The #MeToo Movement: Men and Masculinity in Swedish News Media

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Abstract
This article analyses the coverage of the #MeToo movement in Swedish news media. The aim of the study was to explore how men and masculinity were represented. The results showed that masculinity was associated with violence, harassment, and a culture of abuse, as well as with progressive ideas of a “new man” that is both strong and gentle at the same time. The article discusses how the represented masculinities might be problematic in relation to the #MeToo movement’s ambition to reform a sexist society because of the stereotypical and gender-dualistic tendencies that permeate the material and the tendencies to individualize the represented assaults and perpetrators.

Keywords
#MeToo, masculinities, politics, representations

In 2006, women’s activist Tarana Burke launched a campaign on Myspace for young Black women living in vulnerable areas. Burke’s campaign became a model for the #MeToo movement that emerged as a viral phenomenon when, in October 2017, American actor Alyssa Milan encouraged women who were sexually abused to respond to her tweet with the words “me too.” Milan’s initiative received a lot of attention and spread quickly and globally via social media. In Sweden, several #MeToo calls took place and a large number of women testified about the abuses to which they had been subjected. Many calls were launched with their own hashtags, such as #givaktochbitihop (#attentionandsuckitup) comprising women in the military (Alvinius & Holmberg, 2019) and #slutavverkat (#clear-felled) comprising women in

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the Swedish forestry industry (Johansson et al., 2018) (see Pollack, 2019 for an overview of #MeToo calls and hashtags in Sweden). “We’ve had enough of sexual violence” was the headline when the testimony from the Swedish film, theater, and television industry was published with the hashtag #tystnadtagning (#silencerecording) (Svenska Dagbladet, November 10, 2017). In an article about the testimony from Swedish teachers with the hashtag #ickegodkänd (#notapproved), it is highlighted that working in a female-dominated profession is no protection against abuse: “teachers are exposed by colleagues as well as by managers, guardians and students” (Dagens Nyheter, November 29, 2017).

The interest in the #MeToo movement has been considerable. A search for “#MeToo” on Google Scholar on February 20, 2019 resulted in 39,600 hits. On December 18, the same year, the numbers had gone up to 51,200. While some hits only mention #MeToo in passing as a sign of a changing social context (e.g., Frey & Janssen, 2018; Meyer et al., 2018; Starck & Luyt, 2019; Veissière, 2018), others focus on the #MeToo campaign in its own right (e.g., Hansson et al., 2019). A majority of these take as their point of departure that #MeToo implied a challenge to structures of male dominance, recognizing the effects that the movement had on notions of gender and power. The visualization of women’s widespread experiences of sexism, harassment, and abuse meant an “empowerment through empathy,” as discussed by Rodinocolocino (2018). Some studies also express hopes for the movement’s ability to have important effects, such as impacting on the work for gender equality on the labor market (Ely & Kimmel, 2018; Tippett, 2018), or leading to the recognition of sexual harassment as an important health issue (O’Neil et al., 2018).

The movement generated massive coverage in and by the media. With its public appeal, the media contributed to the establishment of certain ways of relating to the movement while minimizing others (cf. Mylonas, 2015). The media coverage also contributed to the visibility and the expansion of #MeToo beyond social media. Being considered to be an important producer and disseminator of meaning (Hall, 1997), the media representations of #MeToo however show that contrary to what is considered to be the movement’s intent—highlighting sexual assault as a structural problem—the media often focused on individuals. A comparative analysis of the media coverage of #MeToo in Denmark and Sweden concluded that in both countries sexual assault was predominantly portrayed as a personal rather than a societal problem (Askanius & Møller Hartley, 2019). It also seemed that the media primarily represented #MeToo as a markedly White phenomenon (Onwuachi-Willig, 2018; Tambe, 2018), and also that they focused more on the campaign as such than on the possible solutions to the problems that the movement exposed. A study of UK newspaper coverage of the #MeToo movement showed that the fail to discuss effects and solutions may in fact have defused the movement’s potential as a mobilizing social force (De Benedictis et al., 2019). Studying the specific realm of political cartoons, Hersey and Vidrine (2019) focused on gender, and discussed how the #MeToo movement and its main subject positions were represented, concluding that politicians and moguls were portrayed in a negative way while women were seen as contenders, worthy of being listened to and defended from future violence.
Although there is thus a growing body of literature on media representations of the #MeToo movement, less is known about how media representations themselves contributed to the specific reproduction and challenging of notions of gender. As masculinity was constructed as one of the main problems of the criticized situation, there is reason to focus on how the news media coverage tackled and itself contributed to the establishment—or challenging—of forms of masculinity. In this article, we describe the central discourses in Swedish newspaper representations of the #MeToo movement and the way masculinities were constructed within these discourses. Special interest is directed toward the ways in which notions of masculinity were constructed as a problem and toward the suggested solutions to this problem. We view masculinity as constructed discursively, and define discourse as changeable ensembles of ideas, notions, and concepts that regulate the meanings attributed to, and constituting different societal phenomena (e.g., Hajer & Versteeg, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Thus, masculinities are understood as systems of meaning that change over time and that are also dependent on context, the news media being one.

The concept of representation is used to point at this process. Importantly, the studied texts are not analyzed for whether they are “true” or not, but for the way they are representing—that is, are shaped by, and shape— notions of masculinity (cf. Hall, 1997). This take on masculinity as constructed performatively (Butler, 1993; Driesslein, 2017) means that the studied texts are regarded to be more than merely mirroring a preexisting reality; they are part of, and contribute to constructions of reality and the available notions of what it means to be masculine.

Studies of representations of masculinity in the media often highlight constructions that center masculinity around notions of violence, control, and aggression, for instance, in studies of presidential campaigns (Katz, 2009) and advertisements (Messner & Montez de Oca, 2005; White et al., 2012), and how the White body constitutes the norm for masculinity in a Western media context (Park, 2015). But there are also studies of how the media represent phenomena that challenge dominant notions of masculinity, such as eating disorders in males (MacLean et al., 2015) or caregiving (Hunter & Riggs, 2019).

Researchers have documented how media representations sometimes reflect a “crisis of masculinity,” a period of significant sociocultural change (Nijjar, 2019). In line with this strand of research, we argue that media representations of the #MeToo movement offer important insights into how masculinity is understood at a time in history when masculinities are under pressure. What makes Sweden an interesting case is that it is regarded as the most gender-equal country in the European Union (Gender Equality Index, 2017), an image that is reflected in descriptions of the Swedish #MeToo movement: “the country was [. . .] in something of a shock; is this really going on in gender-equal Sweden, in such huge numbers?” (MÅN, 2018).

Studies of masculinities have sometimes been criticized for being too focused on male-dominated contexts, thereby reproducing traditional ideas of the relationship between men and masculinities (Edenheim, 2009). It has also been said (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hirose & Pih, 2010; B. Nilsson, 2011) that some studies appear
to treat masculinities as more or less fixed characters or types or that they do not contribute to gender equality.

The present study’s focus is on a context—Swedish news media representations of the #MeToo movement—that is not male-dominated, but in which masculinity is a main focus of discussion. In that sense, the object of study constitutes a politicizing context in which masculinities are partly deconstructed and potentially challenged.

**Method**

This study is based on a qualitative content analysis of how the #MeToo movement was represented in Swedish news media. The point of departure has been the digital media archive retriever.se, which comprises material from different media sources. To get an idea of how #MeToo was more generally represented in Swedish newspapers, we made a search for “#MeToo AND män” (“#MeToo AND men”) in 50 established Swedish newspapers with a circulation of at least 10,000, and we received 4,182 hits between October 15, 2017 and December 31, 2018. Among these we randomly selected 5%, that is, 209 texts, for a closer study. The purpose was to understand how the movement was described in relation to men in general and what words that were used to signify masculinity. In the next step, we concentrated on how Swedish newspapers represented masculinity more specifically in relation to #MeToo, and therefore searched for “#MeToo AND manlighet” (“#MeToo AND manhood”), “#MeToo AND mansroll” (“#MeToo AND male role”), and “#MeToo AND maskulinitet (“#MeToo AND masculinity”). The number of hits was 214 (119 + 44 + 51), between October 15, 2017 and December 31, 2018. #MeToo is not always the main theme in the selected texts but, in one way or another, the movement is discussed or commented on in relation to manhood, male role or masculinity. The total number of analyzed texts was 423 (209 + 214).

All texts were subjected to a qualitative content analysis with the purpose of identifying key ideas and meanings embedded in the material. This analytical strategy is based on an interpretative reading of the data (Giesler & Beadlescomb, 2015), meaning that the texts were repeatedly read and key concepts and ideas were inductively and reflexively worked out (cf. Altheide, 1987; G. Nilsson, 2018), and organized into main themes based on the focus of the texts (cf. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). These themes were then analyzed for how they played an important part in discourses that regulated how to think about #MeToo and masculinity, and that also appointed positions for men. In this pursuit, a central methodological concept was articulation, which points at the specific ways in which new meaning is constructed by the specific linking together of different signs or phenomena (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The idea is that the media texts’ specific combination of signs conditions the possibilities to understand and think about #MeToo as a phenomenon, and establishes certain ways of relating to the movement. For example, when a text was primarily structured by what we called a discourse of testimonies and accusations, men and masculinity were typically articulated with “abusiveness” and “harassment,” and #MeToo emerged as reasonable and just. When a text was instead primarily structured by what we called a discourse of
criticism, men and masculinity were more likely to be articulated with positions of victimhood, such as “unjustly accused” or “victims of witch hunting,” and #MeToo emerged as possibly unfair to men. One effect of the different articulations is that masculinity is made significant in different ways depending on the discursive context that the respective texts constitute. This line of thinking is based on the assumption that different discourses struggle to define and organize social space, and that they interpellate subjects into different, possibly conflicting positions.

The concrete analysis is focused on the articulations made in the material. How and in relation to what is masculinity constituted? Regardless of the aims of, and points made in the studied news media texts, they are studied for the way that they articulate and (re)produce notions of masculinity. All quotations from the material are translated from Swedish to English by the authors. Below, we first describe the discourses identified in the studied representations of #MeToo. We then move on to discuss the discourses in relation to the production of masculinity.

Four Structuring Discourses

Four discourses permeated the studied representations: a discourse of testimonies and accusations, a discourse of awakening and confession, a discourse of problematization and change, and a discourse of criticism. Importantly, the news media texts were seldom characterized exclusively by only one of these discourses, although in most cases one or a few were more dominant than others. In this section we use the expressions used by the newspapers themselves: male role, manhood, and on occasion, masculinity.

Discourse of Testimonies and Accusations

A recurring theme in the material, especially at the beginning of the investigated period, is women’s global testimonies about the abuse and harassment to which they have been subjected. Headlines such as “The rage echoes around the world—enough now!” (Aftonbladet, November 3, 2017) represent #MeToo as a global mass movement. Women are said to have had enough and will no longer keep quiet. Metaphors such as “explosion” and “fight” help represent the #MeToo movement as both sudden and powerful, but also suggest #MeToo to be a dichotomous construct:

As an exploding fist fight, my social media is filled with #MeToo and women’s story of the sexual harassment they have been exposed to. They describe rapes, a pat on the butt, dick pics that are received without having asked for them. (Östgöta correspondenten, October 25, 2017)

There are a large number of individual testimonies of abuse. One journalist described how she was subjected to violations when a colleague knocked on her hotel room door and screamed: “Let me in, I have to fuck you” (Aftonbladet, November 30, 2017). Apart from describing their own experiences, women feelings of shock are often
described, when—as a consequence of #MeToo—they heard about the general extent of the abuse.

In parallel with, and as a consequence of the individual testimonies of sexual abuse, men are accused of being sexist and misogynistic. The latter is reflected in articles that highlight specific, named men who are accused of having committed sexual abuse. A number of well-known media personalities and cultural profiles frequently appear in the material and it is said that they have repeatedly offended, harassed, and raped women, and for having used sexist and homophobic language. In the news media, these men appear as symbols of “bad men” and unwanted masculinity. However, the represented accusations are also directed toward men in general, and claims that #MeToo is about a few “bad seeds” that are met with counterclaims according to which the problem is a much more widespread patriarchal culture. Critique is also directed toward men who have indirectly contributed to abuse by being passive, by not acting. They are described as opportunists and they are often regarded as being as guilty as anyone else.

The discourse of testimonies and accusations creates a relatively uniform picture emphasizing differences between men and women. Although it is sometimes acknowledged that not all men are guilty of abuse, the overall structuring of gender relations that the discourse offers positions men as perpetrators, and harassment, assault, and abuse are represented as normalized aspects of contemporary manhood. Men appear to lack empathy and respect for others and to act solely for their own benefit. Women, on the contrary, are represented as “ideal victims” (Christie, 1986): innocent, exposed, and humiliated. Against their will, they have been subjected to something beyond their control, and they have not dared to talk about their experiences until #MeToo made this possible.

**Discourse of Awakening and Confession**

Just six months ago, he would hardly have attended such a meeting. For him, like for so many others, the MeToo movement has meant a tsunami of new insights and visions. *(Göteborgs-Posten, December 31, 2017)*

This quote describes a man who attended #killmiddag (#guytalk), an event at which men meet and learn to talk to each other about masculinity and other things that they are otherwise supposed to be unable to talk about. The quotation illustrates a notion which, alongside all testimonies and accusations, recurs in the material and which can be described in terms of an awakening: Because of #MeToo, men have become aware of their own sexist behavior and of being part of a problem. They have realized that they have benefited from existing structures, yielded to peer pressure and the social rewards that have nurtured their own behavior. Thus, men appear to have become more conscious and clear-sighted because of #MeToo, which means that they can no longer accept their own or others’ sexist behavior. Even though men constitute the central subjects of this discourse, “awakening” is also an aspect of the representations of women. Because of #MeToo, they are described to have finally realized that men’s actions were not acceptable and that they are now getting some form of redress.
As part of the above, what we have called the discourse of awakening and confession encourages men to confess their new insights, and confessions constitute central signs of men’s awakening processes. In retrospect, the autumn 2017 was described as the “time of confessions” (Smålandsposten, December 20, 2018). Men confess publicly that they have previously behaved in a sexist manner and now want to apologize. According to texts that are structured by this discourse, men accept their responsibility; they acknowledge that they have acted wrongly and that they are solely responsible. Some writers take responsibility not only for their own actions, but for men’s actions in general: “We men have caused a lot of misery. We are the ones who have started all wars. We are the major environmental criminals. We are the ones who abuse and kill, behave inappropriately, harass and rape (Dagen, October 20, 2017).

Based on the above, the discourse of awakening and confession represents #MeToo as a kind of “fateful moment” (Giddens, 1991): it describes the events of #MeToo as a turning point in life that makes people (primarily men) reflect on their experiences or future life strategies. Fateful moments can be stressful and full of tension for the individual, but can also be a starting point for a process of change. According to texts that were primarily structured by the discourse of awakening and confession, men have increased their awareness of their own actions, how their actions influence others and the importance of changing inappropriate behavior, and women are described to have become more aware of where to put the blame for their experiences of harassment and abuse.

**Discourse of Problematization and Change**

Some newspaper representations of #MeToo are focused on the predicaments of contemporary manhood and the contemporary male role, and, based on their interpretations of how to understand the problem, tries to find ways to change the male role and counteract a sexist culture. We have called this way of representing #MeToo a discourse of problematization and change. The majority of texts that were written from within this discourse articulates manhood with abuse, violence, and derogatory language, and, as expressed in a chronicle, with the “myth of real men who never show their feelings and take what they want without asking” (Värmlands Folkblad, November 11, 2017). The behaviors associated with this male role are also represented as quite different from the conducts of women:

> It has never been the case that a group of women has started caressing themselves between their legs when a male colleague walked pass them to get coffee. (Aftonbladet, December 1, 2017)

But in representing contemporary manhood as a temporal construct—being *outdated* and *old fashioned*—they however also represent manhood as contingent and an effect of culture. It is often pointed out that men and boys are *forced* into a role that prevents them from being themselves:
A man has always been considered really masculine if he proves to be strong, has big muscles and shows determination. Already at an early age, children have men who are strong and brave as role models. The same role models appear in advertising, film and television. (Dagens Nyheter, October 25, 2017)

By primarily representing masculinity as a cultural construct, the discourse of problematization and change also opens for an understanding of #MeToo as the starting point of a new era, where change and transformation appear to be both necessary and inevitable. The overall ambition of all the proposed measures is to achieve a new norm for the modern man. Most representations suggest a new norm according to which men can prove themselves “strong while at the same time being soft and empathetic” (Dagens Nyheter, October 25, 2017). This new man treats women equally, believes in the reciprocity of love, is empathic and shares the responsibility for children, and rests “on the foundation of humanity and solidarity” (Jönköpings-Posten, January 26, 2018).

Proposals for how to accomplish change comprise suggestions to allocate more resources to the police, encourage women to report abuse directly to the police, reform the sex crime legislation, and improved education in both primary school and teacher training. Other advocated measures focus on men’s own responsibility for a renewal of the male role. While some of the texts emphasize an individual responsibility, others highlight the importance of men “joining forces, taking collective responsibility for evening out the power structure of gender and for creating a more distinct male role” (Smålandsposten, December 20, 2018), for example, by joining conversation groups and study circles to collectively reflect on their behaviors.

There are, however, also examples in the material that point in another direction. They represent the ambition of solving a problematic masculinity by creating more secure, or “manly” men. One example is a report on the “Nordic men’s gathering,” in autumn 2017, in which 150 men explored brotherhood and learned to acknowledge and embrace the sociobiological differences between men and women (Dagens Nyheter, December 16, 2017). In a published interview with one of the men behind the gathering, he argues that being male is not just a question of the biological body, but is something that should be allowed to define men’s way of being: “a complete man is a man who has his dick between his legs and the dick in his head” (Dagens Nyheter, January 12, 2018). In a letter to editor with the heading “Real men respect women,” it is said that:

We need to find a new and more positive male role. But without denying our manliness and become gender neutral “they” as some gender fundamentalists would have it. Neither are we to become like women but make the most of the fact that we are actually different, not only between the legs but also between the ears. (Smålands-Tidningen, October 26, 2017)

Thus, the parts of the news media representations that were primarily structured by a discourse of problematization and change are centered around an understanding of
contemporary manhood as being problematic but also possible to change. As a consequence, they call for a new male role. Texts that see present male roles as sexist and outdated picture alternatives to be more gender equal, while texts that see contemporary male roles as too vague and possibly feminized by contemporary norms of gender equality picture a more distinct and confident manhood. However, it is not always obvious how the new male roles should be accomplished or what a new male role would mean in practice.

Discourse of Criticism

A majority of the studied texts represent #MeToo as a positive force in the struggle against inequality and patriarchal relations. But there are also critical voices. We refer to this tendency to scrutinize #MeToo critically as a discourse of criticism. For example, it is sometimes argued that too much attention is given to celebrities as victims and that the many anonymous victims were ignored. Whether it is right or wrong to publish the names of suspected perpetrators is another recurring theme:

One year after #MeToo, we have noted a profound transformation. The general view is that #MeToo is a wonderful movement, but that some moralism and the publication of accused men’s names went too far. (*Aftonbladet*, October 11, 2018)

This type of criticism primarily appear toward the end of the period investigated (cf. Pollack, 2019), but already by the beginning of #MeToo, some texts had warned about the risk of exaggeration, and certain proposals—such as setting up a truth commission for sexual abuse—were considered to be threats against a society founded on the rule of law. Questions such as “Are we heading for a backlash?” and “Has #MeToo hit back?” (*Aftonbladet*, November 8, 2018) are sometimes articulated with comments that support for feminism in general decreases among men, suggesting that despite its purposes #MeToo has contributed to a feminist backlash.

#MeToo is also used as a frame to discuss how far it is acceptable for society, journalists, and people in general to go in their hunt for men suspected of committing abuse. Several texts critically mention an incident when posters had been put up in public accusing journalist Fredrik Virtanen of rape, and that this was done despite the fact that the preliminary investigation against him was shut down:

You cannot punish a structural injustice by abusing an individual. What must happen to Fredrik Virtanen in order for the people to be satisfied? […] Punishment by public shame was abolished in 1864. Now it is back. (*Aftonbladet*, December 2, 2018)

In this example, #MeToo is highlighted as being problematic. The movement is said to legitimize acts that are legally unsound and to punish individual men who have not been found guilty of any crime. Thus, a discourse of criticism can be regarded as a kind of counter discourse to the dominant image of #MeToo as an exclusively positive and genuinely necessary movement. It structures the understanding of #MeToo quite
differently from the other discourses as it makes possible narratives of women who comes with false testimonies, of media that publish unverified accusations, and of men who are misunderstood and falsely accused. In doing so, it also sheds light on how masculinity is constructed as threatened by movements such as #MeToo, and, sometimes, by feminism in general.

Production of Masculinity

The studied Swedish news media representations stated that #MeToo was something new; a mass movement that involved many different people and which, on partially new terms and with the help of new methods tackled a general social problem. In line with research that has described the movement as a challenge to male norms and structures (e.g., Alvinius & Holmberg, 2019; Rodino-Colocino, 2018), #MeToo was frequently represented as a huge attack on what was perceived as a sexist or patriarchal culture and an outdated male role. In the following, we discuss how the identified discourses reproduce and challenge notions of masculinity. The discussion is based on the assumption that discourses not only struggle to define and organize social space differently, but also interpellate subjects in different, possibly conflicting positions. What will appear is a complex picture of various “new” aspects of men and masculinity at the same time that fairly traditional notions of men and masculinity are reproduced. One conclusion is that #MeToo—as it is described in the studied media material—represents an important but also ambiguous movement with regards to its ability to function progressively in terms of re-making masculinity.

Three partly different types of masculinities recurred in the studied texts. Where possible, we have named them in accordance with how similar expressions of masculinity have been named before: “violent masculinity,” “toxic masculinity,” and “‘new’ masculinity.” The different discourses undoubtedly fostered certain masculinities more often than others, although the reproduced masculinities were seldom confined to just one discourse.

Violent Masculinity

Violent masculinity is generally used to describe a masculinity that is associated with physical strength, violence, aggression (Bryson, 1987; Tonso, 2009), rape culture (Carlson, 2008) and, occasionally, weapons (Myröttinen, 2003, 2004). In part, it is related to the restoration of traditional masculine values, often in opposition to, for example, feminism and expressions of gender equality and other egalitarian movements (e.g., Korolczuk, 2014). Violent masculinity has been used as an analytical tool in various research contexts, for example, in studies of school shootings, where images of violent masculinity have been suggested to have served as role models and as sources of inspiration for the perpetrators (Tonso, 2009).

In the news media material, aspects of violent masculinity are particularly evoked within the discourse of testimonies and accusations, and the discourse of problematization and change. In these discourses, masculinity is repeatedly articulated with male
domination, abuse, and sexual aggression. It is linked to ideas of being one-sided, negative and evil, and, importantly, it is based on notions of stereotypical gender differences (cf. Haines et al., 2016; Myrttinen, 2003, 2004); men are mainly represented as perpetrators and women as victims. In such representations, the idea of masculinity as directly linked to violence is used to reinforce men’s guilt and women’s innocence. In that sense, the notion of violent masculinity disregards gender similarities and any suggestions that males and females are psychologically alike (e.g., Hyde, 2005).

The violent masculinity that is evoked within the discourses of testimonies and accusations and problematization and change is often articulated with certain key perpetrators, that is, specific men are presented as personifications of violent masculinity and of a culture of abuse, and much attention is directed toward them. A few well-known media personalities and so-called cultural profiles are represented as powerful symbols of this masculinity. Although there are a great number of texts that state that #MeToo has made visible that abuse occurs throughout society, the impact of this general criticism is diminished by the fact that a lot of attention is directed toward the violent masculinity performed by a number of key perpetrators. They appear to be the genuinely evil ones, often well-known men who have misused their positions of power to repeatedly abuse women. Even though some revelations aroused surprise because the men in question had not previously been associated with violent masculinity, the accusations against them are represented in such a way that they confirm the common hypothesis that violent masculinity is not always visible from the outside. Still, in comparison to these identified individuals, men in general appear to be less abusive and less guilty.

Representations of #MeToo that position perpetrators in relation to notions of violent masculinity are thus ambiguous. Although they comprise a clear criticism of men’s use of violence and of gender inequality, their performative effect is uncertain. The fact that the representations are based on a strong gender dualistic thinking sometimes works to establish a moral order in which men are abusers and women are victims. But in a few cases, this moral order is undermined because the gender dualisms may also include suggestions that men tend to be more tolerant to sexual harassment than women (cf. Kunst et al., 2019), and that #MeToo is the effect of women’s exaggerations. This could sometimes reverse the moral order and position men as victims of the #MeToo movement.

**Toxic Masculinity**

Not all news media articles represent masculinity as physically violent and belonging to a few rotten apples. Instead, they state that the problems of masculinity are more general. They relate to a notion of masculinity that has sometimes been referred to as “toxic masculinity” (Kupers, 2005; Veissière, 2018), which, to some extent, complies with violent masculinity. However, while violent masculinity primarily emphasizes the violent and criminal aspect of men’s practices—direct assault and abuse—toxic masculinity highlights a more general negatively charged masculine culture. Notions of toxic masculinity generally articulate men with characteristics such as the absence of emotion, antifeminism, and homophobia (cf. Kupers, 2005).
According to the discourse of problematization and change, contemporary masculinity affects women negatively, but is primarily regarded as degrading and limiting for men. It is said that men and boys are forced to live their lives in accordance with this destructive masculinity, even though it is harmful to both themselves and others. The texts often express the ideal that boys and men should “be able to feel safe in their male role without having to put others down” (Alekuriren, March 6, 2018). Thus, in the studied news media texts, contemporary masculinity is articulated as a really powerful and regulatory force, as a toxic culture that effects all men and their actions. And it is only when the grip of this regulatory force is released that men and boys can find their true and genuine selves, and live their lives to the fullest.

Although violent masculinity is primarily represented as harmful to women, the reasoning above highlights the fact that “toxic masculinity” is also characterized by significant limitations for men. This is confirmed by texts that highlight men’s inability to reach their full potential primarily because toxic masculinity hinders them from harboring, expressing, and communicating emotions. The rhetoric implicitly compares masculinity to femininity, and points at characteristics that today’s normative masculinity is said to lack. The rhetoric further reproduces ideas that a too narrow masculinity can be understood as a kind of dehumanization that denies men human nature attributes (cf. Vaes et al., 2012). The stated lack of emotions is foregrounded as an important reason why masculinity has to be reformed, that is, to create emotionally more complete human beings. Thus, while toxic masculinity is described as deeply problematic for men, and, of course, possibly dangerous to women, it is also represented as a cultural construct that is possible to change.

“New” Masculinities

In many ways, Swedish news media representations of the #MeToo movement contribute to a politicization of masculinity in that it highlights masculinity—primarily what we have called violent and toxic masculinity—as a major problem and repeatedly argues for the need for change. In most cases, the goal was a more nuanced masculinity that is gender equal, nonviolent, and emotional, and that accepts and encourages a greater variety of characteristics and abilities as being male. However, some news media articles also represent another goal: a masculinity based on notions of biologically determined gender differences, highlighting the need for a man who is secure in his masculinity and does not succumb to feminist demands. Although the latter suggestion occurred less frequently, it is important to mention as the logic behind the expressed need for it resembles the louder populist protests throughout Europe against so-called “gender ideology” and efforts to combat gender-based discrimination (e.g., Korolczuk, 2014).

Suggested changes mostly occur within the discourse of problematization and change. Many texts represent the idea that if men develop a broader emotional register it will be possible to change a sexist culture and elaborate new forms of behavior. The represented suggestions often include the involvement of men themselves. For example, it is sometimes argued that therapy and conversations groups in which men collectively reflect on
their behavior would lead to the development of new masculinities, or that men will be enriched if they learn to have closer physical contact with other men, for example, if they can hug each other intimately. Manhood courses and male gatherings are also mentioned as ways to find a new and biologically anchored masculinity. The suggestions can be understood as political measures, as attempts to disarm and transform the problematic violent and toxic masculinities, and to accomplish social change, although aiming at different goals. In a sense, the masculinities articulated within the discourse of problematization and change were thus based on a rejection of contemporary masculinity norms and an incorporation instead of values such as male stability and calmness, or “positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality” (cf. Elliot, 2016, p. 241; see also Scheibling, 2020).

Although the news media material often states in general terms that contemporary masculinity must change, the represented suggestions for alternative masculinities are undermined by a lack of specific measures. Apart from the wide-ranging recommendations regarding, for example, group discussions and empathy training, it is unclear how change could be accomplished. The fact that the material also includes examples of masculinities according to which men have to become more masculine in a traditional sense, for example, by emphasizing the assumed biological differences between men and women, complicates the picture even more. Besides the represented need for an altered masculinity, there is thus no clear consensus in the representations.

What is however highlighted as an important sign of ongoing change is men’s confessions. Men who witness new insights and who confess previous abuse within the framework of #MeToo are primarily represented as brave and as challenging a traditional violent or toxic masculinity. Their confessions also tend to confirm that the #MeToo allegations and testimonies of women are true.

From a theoretical point of view, confessions are performative, and the subject is not revealed but constituted during the act of confession (Besley, 2005; Butler, 2004). In this sense, the confession is a ritual for producing both truths and subjects, and, in this case, masculinities. On one hand, through the act of confessing, men acknowledge the existence of a social norm in the form of a general (judging) power, and submit themselves to it, thereby simultaneously reinforcing a nonabusive gender norm. Seen this way, the confession is possible to understand as a mechanism of social control (Foucault, 1976/1978), but also as a progressive gender practice. It is a political act by which a sexist culture is made visible, by which violent and toxic masculinity is reflexively deconstructed and rejected, and which gives hope for a changed normative masculinity.

On the other hand, confessions may also contribute to counteracting change. As a social situation, confessions are structured and follow certain scripts that involve aspects that can reproduce a temporarily lost order or reinstate status quo (Foucault, 1976/1978, 1980). One such aspect inherent in the confession is the notion of potential forgiveness. Although the news media representations do not openly declare that forgiveness is given, they represent confessing men not primarily as examples of the violent or toxic masculinity that they are confessing, but as basically good men who have gained important insights; as men who have become aware of the negative
aspects of their previous behavior. Their awakening is taken to reflect a raising of consciousness which, in line with the confession, gives the impression that men are indeed about to be reformed, and they are thereby represented as less guilty. Furthermore, the confessions typically described occasional incidents and included the information that the confessor was not aware of his behavior being a problem at the time. This way, confessions neither threatened the confessing men’s personality or masculinity, nor did the men risk to fall into disrepute as they had clarified that they acted in good faith. What was represented as desirable about the confessing men—and was thus central in the production of an idealized nonviolent and gender-equal masculinity—was however their courage to come clean and their reflexive approach to their own masculinity.

Conclusion

The media coverage of #MeToo reproduces different masculinities. On one hand, masculinity is directly related to violence, harassment, and a culture of abuse. Even though this violent masculinity is generally strongly criticized and primarily connected to individual and well-known men, it is still recurrently represented. A variant of the violent masculinity is toxic masculinity, which is represented as influencing all men, leading to a general lack of empathy in men and a deficient understanding of others.

On the other hand, the news media representations of #MeToo also evoke a need for a new masculinity described as a solution to the dilemma of a violent or a toxic masculinity, as well as a solution to the problems reported during the #MeToo movement. Sometimes, this new masculinity is strongly connected to notions of biologically based gender differences, and tends to be positioned in opposition to notions of feminism. More often, a new masculinity is evoked that describes men as simultaneously strong, gentle and reflexive. It is a masculinity that fosters men who have no emotional problems but are empathetic and try to understand the perspectives of others. One could easily think that representations of such a masculinity would have performative effects and be helpful in bringing about social change.

However, the proposed measures of reforming masculinity are rather diffuse and presented on an overall level. This, together with the gender-dualistic tendencies that permeate the material as a whole and the tendencies to individualize the represented assaults and perpetrators, means that potential social effects of the #MeToo movement are at risk of being lost because men in general will probably not see the need to change in accordance with the represented “new” nonviolent and gender-equal masculinity. This risk is enhanced by texts that highlight #MeToo as a lawless movement that represents a kind of witch hunting of men, and that thus undermines the general importance of the #MeToo movement. Although a majority of news media texts covering the Swedish #MeToo movement highlighted the importance of the movement, this is a viewpoint that reflects a backlash against #MeToo and that perhaps, at least in part, illustrates the presence of antifeminist tendencies in the country that is regarded as the most gender-equal in the European Union.
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