is shaped by specific institutional and political conditions. An insistence on 'thinking difference differently' can risk appearing distant from these realities. Yet, I argue, this issue cannot be addressed by reproducing a binary distinction between theory and practice. Theory itself is a form of practice. Ideas are material and have concrete effects. Change does not start with you (individual intentions), change starts with giving space for the political.

My analysis in paper IV shows that norm critique, while acknowledging the contingency of meaning, fails to recognize the limits of knowledge and freedom. As explained, what is foreclosed in norm critique is the effects of the unconscious. Norm critical discursive practice builds on the assumption that exclusions and hierarchies are the result of non-knowledge, that people can somehow be made aware of what they are hiding from themselves. This, I suggest, is also *why* the idea of continuous and never-ending self-reflection or so called 'process-oriented learning' is seen as desirable and sensible. The problem with this, as I see it, is not that people reflect on how they treat each other, but rather that this idea furthers an assumption that even the content of our unconscious, our constitutive lack and

desire is something we simply are *unaware* of, and consequently something we can be made aware of, if we just try hard enough. Thus, to 'be norm critical' makes it possible to inhabit a position as someone who has tried harder to be aware, who is more enlightened and on the 'good' side.

More importantly, the belief that we can somehow escape our sense of alienation fosters oppression. As argued by McGowan, "Oppression comes into being through the attempt to overcome alienation. People invest themselves in commodities or devote themselves to communities to find ways to escape their alienated subjectivity" (McGowan, 2024: 148). As discussed throughout the individual papers, norm critical discursive practice operates within an ideological fantasy to overcome alienation. As such, it does not serve as the radical undermining of knowledge and power that it sets out to be but risk instead to sustain the exclusionary practices it aims to reduce.

Impossibility, understood as the unconscious, is what makes change possible. However, the positive moment in critique which norm critique aspires to, effectively closes this possibility. As my analysis illustrate, a structural tradition, rather than a poststructural one, is clearly better suited for such a task[23]. One of my main contributions to emerging research on norm critique is a consideration of how certain theoretical premises had to be left out of its articulation for it to be so broadly and publicly accepted (Paper IV). Following McGowan (2024: 30), the way we understand subjectivity has implications for the constitution of our political possibilities. Hence, the questions that my thesis addresses are not merely theoretical. My study contributes with a perspective on the meanings attributed to norm critique when it is implemented in relation to gender equality policy and picked up as a tool for feminist political change by civil society actors. It also provides insights into potential effects of the discursive articulation of norm critique as a concept and practice, with relevance for gender equality and social justice work more broadly, as well as for gender studies as a field.

Within public administration and the educational sector, norm critique can be interpreted as offering an opportunity to introduce a broader and more inclusive

[23] In this respect, I agree with Nørgaard Iversen's (2024) discussion on norm critique's affirmative aspirations. As he argues, Hegelian dialectics allows for both a destabilizing and consolidating moment, it makes possible a centre from which to make valuations. However, arriving at such a centre transforms the unknowable impossible into a knowable possible, whereby contingency is abandoned in favour of closure. Even if such closure is not seen as total or final, but rather, in its openness offers unrestricted possibilities, it is still articulated as a set position, a position one can arrive at, and which is split from other positions. This strengthens conflict between positions rather than highlight the conflict immanent in the position i.e. alienation as immanent in subjectivity.

perspective than traditional gender equality frameworks. Norm critique makes it possible to implement an intersectional perspective in practice and promises to make the complex more manageable. By positioning itself as a power-critical perspective, it also provides an answer to the critique coming from feminist scholarship regarding the relation between gender mainstreaming and neo-liberalization (see for example, Rönnblom, 2008/2011).

Moreover, norm critique can be seen as an attempt at establishing a nodal point for feminist activism and research which, similarly to intersectionality, promises to bridge differences and conflicts within feminism (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013). Importantly, and somewhat paradoxical, norm critique also allows for the inclusion of men. By claiming that we are all equally affected by patriarchal structures, the call for men to take responsibility for gender equality is given a more appealing framing. This way, the struggle for gender equality can be understood as a shared project, something that everyone can and should be included in (Olsson & Lauri, 2020). Norm critique thus becomes a 'one-size-fits-all' solution (Axelsson, 2023), offering something for everyone. It makes it possible to stay one step ahead of *all* potential criticism or arguments about feminism having gone too far, making it an attractive concept in contemporary policy and educational discourse. Norm critique constructs a good and inclusive feminist community. However, this risk to maintain a polarized political climate in which community and solidarity is built on identity and where the 'good' feminists are put against the evil or uninformed others (see also, Edenheim, 2018).

The norm critical discursive practice that I have analyzed explicitly aims to overcome alienation by dismantling norms and advocate difference at the level of identity. My psychoanalytic reading of norm critique suggests, however, that the unconscious desire of norm critique satisfies itself in the very failure of this project. According to McGowan, "unconscious desire satisfy itself by opposing the conscious wish" (2024, 21). Thus, even when norm critique consciously pursues difference, its unconscious desire seeks sameness. Needless to say, the logic of alienation cuts both ways. A conscious affirmation of alienation, through psychoanalytic theory for example, will still be haunted by fantasies to overcome it. No one can escape unconscious investments in reconciliation, mastery, or wholeness. The gap between conscious wish and unconscious desire, between being and knowing, persists on all sides. Highlighting this paradox is the strength of critique. It shows that alienation cannot be consciously avoided or wished away but structures subjectivity as such. This gap, which constitutes the subject, is the gap where freedom and equality linger. *The feminine is always elsewhere.*

I thus want to end by making a case for a return to critique. One that, if to serve as a theory and/or method for gender studies, stay with the trouble of *not* knowing since this is what keeps open the possibility for alternatives. I believe that a politics without conviction (Brown, 2001), a radical democratic politics (Mouffe, 2008) or, in other words, *critique as the political* poses a challenge to today's consensus-driven ideals, where change is blocked. I find the promise of the impossible to be comforting, the knowledge that we can never know for sure. Herein lies the potential of critical analysis, in its refusal to definitively establish anything. For it is precisely the contingency and limit of meaning that contains the hope of change. That is, the impossible makes change possible (Weed, 2024; Laclau, 1990; Laclau, 2015). The smallest of events can open for a loophole, or in the words of Mark Fisher: "From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again" (Fisher, 2014: 81).

I hope that my thesis will contribute to ethical and political discussions relevant to the accountability of gender studies and to the development of feminist theory in relation to the political.

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