Feeling rules and sexualities: Postfeminist men in Swedish television

Klara Goedecke
Stockholm University, Sweden

Abstract
Postfeminist cultural representations have shown men as bumbling anti-heroes, and as sensitive and supportive of feminism. Research on postfeminist men has mainly been based on UK and US cultural representations, while other contexts have received little attention. In this article, I deepen the understanding of postfeminist portrayals of men by focussing on Sweden and on formulations of men’s emotionality and sexuality. I also develop the idea of postfeminist feeling rules by relating it to men. The material of the study is Boys, a 2015 Swedish TV series about two young feminist men. The article discusses several feminist-inspired discourses present in the series, including narratives of personal development, men’s emotions as in themselves progressive and a (semi)problematisation of heterosexuality, all of which reduce gender politics to concern mainly the emotional lives of men. The postfeminist feeling rules formulated in the series privilege reflexiveness and, ostensibly, ‘letting out’ feelings and sexual desires. However, I argue that the series suggests a careful curating of emotional displays, excluding, for instance, aggressiveness. The article demonstrates the importance of critically scrutinizing mediated productions of postfeminist masculine positions in different contexts, and deepens the understanding of how postfeminism addresses and produces masculine subjects.

Keywords
Cultural representations of men, emotions, heterosexuality, postfeminist feeling rules, postfeminist men, Swedish men, Swedish television

Corresponding author:
Klara Goedecke, Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender studies, Stockholm University, Stockholm 106 91, Sweden.
Email: Klara.Goedecke@gender.su.se
Leo: If we make sex and love songs it’s important that we dare to expose ourselves there, that it doesn’t, that it doesn’t become full of attitude [. . .]

Viktor: No, but there’s no risk of that I think

Leo: I think that . . . There’s always a risk . . . We must not get stuck in patriarchal ideas [. . .] there should not even be a possibility to interpret it that way [. . .] We need to think about this in all we do! (Boys, E3)

The series Boys (original title in English) aired on Swedish public television during the fall of 2015. It portrays best friends Viktor and Leo, trying to make it as musicians in Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. Viktor and Leo identify as feminists, and the series portrays them striving to live as progressive men, a struggle which concerns mainly their emotional, (hetero)sexual and musical lives. Set in Sweden, the series refers to and comments upon interpretations of feminist ideologies and ideas about men and feminism that have been common in this context. The series was widely debated in Swedish media; was it a failed attempt at representing an expanded ‘male role’ (Hultquist, 2015) or a much-needed problematization of men’s heterosexuality and sexual consent (Nöjesguiden, 2015; Rydén, 2015)?

Cultural representations give meaning to, shape and produce ‘reality’ (Hall, 1997), including masculine and other gendered positions (Lotz, 2014). Angela McRobbie (2009) argues that feminism is increasingly taken up and incorporated in cultural representations, but often in ways that undermine it or render it redundant. Such ‘postfeminist’ representations have often been focussed on women, but postfeminist portrayals of men are increasingly visible in popular culture (Dow, 2006; Gill, 2014; Hamad, 2013; Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2011). Sweden, often described as one of the most gender-equal countries in the world and allegedly populated by gender-equal, progressive Swedish men (Järvklo, 2008; Martinsson et al., 2016), presents an important context in which to understand the workings and effects of postfeminist discourses. In this article, I develop the understanding of postfeminist portrayals of men in relation to emotionality and sexuality, and deepen the understanding of postfeminist feeling rules (Gill, 2017) by discussing them in relation to men. I also advance the discussion about take-up of feminist and gender equality ideologies in the Swedish cultural context.

Studying postfeminist representations of men

During the last 70 years, television has become one of the most powerful media, representing, influencing and constructing society. During the last decades, there have been changes in how men are portrayed on television, with ‘softer’, less homophobic and more emotionally open portrayals becoming more common (Lotz, 2014). However, the politics of these representations remain unclear; do ‘softer’ representations of men reflect changes in gendered power relations, or even in men? Views of representations as constructing rather than mirroring society (Hall, 1997) indicate that these portrayals should be seen as arenas where negotiations around masculine ideals and power take place, and where new sense-makings around gender can be taken up and also produced. ‘Softer’ portrayals of men might thus constitute a renegotiation of masculine ideals, whose significance must, however, be scrutinized carefully – they may portray and enable new
ways of being a man but these need not constitute a questioning of gendered or other power relations.

In this article, I use research on postfeminism to understand this tension. Postfeminism indicates that feminism is taken into account, yet undermined in cultural representations, and includes an emphasis on individualism, choice and agency (McRobbie, 2009). According to Rosalind Gill (2016: 609), postfeminism has become ‘the new normal, a taken-for-granted common sense that operates as a kind of gendered neoliberalism’. It may include attempts to sell products through references to feminism or present individual women as able to – and responsible for – solving structural issues by growing more confident (Gill and Orgad, 2015). Such appeals, as well as expectations of incessant self-surveillance and performance of certain emotions (confidence and up-beatness) are typical of postfeminism, which has taken on affective dimensions. Gill (2017) discusses this in terms of ‘postfeminist feeling rules’ (p. 620), but does not develop the term or its implications, and uses it only in connection with women.

According to Arlie Hochschild (2003), who coined the term, feeling rules ‘guide emotion work by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges’ (p. 56). They involve the changing or masking of authentic emotional states, a process that might lead to feelings of alienation and which is fundamentally gendered. For instance, women may be expected to perform joy or care in professional life, while men may be expected to perform aggression (Hochschild, 2003: 139–147). Similar to Gill, I prefer to see feeling rules as gendered ‘technologies of the self’, connected to neoliberalism (Gill, 2017; see also Illouz, 2008). Postfeminist feeling rules, as I will use them here, are not about interactions in the workplace but rather sense-makings around and productions of subjectivities and emotionalities. While women are addressed and made meaningful as confident subjects it is likely that men are interpelated in other ways.

Postfeminist representations of men have been studied in both cinematic and literary representations (Dow, 2006; Gill, 2014; Hamad, 2013; Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2011; Thompson, 2013). Bonnie J. Dow argues that postfeminist men, men that are respectful, sensitive and nurturing, start appearing in the 1980s film and television. Since they are portrayed as ‘truly supportive of the feminist project’ (Dow, 2006: 122), postfeminist men are ‘crucial [. . .] to promoting the idea that women’s problems [e.g. of combining professional life and parenthood] are their own responsibility’ (Dow, 2006: 121). Contrastingly, Gill (2014) points to anti-heroes in ‘guy lit’ novels when discussing postfeminist masculinity. Here, the men are bumbling, immature, a failure professionally and personally. Meanwhile, women are portrayed as successful and in control. ‘Far from mocking or unmasking male power’, Gill writes (2014: 200), ‘the presentation of ineptitude and confusion seems strategically designed to maintain it, while simultaneously effacing it and claiming that men are the disadvantaged losers in the “new” gender stakes’.

These postfeminist portrayals of men enter into dialogue with feminist or feminist-sounding discussions, as does Boys; these include men’s personal development, emotionalities and (hetero)sexualities. Men’s emotionality has often been discussed as politically important. Emotional inexpressivity in men has long been connected to patriarchal power (e.g. Sattel, 1976), and as Sam de Boise and Jeff Hearn (2017) argue, it is
often believed that ‘there is something novel or historically unprecedented about men expressing emotions’ (p. 787). Also central to feminist discourse around men, men’s (hetero)sexuality has been seen as domineering, penetrating, violent and possessive (Beasley, 2010; Millett, 1971). This has been discussed by Dow (2006: 126) who argues that sensitivity, reciprocity and unaggressiveness are emphasized in US postfeminist portrayals of men’s sexualities, and by David Hansen-Miller and Gill (2011) who note objectification of women coupled with ironic references to feminist critiques of such objectification in postfeminist movies. Men’s emotionalities and sexualities are of great discursive importance in discussions about what a progressive man should look like, and Boys’ engagement with these themes is part of what renders the series postfeminist.

Rachel O’Neill (2015: 115) has argued that understanding men’s varying positions vis-à-vis postfeminism is an ‘acute endeavour’, a claim with which I agree, not least in the light of Sweden’s reputation and self-image as one of the most gender-equal countries in the world (Martinsson et al., 2016). Sweden has a long history of regarding men’s change and emancipation as of pivotal importance to gender justice, or ‘gender equality’ (jämställdhet), especially within the dual earner/dual carer family. In line with this, the engaged, present father has become a national symbol (Björk, 2017; Klinth, 2002). This centres emotionality and care in national narratives of what it means to be a progressive man, while heterosexuality and the nuclear family remain unquestioned (Dahl, 2005). Similarly, the strong focus on gender equality conceals normativities and power relations along the lines of race and class (de los Reyes et al., 2005; Martinsson et al., 2016), not to mention persistent gender inequalities. Also, the idea of Swedish men as especially ‘gender-equal’ produces borders along the lines of class, race, religion and sexuality, rendering immigrant, working-class and religious men ‘traditional’, ‘unmodern’ and ‘patriarchal’ (Björk, 2017; Gottzén and Jonsson, 2012; Järvklo, 2008).

Cultural representations of ‘progressive’ Swedish men have often focussed on fathers (e.g. Wahlström Henriksson, 2016; Widegren, 2016), but research about masculinities on television is scarce (Ganetz, 2015; Skåreus, 2011 are exceptions), as are discussions of postfeminism. In a previous study, I showed that Boys and Våra Vänners liv, another Swedish series, enter into dialogue with feminist debates that have been common in the Swedish context, such as the dual earner/dual carer family ideal, active fatherhood and personal development (Goedecke, 2020; see also Björklund, 2018). However, while Våra Vänners liv referenced a feminism where whiteness and heterosexuality were largely taken for granted, Boys, with its multiracial cast and overt discussions around homophobia signals an incorporation of new discourses within Swedish postfeminism.

Method and material

In this article, I study Boys (2015), including the music from the series. The series was aired on SVT24, one of the channels of the Swedish public service television company, as well as its online video on demand service svtplay during the autumn of 2015. It was created by Robert Andersson, Tomas Dicander, Malin Idevall and Olof Leth (who also directed) and consists of eight 15-minute episodes. There are two protagonists: the friendship dyad Viktor (Adam Pålsson), a university dropout and Leo (Armand Mirpour), a personal care assistant, who have a band together. The series portrays their
music-making, the booking of their first gig and the cooperation with another musician, Christian Bassi (Matias Varela), who makes a remix of one of their songs. The series also focusses on Leo and Viktor’s friendship, including partying together, supporting each other and fighting, primarily over their music and their respective love lives. Alice (Nour El Refai) is Viktor’s love interest in the first part of the series, and Ellie (Nanna Blondell) is a DJ and a friend of both Leo and Viktor, who gets together with Viktor in the final episode. Around the middle of the series, Leo falls in love with Lovisa (Josefine Ljungman). The characters are portrayed as being in their 20s and are conventionally good-looking and dressed in hipsterish clothing. They are engaged in a middle-class, urban, young lifestyle, with night-clubs, restaurants and marijuana-smoking. While the cast includes both white (Viktor and Lovisa) and racialized (Leo, Ellie, and Alice) characters, all characters’ names can be read as ‘Swedish’ and no one speaks with a ‘foreign’ accent.

The analysis has been based on discursive approaches to cultural representations (Hall, 1997). Cultural representations give meaning to, enable and restrain which interpretations are possible and thus help produce, rather than simply reflect, ‘reality’. Thus, the series is viewed in relation to larger discourses and developments in gendered politics and sense-makings regarding, for example, men’s emotionality and heterosexuality.

After the initial viewing of the material, a number of preliminary themes were noted, and during subsequent viewings, the themes were specified and revised in dialogue with relevant literature in an iterative and hermeneutic process, during which examples shedding light on – or contradicting – the chosen themes were highlighted. Following discursive approaches, contested or taken for granted ‘truths’ in the series regarding, for instance, personal development and men’s emotions, were identified and analysed (Hall, 1997). In addition, normalization, idealization and incomprehensibility in gendered, sexualized, racialized and classed positions constructed in the series were scrutinized.

**Gendered ideals of personal development**

‘I want to become myself!’ Viktor exclaims in the opening scene of *Boys*. Viktor is discussing his final essay in business administration with his thesis supervisor, but halfway through their meeting, Viktor declares that he is dropping out to prioritize his music. He decides to move in with his friend Leo, and they quickly decide to put all their energy and time into music and finishing their first record. Viktor and Leo’s struggles to be true to themselves, and their musical, emotional and sexual journeys are the overarching narratives of *Boys*. This is suggested also in their music:

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Am not completely myself yet/have some stuff I need to get through first/The one you see is not me/not the one I’m going to be soon (‘Snart där’ [‘Soon there’], my translation)
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This song, tenderly sung in high falsetto voices by Viktor and Leo and set to an ethereal, soft sample of electronic sounds, ends with the phrase ‘I see a light now, I see more clearly here’. The metaphor of journeying towards light and clarity illustrates that the character arcs of Viktor and Leo are about growing from boys into (certain kinds of) men. Before going deeper into the areas where their personal development projects are
most intense, emotionality and sexuality, it is worth discussing the idea of personal
development itself.

The idea of ‘get[ting] through’ ‘some stuff’ to become ‘[one]self’ becomes meaning-
ful in relation to coming of age-narratives, a staple in both literature and film, including
postfeminist films (Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2011). Such narratives are often surrepti-
tiously masculine (Felski, 2003), but similar to postfeminist ‘lad flicks’, Boys makes
masculinity itself its central object and portrays it as a ‘difficult biographical project’
(Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2011: 40; see also Hamad, 2013). This means that that the
series ‘names men as men’ (Collinson and Hearn, 1994), and overtly discusses gender
politics and masculinity, to some extent destabilizing the unmarkedness of the category
of men. Viktor and Leo both identify as feminists, as do several other characters, and
their personal development projects are addressed as connected to gender, power and
questions about how to make sense of being a (feminist) man.

Personal development has been a theme within Swedish gender equality ideologies
since the 1960s. The ‘male role’, it was argued, obscured an underlying, authentic and
essentially un-gendered self. By ‘seeing through’ and liberating themselves from it, men
could gain access to their true selves, including the ability to show feelings (Klinth,
2002: 91ff). While Anglophone ‘sex role’ ideologies were largely devoid of analysis of
the asymmetrical situations of women and men, who were seen as equally restricted by
differing role expectations, the Swedish debate emphasized liberation for both men and
women as well as critiquing men’s roles, which were seen as equally dysfunctional, unjust
and temporary (Hearn et al., 2012; Klinth, 2002: 69f). Similar discourses about men persist
in the Swedish discursive landscape still (Goedecke, 2018), and are drawn upon and
normalized in Boys.

The focus on personal development can also be understood in relation to what Eva
Illouz (2008) calls ‘the therapeutic discourse’, which consists of a mix of various
approaches within psychology that have become popularized and disseminated during
the 20th century. The therapeutic discourse posits personal development as a goal, and
functions as a way of structuring and making sense of the self, personal relationships,
and emotional and psychological ‘health’, demonstrated through the ability and willing-
ness to verbalize feelings and experiences.

However, the ideals of openness and emotional maturity connected to personal devel-
opment hold specific gendered meanings. They clash with ideals of stoicism and hard-
ness for men, but have resulted, Illouz (2008) suggests, in a new masculine position,
‘viewed by the reigning therapeutic ethos as the only healthy form of masculinity’ (p.
231), a point that can be connected to thoughts about men needing liberation from ‘the
male role’ to reach ‘health’, but also to the projects of personal development in Boys.

The gendered nature of the personal development projects in Boys is evident not least
in the fact that it is only Viktor and Leo who are engaged in them. While they stumble
along their paths to maturity, the female characters, Alice, Lovisa and Ellie, are portrayed
as confident, professional, attractive and ‘together’ (Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2011: 42).
They take initiatives, both sexually and otherwise, and have impressive careers: Alice
designs feminist jewellery, Ellie is a popular DJ and Lovisa is a seasoned traveller, on her
way to South America to work on an aid project. Such portrayals contribute to an idea of
men as losers and women as winners in contemporary society, seemingly rendering
feminism and its analyses redundant (Gill, 2014; Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2011). Using Illouz, Alice, Ellie and Lovisa can also be interpreted as ‘healthy’ and in touch with their feelings, perhaps more ‘liberated’ than Viktor and Leo, whose personal development is seemingly obstructed by masculine expectations.

It is important to note that the idea of complex inner lives as well as the imperative to verbalize feelings are classed ideals. They form important aspects of contemporary capitalism (Illouz, 2008: 216) and are used to distinguish between (and thus produce) the middle-class and the working-class (Skeggs, 2011). The occupations, looks and urbanity of the Boys characters connect them to the intellectual or artistic, although not necessarily wealthy, middle-classes. Viktor, white and a former university student, is more clearly connected to the middle-class at the outset of the series, but Leo, racialized and without university education, also moves along a classed trajectory and, like Viktor, is rich in cultural capital. Their slightly unorganized and non-affluent lifestyle is associated with youthfulness, and becomes temporary rather than a marker of non-respectability. The series’ idealization of personal development connects with this classed and aged narrative, which also ties in with the middle-class focus in Swedish debates around progressive masculine positions (Björk, 2017).

Self-monitoring is an important aspect of US and UK postfeminism, especially for women who are compelled to observe their looks, their bodies and their psyches to be good-looking, confident and upbeat (Gill and Orgad, 2015). In Boys, the construction of personal development as an unquestioned good normalizes self-monitoring also for men, but not of the body but of personal development (see also Thompson, 2013: 162).

**Becoming emotional**

Viktor’s and Leo’s projects of personal development are closely connected to emotionality. Viktor’s choice to become a musician instead of studying business administration is set as a choice between rationality and emotion, and Leo announces in the first episode that he wants to put love at the centre of his sexual and romantic life rather than one-off sexual encounters. As he meets Lovisa, this is seemingly achieved, but their relationship is complicated by his feelings of jealousy and possessiveness. Leo strives to dare to be emotionally open and avoid what he describes as masculine, destructive tendencies, while Viktor struggles to feel confident and secure, projects that come to the fore in especially passionate scenes.

One example of this is a scene between Viktor and his friend Sam (Jonas Bane; E2). Listening to the Boys’ own music, Sam encourages Viktor to dare to dance without feeling self-conscious. After an awkward beginning, Sam shows Viktor some dance-moves and they dance together, laughing, imagining Viktor’s future success as a performer. Sam touches Viktor’s legs in a ‘fan’ performance which makes Viktor feel desirable, cool and attractive. His dance, filmed in slow motion, is accompanied by increasingly loud music and by Sam’s ecstatic shouting, rendering the scene an emotional release; Viktor’s insecurity and self-consciousness are superseded by comfort and confidence.

Another example is the final episode (E8), which represents an emotional epiphany, most notably to Leo. Viktor and Leo visit their friend Ellie and her friend Julian, who lives in a cottage in the countryside. Leo’s girlfriend Lovisa has just left for South America, and Leo realizes, as the viewer has already done, that he has put their
relationship in jeopardy by being unreasonably jealous and unfair. During a walk with Julian, Leo calls her, and despite her assurance that she is in love with him, the phone call leaves Leo upset. As Leo’s breathing hastens and he starts to panic, Julian guides him up a hill, towards a view of the water. Leo breaks down and cries: ‘I just want to smoke [marijuana] until I don’t have to feel anything!’, but Julian consolingly instructs him to breathe deeply: ‘listen to these feelings and dare to be with them, here and now, just feel, be sad, feel!’ Julian puts his hand on Leo’s chest as Leo breathes deeply, crying. After a while, his crying subsides, and Leo puts his hand on Julian’s.

These scenes are reminiscent of the therapeutic discourse, and the openness and emotional maturity they convey are crucial to the character arcs of Viktor and Leo, to their journeys to become emotionally mature men (see also Thompson, 2013: 162). Popularized versions of feminism show men as hindered from expressing their emotions by expectations on them to be masculine (Reeser and Gottzén, 2018: 148), which renders emotions in men progressive (de Boise and Hearn, 2017). This train of thought is related to an understanding of feelings as a force of nature, held back by the ‘male role’ obscuring men’s authentic, emotional selves. In line with this, these scenes in Boys are cathartic and show despair and euphoria coming to the fore, with dancing and crying as signs of liberation and thus, of progressiveness.

Leo’s panic and crying constitutes an emotional climax but also a release. Shortly after, Julian suggests they dance to Indian music that he knows from his travels. Viktor, Leo, Ellie and Julian dance out of the cottage and out on a meadow. There, backlit by a setting sun, with the Indian music still in the background, Viktor and Leo hug, proclaiming that they love each other. Out of breath, looking at the horizon with a waving Swedish flag in the background, they exclaim that they accept that life cannot be controlled. Following on the previous emotional scene between Leo and Julian, this scene and its music intensifies the theme of embracing feelings, letting go of control, connected to a vaguely ‘eastern’, ‘yogi’ or meditative approach that was present already in the scene between Leo and Julian.

Emotions have often been conceptualized as irrational as opposed to rational and civilized, dichotomies that are connected to divisions between feminine and masculine, east and west (see Wetherell, 2012 for an overview). In the countryside, far from urban, rational, controlled Swedishness and under the influence of vaguely ‘eastern’ meditation techniques and music, Viktor and Leo’s feelings can be expressed and handled, rather than shut away. These displays of emotionality in men can be seen as a rejection of Leo’s wish to flee his feelings and of Western ideals of rational masculinity. However, the flag waving behind Viktor and Leo as they profess to surrender control connects the narrative to the Swedish nation, indicating that emotionality, insight and maturity are accessible to reflexive, progressive men whose Swedishness, despite the Indian music, need not be questioned. Sweden is constructed as able to incorporate emotionality and rationality, ‘eastern’ meditation techniques and a position as one of the richest countries in the world, and as a place where sensitive men can display their feelings while also retaining their masculinity.

Emotionality is celebrated both in Viktor and Sam’s dancing scene and in the scene between Leo and Julian, which privilege feeling confident in oneself as a dancer and a man and imperatives to ‘just feel!’, respectively. These messages are reminiscent of the
postfeminist advertisements preaching confidence for women (Gill and Orgad, 2015) and can be interpreted as postfeminist feeling rules, making certain masculine positions and emotional displays intelligible. These feeling rules are about engaging in personal development and daring to show feelings, which corresponds well to portrayals in postfeminist films and literature of gender injustice as personal, individualized and based in psychology (Dow, 2006; Gill, 2014). Such formulations ‘turn on its head the feminist notion that the personal is political’ (Gill and Orgad, 2015: 331), instead rendering the political personal.

Interestingly, the scenes between Viktor and Sam, Julian and Leo, as well as numerous scenes of support between Viktor and Leo, portray men’s friendship as an important arena for the expression and management of emotions. This differs from US postfeminist movies, where the peer group of the protagonist often stands for the resistance to change and the desire to stay in the known, juvenile position, while the girlfriend is the one demanding and initiating change in the protagonist and where closeness between men is infused with irony and a ‘simultaneous enactment and mocking of homophobia’ (Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2011: 45). While the protagonists of these movies develop despite their friends’ efforts, the friendships between men in Boys become arenas where sensitivity and emotionality can be performed and learnt. The idea that close friendships between men signal progressivity is familiar from other Swedish research (Goedecke 2018; 2020), but here the linking of men’s change to homosociality resembles the postfeminist tendency to render feminists’ and women’s critique redundant; men have already changed, of their own accord.

Managing emotions

So far, personal development and emotionality have been shown to be celebrated in Boys. But this narrative becomes more complicated in the second episode, when Viktor and Leo are introduced to Christian Bassi, an internationally successful house DJ. Bassi is slightly older than Viktor and Leo, and has a tougher, more laddish style. Despite ambivalence on Leo’s side, they ask him to make a remix of one of their songs, called ‘Kom och lek med mig i natt’ [‘Come and play with me tonight’] (E3). Besides the rather suggestive title, the lyrics also contain lines like ‘she’s playing with me’ and ‘I know you’re seeing others/if only you keep seeing me/hope you can see/what we have [together]’, emphasizing reciprocity, insecurity and longing.

Similar to Viktor and Leo, Bassi identifies as a feminist, but his feminism is immediately put in doubt. ‘I am a feminist, but when it comes to sex [. . .] girls want it to be mysterious, it should be a bit animalistic’ (E3), Bassi argues while making crude gestures, ensuring Viktor and Leo that if they release the song with him, they will have no difficulty ‘scoring’ with women. Leo rolls his eyes during this conversation, and afterwards Viktor and Leo have an agitated discussion about whether they should cooperate with him at all: ‘And he calls himself a feminist!’ (E3).

Predictably, Bassi’s remix of the song omits much of the lyrics and all of the etherealness and insecurity of Viktor and Leo’s original. ‘He has killed the song’, Leo complains, but as they go to break off their cooperation, Bassi becomes aggressive, leaning over them and roaring: ‘fucking hipster faggots!’ (E5). In this moment, Bassi’s feminism is
again put into question, not only due to his use of a homophobic slur but also to his performance of aggression and physical threat, producing Viktor and Leo as sensitive and unaggressive men, and, implicitly, ‘real’ feminists. In addition, Viktor and Leo’s skills as composers and performers of soft, electronic music become connected to one kind of masculine emotionality, while Bassi’s uptempo, house music connects him with another (see also Ganetz, 2015).

As de Boise and Hearn (2017) argue, the idea about men’s emotionality as automatically progressive is problematic since it ignores how the expression of some emotions, such as competitiveness or aggression, have long formed central parts of the production of masculine positions and of reproductions of gendered power (Sattel, 1976). It also rests on a view of emotions as restrained by culture, not produced in material-discursive, gendered processes (Reeser and Gottzén, 2018: 148). Viewed in this light, displays of longing, joy or vulnerability should be scrutinized as closely as performances of aggression, and neither should be regarded as natural or pre-discursive. In Boys, Bassi functions as a contrast to Viktor and Leo’s emotionality, not by being portrayed as an unemotional or inexpressive man, but rather as emotional in threatening, aggressive ways. Progressiveness is thus linked not only to a general emotionality but to certain emotional displays.

Following this, the feeling rules of Boys can be specified further. In the scene between Julian and Leo discussed above, Leo’s wish to avoid his emotions of pain, shame and regret is clearly not endorsed by the series, and the viewer is supposed to recognize it as a fearful, inauthentic attempt to flee his feelings. In line with the therapeutic discourse, the viewer is assumed to advocate an acceptance of and openness about feelings and recognize Viktor and Leo’s immaturity and growing awareness throughout the series. This means that Leo’s feelings of fear are not included in the imperative to ‘just feel!’ since they hinder him from accessing and showing his other, more authentic feelings. In addition, displays of anger or aggressiveness are not endorsed by the series. Thus, the feeling rules of Boys are about very specific productions and performances of emotionality in men, which include feelings like sorrow, insecurity, joy and love and practices, such as dancing, hugging, crying and talking. Despite the encouragement to ‘just feel!’ emotional control is essential.

(A)Political sexualities

Besides emotionality, Viktor and Leo’s personal development projects concern sexuality, more specifically heterosexuality. In the first episode, after a casual sexual encounter with an unnamed woman and getting caught watching pornography by Viktor, Leo declares: ‘I’m going to stop watching porn [. . .] you get such sick images, of how girls are, how boys are [. . .] I want it to be love, man! Even if it’s just for the night’.

The series portrays a struggle with how to reconcile Viktor and Leo’s sexual practices with their political views, that is, how to be a feminist, modern man, wanting to question stereotypes, while at the same time being stereotypical in the sense of being straight. This is demonstrated in recurring discussions about ‘hardness’ and ‘dominance’ in men’s sexuality. For instance, Leo and Ellie’s first meeting ends in a sexual encounter where Leo suddenly asks Ellie to be on top of him, pull at his hair and choke him (E2). This turns out to be awkward, and they move on to talking:
Leo: I liked being dominant before, it has just started feeling . . . wrong
Ellie: But, hey, you didn’t like being dominated [just now]
Leo: No. Shit, but the whole thing that men should be in charge and women be subordinate, I just . . . Fuck . . . I don’t like that! (E2)

As many feminist theorists have shown, heterosexuality and sexual practices are by no means exempt from societal, gendered patterns and power relations (e.g. Millett, 1971). Penis–vagina sex is understood as permeated by gendered power, as is pornography. The Swedish debate has been inspired by such radical feminist views (Dahl, 2005), and Boys names and problematizes male sexuality and heterosexuality, so long invisible in their powerful, taken for granted positions (cf. Collinson and Hearn, 1994) using such feminist-inspired ideas. Such a stance politicizes heterosexuality, but it is simultaneously depoliticized in a number of ways.

While Leo gets to voice critique against hardness in men’s sexualities, Ellie disagrees. In a reversal of common gendered stereotypes, Ellie argues that Leo overthinks sex: ‘No, wait, wait, that has nothing to do with that. Sex is sex; what turns you on, turns you on’ (E2) she answers Leo in the conversation quoted above. According to her, sexual practices are separate from other gendered performances and should not be politicized. This is developed even further after Ellie and Leo’s sexual encounter, when Viktor, Ellie and Leo (now having settled their relationship to be friendly and not sexual/romantic) discuss ‘a spiritual book’ about gender that Ellie has read. Inspired by it, Ellie argues that all people have a gendered ‘essence’, either masculine or feminine, irrespective of their biological or social gender:

You can be a man and have a feminine essence and you can be a woman and have a masculine essence [. . .] That means that you either are turned on by taking or being taken, being dominant or being dominated (E3).

Ellie goes on to argue that she and Leo both have masculine essences, and that this is the reason that their sexual encounter did not take off. Leo’s overthinking of sex, she argues, is due to him having a masculine essence while also being a man, and being too ashamed of this normativity to admit it (as non-white men have often been associated with ‘deviant’ or ‘problematic’ sexualities, one can wonder at the significance of it being Leo, black-haired and olive-skinned, who gets to struggle with his wishes to ‘dominate’). Leo and Ellie suggest to an unconvinced Viktor that he has a feminine essence, adding that there is ‘nothing wrong with that’ (E3).

Within the logic of the text, Ellie is proved right. The danger of overthinking sex is confirmed when Leo meets Lovisa: ‘I’m in this great place with her [Lovisa] right now. All this . . . dominance, it just feels so natural, it’s just self-evident, it doesn’t exist, it just is’, Leo tells Viktor happily (E5). Also, in his relationship to Alice, Viktor is portrayed as more needy, emotional and loving than Alice, who takes sexual initiatives while Viktor admits to being nervous when they at last sleep together (E5). When he returns home afterwards, he tells Leo: ‘She owns me . . . She helped herself to me as you help yourself to a smorgasbord, I was just lying there, and I love it!’ ‘I think I have a feminine essence, and I think I like it!’ (E6). In the final episode, Viktor and Ellie get together. This is initi-
ated by Ellie who thus demonstrates her masculine essence, once again proving her theory right in the series universe.

The idea about feminine and masculine essences seemingly connects sexual practices to gender, contrary to the previous statement that sex has ‘nothing to do’ with gendered power relations. It also adds a factor to Judith Butler’s (1990) famous discussion of sex, gender and sexuality as the three aspects that need to ‘align’ in intelligibly gendered subjects. The discussion of essences in the series thus represents gender and sexuality as complex, multi-layered phenomena, in a feminist-sounding way.

Despite this, I suggest that discussing sexual practices and desires as ‘essences’ functions to disconnect them from gender and gendered power relations. Essences are gendered (masculine or feminine) in the series but by discussing them thus, it is made clear that they are not the same as gender. Leo’s emotional breakdown (above) is about having been unfair, jealous and possessive towards Lovisa, that is, having handled his heterosexual desires in unsuitable ways. However, in the final acceptance that life cannot be controlled, he releases his jealousy as well as his feelings of guilt. I suggest that this signals an acceptance of his masculine essence, but not his jealousy and attempts to control Lovisa’s feelings. His masculine essence is thus disentangled from desires and feelings that pertain to his romantic and social life more broadly. Thus, in a move typical of postfeminist cultural representations (Gill, 2016), the series politicizes gender and sexuality by drawing on feminist-sounding arguments, but then separates gender and sexuality from ‘essence’. Essences, by consequence, can be described as innate and apolitical, isolated in the metaphorical bedroom from gendered power relations and from other aspects of life.

This is confirmed by a joking discussion between Viktor and Alice (E4) about an older, heterosexual couple, seated next to them in a restaurant. They are ‘the best couple in the world’, Alice and Viktor guess, and have been together for 40 or 50 years. The husband is a romantic person, bringing champagne to his wife, but in 1 second, Viktor speculates, he can turn from romantic to ‘stallion’, a person who has ‘hard’ sex and can get multiple orgasms. Alice comments that this is not possible, but Viktor maintains that it is: ‘He can!’ This conversation is playful and ends with Alice and Viktor laughing, but it illustrates the idea of sexual hardness (a masculine essence?) as coexisting with and as separate from other aspects of a person’s character. Here, the stereotype of male hardness is coupled with another; the sensitive, romantic, loving man. As long as the ‘hardness’ relates only to the purely sexual, it need not be problematic from feminist-inspired point of view.

The essence idea may seem like a questioning of heterosexuality since it opens up for same-sex desire (between people with similar genders but differently gendered ‘essences’) and questions Ellie and Leo’s (hetero)sexual compatibility. However, it also heterosexualizes sexual desire by reproducing ideas about difference (now of essence, not of bodies or genders) as necessary for sexual attraction (cf. Butler, 1990: 31). Thus, it stays with ideas about difference and dualisms at the heart of so much Western thought on gender and sexuality. In addition, the ideas about essences as corresponding to two kinds of complementary sexual practices; being dominated, passive, possessed, or dominant, active and possessing, further entrenches the difference-centred view of sexuality.
The ideas about essences and sex as separate from gendered power relations function as attempts to handle the dilemma between masculine, heterosexual desires and feminist critique articulated by Leo. I suggest that jealousy, aggression and sexism, just like fear (above) are constructed as inauthentic remnants of societal, gendered expectations (‘roles’). This renders seemingly authentic desires, associated with essences, unproblematic; heterosexuality need not be heteronormative, and heterosexual men, even those with a ‘masculine essence’, are not necessarily oppressive (cf. Beasley, 2010). This leaves the impression that in the absence of inhibitions or masculine expectations (‘roles’), men’s feelings and sexualities are authentic and progressive. Personal development and insight are rendered all the more central as they serve to distinguish between the authentic and the inauthentic. This separation obscures both the feeling rules at work and the constructed nature of the progressive masculine position, which is instead exonerated and normalized in *Boys*.

**Conclusion**

The encouragement to ‘just feel’ and to accept one’s essence have strong normalizing effects, obscuring the constructed and mandated nature of emotions, and indeed, the feeling rules produced in *Boys*. Instead, the series draws on ideas about emotions as inherently progressive in men, as they seemingly indicate a freedom from restricting, societal expectations. The ease with which these ideas are normalized must be understood in relation to the Swedish debate about gender, which has relied and still relies heavily on ideas about underlying authentic selves restricted by gender roles (Klinth, 2002: 91ff; Goedecke, 2018). Freed from the yokes of gender, men and women will allegedly be able to be their true, human selves, which becomes the goal of this political project. Such views understand gender ‘as an attribute of a person who is characterised essentially as a pregendered substance or “core”, called the person, denoting a universal capacity for reason, moral deliberation, or language’ (Butler, 1990: 10, italics in original).

In this view, emotional restriction is one of the main ways in which ‘humans’ are made into ‘men’. In emphasizing this aspect of progressiveness in men, *Boys* highlights what Michael A. Messner (1997) calls the ‘costs’ of being a man in patriarchal society. According to Messner, a truly progressive men’s movement must focus on such costs along with men’s institutional privileges and differences in power among different groups of men. In focussing almost exclusively on costs, the politics of *Boys* abstains from a deeper analysis of gendered power relations.

However, in this article, I see feeling rules as producing rather than restricting emotions, or rather, as rendering masculine positions which are emotional in certain ways comprehensible and relatable. The feeling rules of *Boys* incorporate feminist critique while also undermining it, and must therefore be understood within the context of postfeminism, and have several effects. First, they indicate that men’s emotional lives, like women’s, have become subject to increasingly intrusive demands of compulsory self-monitoring and self-betterment, requiring men to subject themselves to a neoliberal, postfeminist culture demanding tireless work on the self. Second, like the ‘small, manageable, psychological tweaks’ encouraged by postfeminist feeling rules for women which are essentially undisruptive (Gill, 2017: 618), these feeling rules turn the feminist
notion that the personal is political on its head; the political is instead rendered personal, even introspective (Gill and Orgad, 2015: 331). Third, they normalize emotional men, exonerating them from responsibility and from being ‘problematic’ from a feminist point of view. This highlights the doubleness with which men must be studied within post-structuralist research; as wielders of power and as produced by it; a category that is produced and constructed, enabled and restricted by discourses which also tend to normalize gendered power relations and masculine privilege.

Instead of framing postfeminist men in terms of heterosexual monogamy (Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2011; Thompson, 2013) or present fatherhood (Hamad, 2013), Boys questions and probes heterosexuality (even if it is also depoliticized). Friendship between men decentres the couple as the place where emotions can be shown and where the ideals of therapeutic discourse and the postfeminist masculine positions produced in the series can materialize. Friendship serves as an arena for regulating masculine subjects and enforcing feeling rules, a relationship where gendered positions may be construed. Despite this regulatory aspect and the marginalization of women in these homosocial narratives, I suggest that the centring of friendship constitutes one of the more radical aspects of Boys, pointing to intimacies beyond the romantic couple as emotionally and politically important.

The lively debate caused by the series in Swedish media shows that this postfeminist rendition of feminism in men was not uncontroversial. Men’s relationship to feminism has a long and complicated past, and Boys does not lay this debate to rest, but raises further questions about emotionality, sexuality and the role of the personal within feminism.

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ORCID iD

Kråla Goedecke https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4004-1301

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Biographical note

Klara Goedecke, PhD, is a researcher at Stockholm University, Sweden. Her research interests include men and masculinities, homosociality and friendship, formulations of progressive masculine positions, postfeminism, cultural representations and qualitative interviewing. She is currently working on a project about men and gambling as cultural phenomena in the Swedish context.