



## Walk the Talk. Men's Friendships, Progressiveness and Postfeminism in Swedish Television

By  
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### Abstract

This article explores two Swedish TV shows centred on close, emotional friendships between men, *Våra vänners liv* (2010) [Our friends' lives] and *Boys* (2015), as examples of postfeminism with a Swedish twist, inspired by Swedish ideologies of gender equality. Explicitly referring to feminism and gender equality, both shows explore what can be considered progressive masculine positions, drawing on ideas about sincerity, authenticity, emotionality and insight in men as central but not easily attained. I discuss portrayals of men as well as their friendships and explore the meanings of race, class and sexuality in the shows.

Unlike many US and UK postfeminist representations of bumbling, ironically sexist anti-heroic men, efforts at reaching sincerity and authenticity characterize the protagonists of the shows. Similar to other postfeminist cultural representations, both shows portray political problems as individual ones or, alternatively, as issues that already have been dealt with. For instance, *Boys* portrays a posthomophobic and postracial Sweden where racism and homophobia are of the past, and both shows portray personal development in individual men aimed at becoming progressive as solutions to problems regarding gender justice.

Both shows explore masculine positions that are available and unavailable, comprehensible and incomprehensible in contemporary Sweden, said to be one of the most gender-equal countries of the world. New masculine positions and intimacies between men, incorporating and referring to feminist or gender equality discourses, may be imagined and made available in shows like *Våra vänners liv* and *Boys*. However, such references and their consequences must be critically scrutinized.

**Keywords:** Men's friendships, progressiveness, masculinities, Sweden, *Boys*, *Våra vänners liv*, postfeminism, television.

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## Introduction

“I love you, man!” “I love you too.”

Two men stand in a meadow, backlit, with blue skies and a setting sun, hugging, dancing and proclaiming their love for each other. This is one of the final scenes of the Swedish TV show *Boys*, where best friends Viktor and Leo have reached the ending of their respective storylines of maturation and insight, having struggled with and sought truths about themselves, their feelings and their music. Men’s friendships are often portrayed on television, though they are rarely shown as so tender and close as in this scene, and they have seldom been the narrative focus in Swedish TV productions. However, *Våra vänner liv* (2010, [Our friends’ lives], henceforth: *VVL*) and *Boys* (2015) are two exceptions, both of which portray emotionally open men whose friendships are permeated by conversations and closeness.

Cultural representations do not just mirror reality but give meaning to, shape and produce it (Hall 1997). Cultural representations of men’s friendships may constitute explorations of practises of intimacy and care but also reproductions and/or negotiations of ways of making sense of masculine and other gendered positions and intimacies. Both *VVL* and *Boys* themselves and the strikingly similar debates they gave cause to in Swedish newspapers (e.g. Sveland 2010, Thunberg 2010, Samuelsson & Kyeyune Backström 2015) referred to feminism and feminist critiques of men and their friendships. Rosalind Gill (2016) argues that (versions of) feminism are often present and referred to in contemporary cultural representations. However, in these references, feminism is often deradicalised; it is represented as already incorporated and thus redundant or as concerning failings of individual men and women rather than overarching societal problems (see also Dow 2006). This simultaneous movement of incorporation and repudiation is discussed by Gill and others as *postfeminism*, and, as I will argue, it is crucial to understanding the depictions of men and men’s friendships in *VVL* and *Boys*.

In this article, I use feminist perspectives on cultural representations, men and men’s friendships to discuss *VVL* and *Boys*. I investigate how men and relationships between men are portrayed, and which gendered positions are discernible in each show. I discuss how these can be understood in relation to discourses about men, men’s intimacy, postfeminism and postfeminist representations of men as well as gendered, sexualised, classed and racialized power relations in contemporary Sweden. Examining continuities and discontinuities between the two shows gives insight into developments within the feminist debate in Sweden and its relationship to ideas about “progressive” men and postfeminism.

## Background

During the last 70 years, television has become one of the most powerful media, presenting, representing, influencing and constructing society. According to Lynn C. Spangler, men's friendships have been portrayed on television starting with Westerns of the 1950s. While this genre often features loners, it also portrays relationships between men based not on disclosure of feelings but on a strong sense of loyalty, sometimes even after death (Spangler 1992: 97). Sociological and ethnographic research has shown that loyalty rather than intimacy, along with competitiveness, stoicism and homophobia are characteristics of men's friendships (Rubin 1987, Messner 1992, Seidler 1992, Strikwerda & May 1992, Schmitt 1998). These features have been visible also in televised portrayals of men's friendships. However, portrayals of men and their friendships have started to change during the last decades, often demonstrated through comparisons of "new men" to "older" or "outdated" versions of masculinity (Hanke 1990, Zimdars 2018). Debates about men's emotionality, intimacy with other men, homoeroticism and homosociality are ongoing in research about men's friendships on television, and US productions like *Entourage*, *Friends*, *Scrubs*, *Nip/Tuck* and *Boston Legal* have been discussed as examples (Iglebäck 2000, Feasey 2008, Becker 2014, Lotz 2014). Displays of emotions, talk and touch between men—aspects of intimacy possible to study on screen—have been in focus, often accompanied by a discussion about whether the intimacy between the characters can be seen as progressive from a feminist perspective (in a broad sense). Most of these studies focus on Anglophone productions and very little is known about Swedish cultural representations of men's friendships, a void this article seeks to address.

Outside the sphere of television studies, in Swedish gender studies, debates about softer, more emotional and possibly progressive men have been connected to Swedish ideologies of gender equality and ideas about Swedish men as exceptionally progressive. While fatherhood has been rendered symbolic in these constructions of Swedishness, masculinity and gender equality (Klinth 2002), recent research indicates that capability to form close friendships with other men, including emotionality and non-homophobia, is also associated with the idea of gender-equal Swedish men (Goedecke 2018). Other research highlights that straightness, whiteness and a middle-class position are used as unacknowledged points of departure in the Swedish gender equality debate (Dahl 2005, de los Reyes et al. 2005), including in the debate about gender-equal men (Järvklo 2008, Gottzén & Jonsson 2012). This research shows that othered (racialized, rural, working-class) men are depicted as less progressive, a result also familiar from international research (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner 1994, Barrett 2013, Bridges & Pascoe 2016).

In this body of research, the meanings of progressiveness in men, or “new” or gender-equal men are discussed. Producing some men as progressive by drawing on, for example, racist and classist discourses about “other men” can be argued to be far from progressive, and “new” masculine ideals may indicate selective, superficial change rather than profoundly altered power relations. This discussion has interesting parallels to the debates about progressiveness in television studies of men’s friendships as well as to the debates around *VVL* and *Boys* in Swedish media.

Mediated representations of men, both cinematic and literary, have also been discussed in research about postfeminism (O’Neill 2015, Gill 2016, 2017). There have been conflicting definitions of postfeminism, but I use Gill’s definition of postfeminism as a sensibility that includes an emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency in which feminism “is ‘taken into account’ yet attacked”, and “co-opted, selectively taken up, derided, and entangled in complex ways” (2016: 621). Postfeminism is entangled with feminism in processes of “incorporation, repudiation, commodification” (Gill 2016: 621).

Postfeminist cultural representations of men have received attention from US and UK researchers (e.g. Dow 2006, Hansen-Miller & Gill 2011, Thompson 2013, Gill 2014). Bonnie J. Dow argues that postfeminist men, respectful, sensitive and nurturing, started appearing in 1980s film and television. Since they are portrayed as “truly supportive of the feminist project” (Dow 2006: 122), the 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 unheroic men in so-called “guy lit” novels in her discussion of postfeminist masculinity. These men are immature, a failure professionally and personally, and while they desire and objectify women, this is done ironically and with hints to feminist critiques of men’s sexualisation of women. Meanwhile, women are portrayed as successful and in control, a portrayal that shows men as disadvantaged (Gill 2014: 200). In this article, I connect research on postfeminism with research on men, masculinities and Swedish ideologies of gender equality to understand *VVL* and *Boys* and argue that both shows should be seen as postfeminist portrayals of men and men’s friendships.

## Material and Methodology

*VVL* and *Boys* are two Swedish single-season TV shows. *VVL* (2010) was created by Calle Marthin and Niklas Rockström and directed by Henrik Georgsson and Mani Maserrat, and *Boys* (2015) was created by Robert Andersson, Tomas Dicander, Malin Idevall and Olof Leth (the latter also directed). Both shows put men’s friendships centre stage and portray them as emotional and close.

Additionally, both shows explicitly connect men's friendships to feminism and its impact on Swedish men, which make them particularly relevant to study. The shows attracted much attention, giving rise to newspaper debates regarding the state of gender equality and masculine positions in Sweden, and thus helped shape the Swedish discourse on these issues.

Both shows aired on Swedish public broadcast television (Sveriges Television) and are set in central Stockholm. All protagonists, with the exception of Leo in *Boys*, who has black hair and olive skin, are WHAMs (white, heterosexual, able-bodied and middle-class men), and all are located in urban contexts. *VVL* consists of ten one-hour episodes, and its protagonists are four close friends: Pontus (Jacob Ericksson), Olle (Shanti Roney), David (Erik Johansson) and Mats (Gustaf Hammarsten). The men's friendships and weekly dinners are in focus, together with their professional, romantic and familial lives. *Boys* consists of eight 15-minute episodes and has two protagonists: the friendship dyad Viktor (Adam Pålsson) and Leo (Armand Mirpour). Viktor, a university dropout and Leo, a personal care-giver, have a band together, and in the show their friendship, love lives and music-making are portrayed.

I see cultural representations as producing reality, as "powerful loci of ideas about how to do and live intimate relationships" (Gill 2014: 187) and as giving meaning to, enabling and restraining which gendered and other positions that become recognisable, possible and comprehensible (Hall 1997). This means that shows like *VVL* and *Boys* are related in complex ways to contemporary formulations of friendship, gender, sexuality and other categorisations, and that they must be seen as connected to power since they make some formulations of, for instance, gender and friendship comprehensible, and others incomprehensible, impossible and unavailable.

Tools from discourse analysis and cultural studies (Hall 1997) have been used to approach the material. All episodes have been viewed at least twice, but most have been viewed many more times. Careful notes have been taken while watching in order to capture large narratives, significant, individual scenes, and similarities and differences between the shows.

### **"Feel no more fears, take your faults and make them right today"<sup>1</sup>**

As the above-quoted lyrics of the theme music of *VVL* indicate, one of the overarching narratives of the show is personal growth and maturation. *Boys* has a similar narrative, and with its slightly younger cast, it even more clearly constitutes a coming-of-age narrative, although it, like *VVL*, also contains many other plots and sub-narratives. These narratives, their goals and difficulties, can be

seen as formulations of acceptable or discursively available masculine positions and constitute the theme of this section.

In *VVL*, each of the protagonists works his way to a personal truth, often, as the song indicates, concerning overcoming fears, realising what really matters in life and doing what is framed as the right thing. For instance, one of the friends, Olle, is diagnosed with a kidney disease. In desperate need of a kidney transplant and with all his friends unsuitable as donors, Olle's estranged father Gösta, who left when Olle was a child, is the only possibility. Olle nurses a long-time bitterness against his father, which persists until the final moments of the last episode, when Olle, having reached acceptance and forgiveness, names his new-born son after his father. Another of the *VVL* friends, David, is single at the beginning of the show, forever finding fault with all the women he meets. In the first episode, he runs into twenty-years-old, successful, wealthy CEO Jenny and falls in love with her. After several rejections on both their parts they get together in the final episode, realizing that their age and status differences do not matter.

Olle and David's friend Mats struggles with his career and with being less successful than his wife and father-in-law. At the outset he works as a journalist at a local paper but, displeased with the lack of grandeur in the news he gets to report, he quits to try and write a novel but then starts work as a preschool teacher, a job he initially thinks is beneath him. In the closing episode, after having been recruited by his father-in-law to be a part of his company, Mats realizes that his previous job at the preschool was more satisfying and meaningful and decides to return to his work there.

The fourth and last protagonist of *VVL*, Pontus, is left by his wife, and the show portrays his struggles to come to terms with this, with finding a new apartment, with sharing the care of his daughter with his ex-wife, and, later, with finding time for a budding romantic relationship with a female colleague. At first, his ex-wife Anna (Meliz Karlge) seems like an angry, cold and unfeeling person to the viewer. However, as the show progresses, both Pontus and the viewer realize that he has not been prioritizing his daughter as he should. His ex-wife becomes more and more relatable as we see Pontus neglect and lie to his daughter in order to work and to be with his new girlfriend, who also gets to organize his daughter's birthday party. "A modern man has wise priorities", Pontus says as he is about to leave work early to pick up his daughter (E4). However, as his boss comes in for an unscheduled meeting, Pontus' priorities change, showing his hypocrisy to the viewer and putting his wisdom as well as his alleged modernity in question. However, in the final episode, in a grand gesture, Pontus puts aside work as well as his girlfriend to prioritize his daughter.

The narratives of *VVL* show four men on the cusp of middle-age, navigating the demands of everyday life, the temptations of prestige and success, and their

own feelings of bitterness and fear. As the show progresses, the characters are portrayed as developing and gaining insight into what really matters in life: following their hearts to seek authenticity and sincerity as opposed to status and vanity, as well as prioritizing relationships and love. The relationships in question are romantic and familial but also involve children. This is evident in the storylines about Pontus and his daughter, in Mats's storyline when he finally sees the significance of spending time with the children at his preschool, and in Olle's story, a high school teacher who not only becomes a father himself but also has an honest and heartfelt relationship with the adolescents he teaches.

The characters of *Boys*, like those of *VVL*, are engaged in various projects pertaining to the self. The opening scene of the first episode shows Viktor quitting university, proclaiming that he wants to prioritise his music rather than become a management consultant: "I want to become myself!" (E1). Throughout, especially in moments of doubt about his and Leo's music, Viktor is torn between conventionality and creativity, between finishing his degree and prioritising "pure art", but as the show progresses, he increasingly leans towards the latter. Also, in the opening episode, Leo proclaims that he wants to stop watching porn: "I want it to be love, man", he says to Viktor, while also rejecting the "weird images" of men and women in porn. Throughout *Boys*, Leo struggles with how his (hetero)sexual practices and desires can be reconciled with his feminist opinions. He attempts to alter his sexual practices as he meets Ellie (Nanna Blondell), but this makes their sexual encounter awkward, and their relationship instead develops into a platonic friendship.

Leo's and Viktor's projects differ slightly, but similar to the men in *VVL*, they learn to trust and accept their feelings, reject conventional status and believe in themselves as musicians (associated with another kind of status), and also gain insights that pertain to their romantic lives. For Leo, handling and listening to his emotions becomes the strategy for reconciling with and changing himself. In the last episode, Leo, who has not been portrayed as particularly inexpressive up to this point, becomes even more "emotionally intelligent" (Illouz 2008: 211ff) when he is taught how to breathe his way through crying and panicking about his girlfriend Lovisa. She has left on a trip, and although they are still in love, he realizes that he has put their relationship in jeopardy by treating her in an unfair and sexist way. His panic demonstrates his remorse, signalling to the viewer that he has indeed achieved the goal of learning something about himself and his feelings and is rejecting sexism. Shortly after, Viktor and Leo proclaim that they love each other, and looking at the horizon, they breathe deeply and exclaim that life cannot be controlled.

The importance of relationships, authenticity, and listening to one's heart and emotions are prominent in both shows. *VVL* was promoted internationally under

the title *Walk the talk* (SVT Sales 2019), which captures the process of attempting to put these insights into practice.<sup>2</sup> At the outset, the protagonists are less than proficient at this; indeed, both shows first portray the men as struggling and losing their way before finally finding it. The difficulties help represent the insights as profoundly meaningful.

Notably, none of the women in the shows have problems with discerning what really matters in life. For instance, in *VVL*, Mats' wife has no problems with Mats earning less money than she does nor with him being a preschool teacher. Similarly, the women in *Boys* are more successful than Viktor and Leo professionally and also have the role of delivering various truths. When Leo starts talking to Ellie about sex, porn and societal gender roles, Ellie explains that these are unconnected and that he must stop *thinking* about and politicizing sex and instead do what *feels* right (E2). This is a surprising statement, considering the decades of research on sexuality and gender which convincingly show that gendered power relations, sexuality and sexual practices are intimately connected (e.g. Millett 1970). Despite this, it is proven right in the context of the show, as Leo finds that his doubts about sex, dominance and subordination become irrelevant when he, guided by his feelings, meets Lovisa.

Confused men and successful women is a familiar trope in postfeminist "lad flicks" and "lad lit", discussed by David Hansen-Miller and Gill (2011) and Gill (2014). There, women "have it together" while the men, clumsy, lost and unsuccessful, seek maturation. "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". This resembles the confusion of the attempts to walk the talk among the protagonists, and the discussions about sex in *Boys* are also good examples of postfeminism, as Leo gets to voice feminist-sounding ideas which are then refuted by Ellie (who, significantly, is a woman): sex is unconnected to gendered power, instead, individual men need to listen to their hearts.

Another example of postfeminism is the storyline about Pontus in *VVL*. Anna, Pontus' ex-wife, can be compared to the mothers in contemporary Swedish literature, written about by Jenny Björklund (2018), who leave their families due to a lack of gender equality in the family dynamics. Unlike in Björklund's material, it is not suggested that Anna will return to Pontus, but like the fathers Björklund writes about, Pontus grows with the challenge presented by his estranged wife's departure and realises what is most important in his life—his daughter and being there for her—which becomes the solution to Pontus and Anna's conflict. As Björklund (2018: 810f) comments, such depictions of gender inequality reduce it from a structural issue to something that can be addressed by men working on



themselves and their skills. As she argues, this can be understood as a postfeminist phenomenon, where feminist critique is incorporated but also undone: The radical, feminist messages about inequality in the nuclear family are taken into account but transformed into stories about failings of individual men. This is relevant to understanding not only Pontus' storyline, but the attempts to gain insight and "walk the talk" in both shows, where individual failings are rejected in order for the protagonists to become "modern men" with "wise priorities".

The postfeminist representations discussed by Hansen-Miller and Gill portray "lads", a "cultural figure organized around homosocial bonding and predatory and objectifying attitudes towards women" (2011: 37) associated with the working-class. The men in *VVL* and *Boys* have more in common with the respectful, sensitive and nurturing middle-class men Dow (2006) describes, and their focus on emotionality and quest for authenticity, often thought to be "novel or historically unprecedented" in men, connects them with progressiveness (de Boise & Hearn 2017: 787). Even more specifically, I suggest that they should be understood in relation to the cultural figure of the progressive, Swedish man, who is relationship-oriented and close with his (and, in *VVL*, other people's) children (see also Klinth 2002).

The links to Swedishness are produced by geographically situating all characters in Stockholm, the capital, through frequent birds-eye shots and exteriors, and, in *VVL*, through the introduction to each episode. The intro includes "retro" grainy photographs of tennis-player Björn Borg in 1970s haircut and shorts, 1970s anti-nuclear power demonstrations in central Stockholm and children celebrating Lucia (a part of Swedish Christmas celebrations). Other photos, many of which seem to be authentic, portray the four main actors as children and adolescents in row boats, fishing, graduating and doing their military service. The intermingling of these photographs connects the *VVL* characters with a specific, nostalgic rendition of the Swedish welfare state as well as 1970s counterculture, rendering them "products" of this historical and political epoch. The characters, one feels, are adult versions of the children in the anti-nuclear demonstration, part and parcel of a formulation of Sweden that renders it the most politically progressive nation in the world (Hübinette & Lundström 2014).

An important aspect of Swedishness is race. While *VVL* features solely white characters, *Boys* includes several central characters of colour or from minoritised groups such as Leo, Ellie and Alice (Nour El Refai) and is thus significantly more racially diverse. However, all characters have Swedish-sounding names and speak without "foreign" accents, and as neither race, nationality nor ethnicity are mentioned or discussed in *Boys*, the issue of race—highly politicized and often debated in contemporary Sweden—is rendered apolitical: Among the hip, creative,

good-looking characters of *Boys*, race is just another individual characteristic. This is reminiscent of the colour-blind, seemingly anti-racist images of Sweden that Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström (2014) critique, and I suggest that *Boys* connects its protagonists to a slightly different formulation of Swedishness and the Swedish, progressive man than *VVL*; less reliant on whiteness and more dependent on ideas about democracy and (gendered and racial) progressiveness. Thus, *Boys*, like *VVL*, is postfeminist in the sense that feminist critiques are taken into account but transformed into individual projects. Yet, *Boys* incorporates intersectional feminist critiques, making an all-white cast discursively impossible. The postfeminism of *Boys* strips race and racist structures of political meaning, imagining them as already overcome, but it also points to developments in Swedish feminist debates and in ideas about who and what can be considered progressive.

### **Middle-class Men and their Others**

Both *VVL* and *Boys* portray men engaged in gendered self-improvement projects, aimed towards goals of emotionality, sincerity and relationships. These are individual self-improvement projects that connect the shows to postfeminism and to the idea of the progressive Swedish man, albeit in slightly different ways. In this section, I deepen the analysis of the masculine positions produced in both shows by pointing to the importance of class and of various “others”, used to produce meanings around the protagonists.

The self-improvement projects discussed above—ignoring money and status and instead aiming for authenticity, sincerity and becoming yourself, to create music or find a job that feels right—all make sense only when the individual has some degree of financial security. The professions of the protagonists; journalists, antique dealers, book editors and teachers (*VVL*) and musicians (*Boys*) are valued in prestige and to some extent financially, placing the characters in the intellectual middle class. Even if several characters have financial difficulties—Leo borrows money from Viktor, who borrows from his mother in order to pay the rent, and David’s antique store does not seem to leave him very well off—they do not prevent the characters from eating out, partying and buying drugs (*Boys*) nor from living in the affluent, central parts of Stockholm (both shows). In both shows, the life and struggles of the working classes are absent. Mats enters a lower-status profession when he leaves journalism for teaching at a preschool, but he chooses it due to the feeling of authenticity he experiences, not because he has to, and Leo, originally from the less affluent suburb Skärholmen (E5), works part-time as a care-giver for someone, but we do not see Leo at work. Also, at the end of *Boys* (E8) it is indicated that Leo and Viktor are well on their way towards becoming successful musicians, giving them a prestigious, urban, cultural, middle-class position. A

quick glance thus indicates that the middle-class is in focus in both shows, but class is also intertwined with the masculine positions produced in the shows in several other ways.

This is evident in the roles of “other” men, most often characters outside of the friendships. Using comparisons with some men to establish progressiveness in others is well-known from research about “sensitive” men on television (Hanke 1990: 240, Zimdars 2018) and from Swedish gender politics more broadly (Gottzén & Jonsson 2012). From a discursive perspective, “others” work to produce and fixate meaning of a concept through producing an arbitrary border between it and its constitutive outside (Hall 1996: 4).

In *VVL*, the most prominent “other men” are Gösta (Anders Ahlbom), Olle’s estranged father and Klas (Sten Ljunggren), Mats’ father-in-law, both in their 60s. As mentioned above, Gösta left Olle and his mother during Olle’s childhood, and throughout the show, Olle struggles to forgive him while also preparing to become a father himself. A similar trope is noted by Robert Hanke (1990), writing about *thirtysomething* (aired 1987-1991). There, Hanke argues, difference is produced between an old-fashioned and a new-fashioned paternalism; traditional and contemporary fatherhood (1990: 240). This can be compared to this storyline of *VVL*, but the dichotomy is destabilised as Olle is produced as partly unreasonable in his dislike towards Gösta, and Gösta is partly rehabilitated in the eyes of the viewer when we find out that he left because he found true love with another woman, whom he then cared for until she died of cancer.

While Gösta is made partly understandable to the viewer, and thus partly “un-othered”, Klas, Mats’ father-in-law, remains an unsympathetic character to the end. His opinions and values are status-oriented and patriarchal, and he openly dislikes and disregards Mats and his (lack of a) career. “You are driftwood”, he tells Mats in the opening episode, critiquing Mats’ lack of direction. A hundred years ago he could have prevented Mats from marrying Charlotte, he says, clearly indicating that he would have preferred this version of fatherly authority (E1). This marks the character Klas as an old-fashioned patriarch (Hanke 1990), but his conservatism goes beyond his role as a father. In later episodes, when Mats finally starts feeling at home as a preschool teacher, Klas tells him it is embarrassing for a man to do such work, implicitly due to its feminized and classed status. Mats is persuaded by Klas to take a job at his firm, and when he manages to make a profitable deal or two, Klas changes his opinion of him and invites Mats to join his men’s club. While Mats ultimately rejects Klas’ offer and proudly goes back to being a preschool teacher, Klas’ shallowness remains unquestioned.

The portrayals of Klas and Gösta show that age and generation is rendered less important than class, wealth and occupation in the production of contrasts between the main characters and the “other men” of *VVL*. Gösta is a university

teacher as well as a devoted trainer of young fencers, and he is portrayed as part of the same intellectual middle-class as the four protagonists. However, Klas is the owner of a successful shipbroking firm, and thus a part of the wealthy business elite, always in a dark suit and member of an elite men's club. Throughout *VVL* this sphere of society is portrayed as interested only in status and unaware of the insincerity and shallowness of its goals, while the intellectual middle-class, to which the four main characters belong, acts as a contrast.

Clothing is significant in the discursive production of differences between men in *VVL*, as upper-class characters from the business world consistently wear dark suits while the protagonists wear hipster-ish clothing. As Lauren Jade Thompson (2015: 26) remarks in her article about US TV show *How I Met Your Mother*, "the suit seems to function as a visual motif for an older, more traditional, outdated masculinity"—in this case, associated with men from the upper classes. As Thompson remarks, the suit also has the effect of exposing masculinity as a charade, since anyone can wear it or take it off. In line with this, on the verge of being included in Klas' elite men's club, Mats wears a dark blue suit, albeit matched with a loud, polka-dotted tie. At first, he is tempted: "you represent strength, intelligence, power and success", he says, but the authenticity associated with the preschool children wins, and Mats un masks the charade: "The right clothes, self-esteem built on money and some kind of shallow image of success [...] I am a preschool teacher and that is a job that deserves respect and reverence, and that is my contribution to society. I say no thank you to this" (E10).

Contrast between the protagonists and the upper classes is also produced in the depiction of the cigar-smoking, formal, and privileged homosociality between the men in the club, and the relaxed and emotionally open, warm friendships between the main characters. Also, Klas and other members of the upper classes are repeatedly described as old-fashioned, a concept that, in *VVL*, symbolizes both sexism and shallowness. This is not surprising, given the discursive connections between gender equality, progress and modernity pointed to in other research (e.g. Hübnette & Lundström 2014). In *VVL*, it renders the protagonists modern and progressive, but, as previously mentioned, Gösta, roughly the same age as Klas, is not depicted as similarly old-fashioned. Old-fashionedness and unprogressiveness are thus linked primarily to the upper classes and their alleged opinions, not to generational differences. In this way, the show normalizes and idealizes the middle-class, producing it as uniquely sincere and authentic.

In *Boys*, the most prominent "other man" is Christian Bassi (Matias Varela), an internationally successful house DJ who is asked to make a re-mix of one of Viktor and Leo's soft, falsetto, indie electronic songs. The distinction between Bassi and Leo and Viktor is produced through their music, their display of emotions as well as their politics rather than through class, but the distinction

is unstable. At the outset, Bassi is constructed as a tough, laddish and sexist man who, nevertheless, claims to be a feminist (E3). However, after having heard him talk about women and how to ensure heterosexual prowess, Viktor and Leo have an agitated discussion about his politics and whether they should collaborate with him at all: “And *he* calls himself a feminist!” (E3). When Viktor and Leo give voice to their ambivalence about Bassi’s remix of their song, Bassi becomes aggressive and threatening, calling them “fucking hipster faggots” (E5). Homophobic slurs such as “faggots” are never used by Viktor and Leo, who, compared to Bassi, are produced as “real” feminists as well as sensitive and non-aggressive men.

However, this distinction is destabilized when Leo and Bassi meet by accident and apologize, smoke a joint and share an emotional moment. In this scene, Bassi explains his laddish and tough behaviour:

B: The thing was, that when I grew up there were two ways to get laid. Either you were a relatively good football player, or you were damned tough.

L: Umm. So, you became tough in order to meet girls?

B: Yes. And after a while you become tough in a negative way

L: That “fake it ‘til you make it” thing. Exactly.

B: Yes, fake it ‘til you make it, and then you stand there being a damned cold dude and say stupid stuff and don’t think about how people feel and perhaps you beat someone up who doesn’t deserve it...to get laid.

L: Weird, that one enters into that...

B: But, hell, look at you, you have your thing going, you’re some kind of mysterious poet in sandals, I mean, you came up with all that shit. You didn’t wake up one day: “oh shit, a pair of sandals!”

L: It’s everybody’s need for love and valorisation, like, you want to feel that... I deserve to be loved, I deserve your love, your love and on my... and I’m looking for my truth here in life.

B: Yes! You say the same thing that I do, but I am trying to say it in a cool way. It’s the same shit... (E7, my translation)

In this dialogue, Bassi is produced as an emotional and insightful man, beneath his rough surface. The dialogue becomes comprehensible in relation to ideas about a multi-layered self, where the surface and the “deep”, allegedly more genuine self, need not correspond. This can be connected to what Eva Illouz (2008) calls “the therapeutic discourse”, a mix of various approaches within psychology that have become popularised and disseminated during the twentieth century, which posits goals such as self-realisation, health and maturity, primarily through verbal disclosure. This discourse functions as a way of structuring and making sense of the self and of personal relationships, and Leo and Bassi refer to it when discussing their deep-down longing for love and validation. Similar thoughts are present in contemporary meaning-making processes regarding how men understand norms of masculinity (Goedecke 2018) and have been present in Swedish gender debates since the 1960s, in ideas about an underlying, essentially un-gendered, authentic self, obscured by demands on men to live up to the “male role”, from which they need liberation (Klinth 2002: 91ff). In this debate, as well as in *Boys*, individual men “seeing through” expectations to be masculine becomes the solution to sexism and violence among men and doing so is seen as being in men’s own interests, that is, benefitting men as well as women.

These ideas also help link Leo and Bassi to the middle-class. Beverly Skeggs (2011: 497) argues that “the idea of the self with depth and interiority is linked ideologically to the ascendancy of the white middle-class”. Illouz suggests that a certain emotional style, emphasising self-consciousness, nervousness and being verbal and reflexive is linked to the middle-classes, marking “a form of social distinction” (2008: 222) and contributing to the formation of a verbally and emotionally skilled, allegedly healthy and mature masculine position (2008: 231). This classed and gendered construction is discernible in both shows, which in slightly different ways tie class to the ability to prioritize relationships, emotions, sincerity and authenticity, and to being what is considered a progressive man. Most often, it is the working classes that are portrayed as old-fashioned and as holding “retrogressive”, “dreadful gender assumptions” (Lawler 2005: 435), but, notably, in *VVL* it is the upper classes that are used as the constitutive outside, whose insincerity and shallowness produce the protagonists as sincere and insightful.

In *Boys*, stable distinctions between different men dissolve as both Bassi’s tough, laddish style and Leo’s softer, bohemian persona are exposed as charades. The othering of Bassi ceases, and together with Leo, he is portrayed as “seeing through” gendered and sexualized expectations. In pointing this out, *Boys*, unlike *VVL*, draws attention to the performative nature and instability of all masculine positions, including progressive positions, but it also depicts all men as, deep down, seeking to be progressive. As with the topic of race, *Boys* portrays and speaks to a wider range of men, which could correspond to changes in how the

progressive, Swedish man is envisioned. While this can be seen as positive, it has the added effect of portraying men from all classes as having incorporated feminist ideas. In line with Dow's argument about men being freed from responsibility, seeing as they are portrayed as "supportive of the feminist project" (Dow 2006: 122), *Boys* exonerates all men, not just those from the intellectual middle-class, from responsibility for gendered power relations.

### **Friendship, Intimacy and Homoeroticism**

The depictions of friendship in *VVL* and *Boys* differ not only from the homosociality of Klas' elite men's club but also from many other portrayals in contemporary television in the absence of homophobic jokes and their emphasis on closeness, conversations and touch between the protagonists. In this section, I focus on how the friendships are portrayed in the shows, particularly on aspects of intimacy, homoeroticism and homophobia.

The characters of *VVL* are portrayed together in a variety of contexts: Mats' wedding party and stag night, when helping Pontus move to a new house, at restaurants and cafés, at the hospital, in the characters' homes and at the weekly dinners, during which they take turns cooking. These dinners take place in the semi-public arena of David's antique store/apartment, which functions as a homosocial and private space during the evenings and a public space where new characters can be introduced during the daytime. The men are repeatedly portrayed hugging each other and at one point drunkenly sleeping on top of each other in a taxi (E1). However, their main activity is talking, and they talk about a wide range of subjects, particularly feelings, family, relationships, health, and work.

The characters of *Boys* are portrayed confiding in each other, singing and smoking marijuana together, talking about feelings, music, dreams and sex, baking together and watching TV. Younger than the *VVL* protagonists, they share an apartment and spend much time together. They are also portrayed as physically close: they hug, stroke each other, trim their body hair, and, at one time, take a bath together (E3). In this scene, Leo invites Viktor to share his bath, and after some hesitation, Viktor agrees. As he steps into the tub, he covers his genitals and tells Leo about his insecurity regarding his penis size. Leo, relaxed, takes a look at Viktor's penis and says "but that's great!" and continues, "almost the same size! Mine might be a little longer, but yours is broader!" Notably, the scene, while involving considerable physical intimacy and homoerotic potential, abstains from homophobic jokes and reassurances of the characters' heterosexuality, though it leaves the importance of penis size unquestioned. Instead, Viktor reveals his insecurities and receives reassurance and comfort from Leo.

A queer reading of this scene is certainly possible, but the absence of homoeroticism *and* homophobia complicates the suitability of such an analysis.<sup>3</sup> The scene referred to at the outset of the article, where Leo and Viktor hug and proclaim their love for each other, is a similar example. While they indeed can be seen as “ending up” together, this scene is preceded by Viktor getting together with Ellie and Leo making up with Lovisa over the phone. Viktor and Leo’s demonstration of love thus coincides with successful performances of heterosexuality. As Jillian Sandell (1996: 24) suggests, writing about men’s friendships in films by John Woo, “relegating male intimacy to the realm of homosexuality [...] offers little to challenge contemporary stereotypes about gender and sexuality”. Hansen-Miller and Gill (2011: 45) argue that the “lad flicks” they study contain ironized messages “simultaneously enact[ing] and mocking [...] homophobia”, which I suggest is applicable here. The bathroom scene from *Boys* is reflexive about several layers of cultural expectations around men’s friendships, including ideas about men’s friendships as permeated by competition and teasing. In abstaining from such portrayals, the show shows its awareness of feminist critiques of these friendships. Also, by knowingly excluding homophobic comments in a situation where they would not have been unexpected, the show rejects ideas about closeness between men as permeated by (the hiding of) homoerotic desire, which constitutes both a mocking of homophobia and, paradoxically, a reassurance about the characters’ heterosexuality. This reflexiveness represents a postfeminist taking into account of feminist critiques of homophobia and competitiveness in men’s friendships.

The friendships in *VVL* and *Boys* can be connected to developments in how intimacy between men is portrayed on television. *Friends*, the US TV show about six friends living in Manhattan, which aired from 1994 until 2004, portrays heterosexism as central to bonding between men. For instance, Joey and Chandler, two characters in *Friends*, bond by watching *Baywatch* and commenting on the sexiness of the female actors (Iglebæk 2000, Feasey 2008). Hugging between the male characters is accompanied by jokes, and the “mistaken sexual identity plot” (Becker 2014: 237) occurs, familiar also from *Seinfeld* (aired 1989-1998), where two male friends are mistakenly interpreted as a gay couple. However, in television from the last decade the mistaken sexual identity plot is absent (Becker 2014, Lotz 2014). Ron Becker argues that this can be connected to increased visibility and acceptance of non-straight sexual orientations in an alleged post-closet era, where homosexuality is seen as equivalent to being “out”. This suggests an end to homophobia and an assumption that all LGBTQ people are “out”, while anybody who is not “out” is heterosexual. Becker’s views hold many similarities to postfeminist notions of homophobia already having been dealt with (Gill 2017: 615).



According to Becker, this discourse effects a strengthening of boundaries between straightness and non-normative sexual orientations, since sexual orientations are understood as stable and observable rather than fluid, ambivalent or hidden, as identities rather than practices. It does not decentre heterosexuality, which stays a taken-for-granted point of departure, and it contains multiple problematic and overly optimistic assumptions about sexuality and the state of sexual politics. However, this discourse does enable more multi-faceted portrayals of men's friendships, since a wider set of practices become available when (hetero) sexuality is seen as manifest and stable.

This, I suggest, is relevant to understanding *VVL* and *Boys*. Homophobia is absent, but heterosexuality remains central in both shows. Heterosexuality and family life are central to many of the *VVL* narratives about personal development discussed above. Additionally, Viktor and Leo's time together, whether working on their music or hanging out, is frequently interrupted by text messages from or meet-ups with their respective love interests, which always take precedence. When potential girlfriends get in touch, friends must wait; friendships are more stable but also less significant than romantic relations with women. In *VVL*, homosexuality and other non-normative sexual orientations are wholly absent, and in *Boys*, the only instance when a non-heterosexual orientation is suggested is when Alice, Viktor's love interest, disappears with a female dancer during a party (E7). Viktor's hopes of getting together with Alice are finally vanquished, and he leaves the party. Here, too, we can find an interesting parallel with *Friends*: in *Friends*, Ross' wife leaving him for a woman is constantly remarked upon and shown to emasculate Ross, but in *Boys*, Alice's sexual orientation is not remarked upon, and the fact that Viktor, it is implied, is "dumped" for a woman is not depicted as emasculating or as adding to his heartbreak.

As Gill notes, the idea that homophobia is an issue that has already been dealt with has a lot in common with other postfeminist ideas, as it renders struggles for recognition and against normativities obsolete. In the context of men's friendships, it produces openings for intimacy between men while the intimacy is simultaneously rendered harmless in terms of its ability to disrupt normative heterosexuality. Thus, the touch and closeness between the characters is rendered asexual, de-radicalized and "homosocialised" (see also Goedecke 2018: 230). In *VVL* and *Boys*, the absence of homophobia enables new portrayals of men's friendships. The heterosexuality of the Swedish, progressive man can be preserved (Järvklo 2008) while his progressiveness is never questioned.

## Conclusion: Swedish Postfeminism

In this article I have discussed portrayals of gendered positions as well as relationships in *Våra vänner liv* (2010) and *Boys* (2015) in relation to race, class,

sexuality and Swedish ideologies of gender equality. I have shown that both shows can be understood as postfeminist, albeit in slightly different ways. Gill (2016: 612) highlights the need to make distinctions between different kinds of mediated feminisms, and with this in mind, I argue that the shows are examples of postfeminism with a distinctly Swedish twist, informed by Swedish ideologies of gender equality. These ideologies include a strong focus on men as gender-political subjects, especially as fathers, who should grow softer and more emotional by spending time with their children and form a dual-carer, dual-earner family with a woman. Also, gender equality is assumed to benefit everyone (Klinth 2002), and the shows communicate this ideology: All women in *VVL* and *Boys* are portrayed as professionally successful while the protagonists are striving to be more authentic, listen to their hearts and prioritize relationships, which in *VVL* often involve children.

The differences between the shows suggest that there have been discursive developments in formulations of feminism and progressiveness in Sweden. No doubt connected to the still-ongoing lively debates about immigration, racism and the links between whiteness and how Swedishness is formulated (Hübinette & Lundström 2014), *Boys* portrays a multiracial, albeit colour-blind Sweden. While an all-white cast made discursive sense when attempting to portray Sweden and Swedish men as progressive in 2010, it did not in 2015. Also, *Boys* portrays Swedish men irrespective of class as engaged in the project of progressiveness and personal insight. For this reason, I suggest that *VVL* enters into dialogue with a feminism predominantly interested in gendered power relations, while *Boys* engages with a more intersectional rendition of feminism, where more same-sex touch is possible, whiteness cannot be taken for granted, and class cannot be subject to simple dichotomizations.

Postfeminism does not constitute an unequivocal rejection of feminism (Gill 2016: 621); instead, postfeminism promotes but also commodifies and deradicalizes feminism. The shows I have studied do not explicitly reject the variations of feminism they engage with; on the contrary, they are prominent and celebrated. Both shows portray Swedish society as at the threshold of gender equality; there is an awareness that progressiveness risks becoming “just talk”, but both shows portray men as engaged in “walking the talk”. However, feminist critiques of racial, classed and gendered injustices as well as lingering non-progressiveness in men is deradicalized even in *Boys*, as injustices based on race, class or gender are portrayed as already dealt with. It is the struggles against individual temptations and problems, the lingering remnants of non-progressive masculinity, that constitute the “walking”, which the protagonists at last succeed at. Thus, in this rendition of postfeminism, women are not blamed for gendered injustices as Dow (1996) suggests; instead, it is individual men’s work on themselves that stands between Sweden and gender justice (see also Björklund 2018).

Postfeminism entails the muting of vocabularies for talking about structural inequalities and cultural influence (Gill 2016: 613), and it is connected to dominant ideologies like individualism and neoliberalism. Individualism has been shown to be relevant in these shows, but the interplay between these aspects in the Swedish context as well as how postfeminism can be used to deepen the understanding of how feminisms are taken up and renegotiated in contemporary Sweden need to be discussed in greater depth. This would be particularly relevant for ideas about gender-equal Swedish men. Thus, both the “talk” and the “walk” of Swedish postfeminism needs further scrutiny.

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## Notes

- 1 From the lyrics of the theme music of *VVL*: “Cry no more tears” by Sweet Chariots.
- 2 To walk the talk means performing actions consistent with one’s claims. (Wikipedia 2020)
- 3 One analytical option could be to use Eric Anderson’s and colleagues’ (Anderson 2005, McCormack & Anderson 2010) optimistic theory about a weakening of “homohysteria” in contemporary western contexts, giving rise to “inclusive masculinities” to whom same-sex touch is accepted and normal. However, Anderson’s theory has been convincingly critiqued by several scholars for containing multiple problems, such as not taking power relations, not just between men but between women and men, into sufficient account and taking the practices of some men to indicate wider changes in gender formations (de Boise 2015, O’Neill 2015).

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