

POSTFEMINIST VERSIONS OF EQUALITY?

An Analysis of Relationship and Sex Counseling Practices in Finland

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Relationship and sex counseling are pivotal components of the “therapeutization of society,” which has been identified and widely examined as a key transformation of 21st-century modern Western societies. The particular understandings of gender and sexuality that circulate in those practices contribute to the wider everyday conceptions of intimate life and are thus important to investigate from a feminist perspective. Combining insights from studies on therapeutic cultures, research on intimate relationships, scholarship on postfeminism, and affect theory, this article taps into the often ambivalent ways in which gender equality and sexual rights are articulated in relationship and sex counseling practices. My data are derived from an ethnographic investigation of relationship enhancement events in Finland. Equality was widely supported at these events, but there was no consensus regarding what desirable equality actually looked like. My analysis identifies several contradictory patterns in the data. First, there are statements to the effect that equality has “gone too far.” Second, many experts express tokenized critiques yet remain invested in depoliticizing views. Third, there are acts of resistance that embrace diversity and expand everyday understandings of

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gender and sexuality. I argue that these patterns constitute a postfeminist sensibility, thus complicating the belief that Nordic countries are exceptionally supportive of equality.

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Nordic countries, such as, Finland rank highly in international equality measurements and are often considered exceptionally democratic. Nevertheless, it has proved more challenging in these countries to tackle gender equality in the realm of the intimate than in sites, such as education, work, or politics (e.g., Jokinen 2004; Jurva and Lahti 2019; Kolehmainen and Juvonen 2018; Magnusson 2008). Although consensus prevails in Finland regarding the importance of gender equality, there is no consensus on what this equality should actually look like. Likewise, Nordic countries are known for their advocacy of sexual rights (Lottes 2013) and are hailed internationally as queer utopias (Kjaraan 2017; Whitney 2017), but progressive legislation does not translate into unquestionable collective support for LGBTIQ + rights (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer and/or questioning people where + is an acknowledgement of the non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identities that are not included in the initialism). In light of this, it is unsurprising that gender equality and sexual rights are supported in the myriad practices of relationship and sex counseling, almost without exception. However, questions such as how exactly counseling professionals and lay experts should understand equality remain unexplored.

In this article, I examine articulations of gender equality and sexual rights in Finnish relationship and sex counseling practices, analyzing data collected from a variety of relationship enhancement seminars. Such events are pivotal components of the “therapeutization of society”: the pervasiveness of psychological practices and discourses in everyday life. This phenomenon has been identified as a key transformation of late-modern western societies and constitutes a significant transnational industry (e.g., Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008; Salmenniemi 2017) to the extent that some scholars talk about “therapy culture” (Furedi 2004). Contemporary therapeutic cultures promote endless self-surveillance, self-diagnosis, and self-management (Furedi 2004; Swan 2008). Such cultures encompass a wide range of practices and services, at both professional and popular levels: individual therapy and counseling; group or family therapy; self-enhancement workshops; self-help books; media and digital materials; advice columns (e.g., Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008; Salmenniemi et al. 2019). For instance, relationship and sex counseling is delivered through a range

of options beyond private sessions, from marriage camps to self-help books. The emphasis has shifted from preventing divorce to taking care of relationships (Maksimainen 2014; Malinen 2018), so even people who are not actively seeking help can browse advice columns, attend experts' lectures, or otherwise expose themselves to the therapeutic realm.

Although the therapeutization of society has been widely explored, much less is known about collective therapy events. Nevertheless, the therapeutic field offers a site for renegotiating gender relations and identities (Salmenniemi and Kempainen 2020), which makes it a fertile object of feminist exploration. Indeed, relationship enhancement seminars can be seen as field-configuring events that have crucial influence on field evolution (Lampel and Meyer 2008). Although of limited duration, they assemble a variety of actors in one location and are occasions for information exchange and collective sense-making, generating resources that can be deployed elsewhere (Lampel and Meyer 2008). The observation of relationship enhancement seminars thus reveals collective sense-making processes regarding intimacy, gender, sexuality, and sex. Furthermore, these events may influence intimate practices by renewing, challenging, or "queering" the counseling field. Whereas previous feminist scholarship has produced important insights, especially into mediated intimacy—the ways in which mediated advice and other media forms constitute everyday understandings of intimacy (Barker, Gill, and Harvey 2018; also see Attwood et al. 2015; Gill 2009; O'Neill 2018)—in this article, I enrich current scholarship by providing a unique viewpoint into relationship enhancement seminars.

Relationship enhancement events comprise a contested field where diverse views of gender and sexuality manifest, mesh, and clash. Hence, their investigation is relevant for feminist politics and scholarship. Intersecting power relations shape these practices: on one hand, by advancing some groups' access to counseling services while limiting others' options for support; on the other hand, renewing hierarchies by positioning certain groups as in need of intervention and advice. For instance, conventionally mixed-sex couples are supported by the availability of a variety of counseling options, which further renew heteronormative values by privileging heterosexuality in other ways (Hudak and Giammattei 2014; McGeorge and Carlson 2011; Moon 2010a). Fewer counseling options are available for same-sex couples, whose relationships have lacked strong social support (Moon 2010a; also see Lahti and Kolehmainen 2020). In heterosexual relationships, women are addressed as responsible for their relationships (Kolehmainen 2010), and working-class women in particular are addressed as in need of advice (Yesilova 2008). Previous studies also indicate that the definitions of problems and the advice given

favor middle-class heterosexual men (e.g., Gill 2009; Pernrud 2007). In this vein, this study contests the assumed gender neutrality of the therapeutic realm (Swan 2019).

In this article, I also promote the importance of feminist approaches to the study of relationship and sex counseling practices, beyond issues predefined as relevant to sexuality or gender. The relevance of feminist approaches to the study of therapeutic engagements has been recognized with regard to a limited number of specific issues, such as counseling for nonheterosexual clients (Hudak and Giammattei 2014; Moon 2010a) or trans and nonbinary clients' access to hormone treatment (e.g., Moon 2010b; Whitehead et al. 2012). When it comes to cisgendered heterosexual clients, the importance of feminist approaches has mainly been recognized when the counseling focuses on gendered phenomena, such as intimate partner violence (e.g., Päivinen 2016). However, international studies indicate that perceptions concerning gender expectations in relationships and gender equality affect relationship satisfaction. These studies stress that partners' perceptions of equal relationships increase marital satisfaction (Pollitt, Robinson, and Umberson 2018) and that whereas harmonious mixed-sex couples do not emphasize gender differences, relationship problems fuel the contrasts between women and men (Hatakka 2011). Feminist scholarship on sex advice has also provided tools to challenge other normativities related to intimate relationships, such as mononormativity (the assumed naturalness of monogamy) or the sexual imperative (the idea that every human must experience sexual attraction) (Barker, Gill, and Harvey 2018).

In what follows, I investigate how gender equality and sexual rights are articulated in relationship and sex counseling practices in Finland. For this study, I combine insights from studies on therapeutic cultures, research on intimate relationships, scholarship on postfeminism, and affect theory. As a point of departure, I assume that this kind of combination provides a necessary lens through which to view the often nuanced, ambivalent ways in which gender equality and sexual rights are articulated. Through participant observation in relationship enhancement seminars, I found that gender equality was widely taken for granted, openly supported, or referenced. However, experts would often first refer to equality discourses and then go on to mobilize gendered stereotypes or promote heteronormative values. Instead of trying to "fix" or stabilize the meaning of these encounters, I take the ambivalence as an object of analysis. I identify three articulations in the data: ambivalent statements concerning equality "gone too far"; a token norm-criticalness that seemingly supports gender equality and sexual rights; and acts of resistance that embrace diversity and

expand everyday understandings of gender and sexuality. These articulations highlight that the therapy field entails a postfeminist sensibility—I understand postfeminism as referring not to a backlash toward feminism but as contradictory positions toward feminism, such as the simultaneous coexistence of the continuity of misogyny and the change brought by feminist movements (Gill 2017)—thus complementing our understanding of gender equality and sexual rights in Finland. Furthermore, my analysis develops previous scholarship on the affective, cultural, and psychic life of postfeminism (Gill 2017) by providing novel insights into the nuanced registers that foster inequalities.

EQUALITY IN THEORY, POSTFEMINISM IN PRACTICE?

Finland is one of the Nordic welfare states, which are seen as exceptionally democratic and often as trailblazers in relation to (the partly overlapping areas of) gender equality and sexual rights. In Nordic countries, gender equality is a commonly accepted goal, and relevant struggles mainly comprise debates concerning how to define and understand gender equality and related issues, such as the policies needed to promote equality (Kantola, Koskinen Sandberg, and Ylöstalo 2020). But as Magnusson (2008) remarks, gender equality faces resistance in Nordic countries too. Magnusson, who studied Danish, Finnish, and Swedish heterosexual couples, concluded that these couples were in favor of gender equality on a general level, but were personally opposed to having more equal relationships. They legitimized their views by referring to individual differences between partners, or by relying on naturalized gender differences (Magnusson 2005, 2008). Those whose relationships are less conventional also use similar strategies. Jurva and Lahti (2019) explore unconventional relationships in Finland, such as older women's relationships with younger men, and bisexual women's relationships. They stress that their interviewees, too, locate inequality in other people's relationships or explain unequal situations as the result of individual differences.

The strong ideal of equality also manifests in Nordic countries' relationship and sex counseling practices. Feminist scholars have criticized these practices for rendering equality an ideal rather than putting it into practice. Päivinen (2016) summarizes her insights from therapy sessions in Finland by stating that the ideal of equality may be explicit, but potential ways of realizing that ideal in everyday life are not properly supported. Eldén (2011) investigates Swedish popular psychology, remarking that potential

problems in couple relationships are not associated with gender inequality but become disarticulated from structural inequalities and cultural norms concerning gender. Consequently, issues that stem from gender inequality are seen as connected only to individual traits. Furthermore, the gender-neutral framing of couple relationships paradoxically allows for the renewal of gendered stereotypes because the problems mixed-sex couples face appear coincidental and unique (Eldén 2011). In a similar vein, Danielsen, Ludvigsen, and Mühleisen (2012), who studied a publicly funded and organized relationship course in Denmark, argue that although the counseling practices were harnessed to serve the ideals of equality and democracy, the premises—such as the assumption that partners were already on an equal footing—were problematic. The ideal of equality did not enable participants to recognize inequalities, nor did it provide them with tools to tackle power asymmetries.

In addition to gender equality, Nordic countries have been seen as trailblazers of sexual rights, which they have actively promoted—for instance, by providing sexuality education in public schools (Lottes 2013; also see Helén and Yesilova 2006). Sexual rights can be categorized into “negative” rights, which foreground protection from coercion and violence, and “positive” rights to access sexual information, express oneself sexually, and experience sexual pleasure (Albury 2017). Yet as with gender equality, no consensus prevails regarding which rights should be emphasized (Lottes 2013). Reproductive rights, free abortion, and sexual health are widely available, but there are still challenges, especially regarding gender and sexual diversity. In Finland, the rights of same-sex couples and families have been extended as the result of a long political campaign in the 2010s. My interest in the exploration of sexual rights arose from the ongoing politicization of LGBTIQ+ rights and from my overall aim to study how sexuality is addressed at relationship enhancement events.

As mentioned above, in my data, both gender equality and sexual rights were widely supported. In Nordic countries, equality rather than feminism is the prevailing concept, at state and public levels as well as in academic scholarship (Mühleisen 2007). However, it has been argued that the equality discourse is ill suited to address certain phenomena, especially in contexts where equality is seen as already achieved (Hasanen, Koivunen, and Kolehmainen 2010). I maintain that the therapeutic field both manifests and entails a distinct postfeminist sensibility, where different and even contradictory positions toward feminism coexist (Gill 2017; Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017). Although academic debates concerning postfeminism have taken place mainly in the United States and United Kingdom, postfeminism

circulates globally, and it has been imported and domesticated in other countries—including beyond the West (Dosekun 2015; Salmenniemi and Adamson 2015). Hence, to speak of postfeminism as a sensibility is to speak of a constellation of beliefs, ideas, and practices that are dynamic, travel, and change (Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017). Aligning with scholars who have located ambivalence at the heart of postfeminist sensibility (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020; Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013), I therefore seek to situate my findings in relation to international scholarship on postfeminism, rather than framing it in terms of Nordic state feminism alone.

A closer look at my data revealed that there were many contradictions and ambivalences in regard to gender equality and sexual rights, pinpointing that the mere showcasing of support for gender equality or sexual rights reveals little about how counseling practices advance, or fail to advance, these ideals. In what follows, I therefore use the term “postfeminism” analytically: it is an object of analysis, not a descriptive notion (Gill 2017). This approach is suitable for describing observable empirical regularities in contemporary beliefs about gender equality and sexual rights (Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017). A lens on postfeminism contributes to a better understanding of the contested relationship between sexuality and therapeutic practices, as my analysis will demonstrate.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

My data consist of ethnographic investigations of relationship enhancement seminars. This methodological approach seeks to overcome the three major limitations that have restricted scholarly understandings of the therapeutization of society. First, my study provides insights into therapeutic practices beyond the genre of self-help. Most previous scholarly critiques of the therapeutization of society have focused on self-help, to the extent that it has become a gloss for therapeutic practice as a whole (Swan 2019). Second, by engaging in participant observation at a range of events, my study provides an alternative to top-down approaches that advance a macro-sociological take on the topic. The most pertinent schools of thought to date have been concerned mainly with how therapeutic discourses are mobilized to govern populations under contemporary capitalism (Salmenniemi 2017). Finally, the study makes complex the previous accounts derived from textual analyses. A wide range of studies have focused on discourse, creating the problematic impression that therapeutic practitioners are passive receivers of ideological interpellations

(Salmenniemi et al. 2019; Swan 2019). The actual “happening” of therapy events, with their distinct affective features—such as atmospheres, embodied experiences, or affective registers—has rarely been elaborated on. However, affect as a concept advances a shift away from the study of therapeutic discourses, thus enabling a novel focus on embodiment (Kolehmainen 2019a). In particular, thinking with affect is useful for analyzing how certain understandings of gender and sexuality take manifold forms beyond linguistic meaning making.

When starting my research, I was interested to discover what comprised the field of Finnish relationship and sex counseling practices as a whole. Therefore, I decided not to make a “cut” by separating formal and informal counseling (Barad 2007). Methodological cuts make some aspects of the explored phenomenon visible while hiding others, and the researcher is responsible for the cuts made through such boundary drawing (Coleman and Ringrose 2013). I did not make any *a priori* cuts based on the actual or assumed content of therapy events.

I attended events employing professionals such as certified couple counselors, psychotherapists, and sex counselors, as well as events featuring lay experts such as “experts by experience,” or social media influencers. The decision to include all kinds of event advanced my aim to consider relationship and sex counseling practices as a field. I understand these diverse events as multiple sites, in the anthropological sense. Multisited ethnography (Hannerz 2003; Marcus 1995) is needed when the object of study is a social phenomenon that cannot be accessed by research in one site alone. Hence, the data collection was designed to provide rich information on the diverse field, rather than to focus only on certain events. I attended approximately 40 events between 2015 and 2017 and gathered data through participant observation. The data additionally include a few events that were attended by a research assistant or fell outside the time frame. As a white, middle-class ciswoman in my thirties at the time of the data collection, I was able to “fit in” with relative ease, especially because the events usually had either a mixed-sex or a predominantly female audience; a couple of events catered specifically to women. Whenever possible and appropriate, I wrote field notes by hand during the events; occasionally, I took photos with my smartphone or used my phone to write notes electronically. In all cases, I would then produce more extensive notes afterward, integrating my experiences and reflections. As I considered my study an affective ethnography (Gherardi 2019), my notes did not seek to replicate the events in a distanced, “objective” manner. The strength of this approach lies not in the accurate representation of events but in its suitability to consider the affective,

cultural, and psychic elements that characterize those events and contribute to participants' experiences. The data collection was completed and supported by the gathering of additional materials, such as leaflets and guides.

The majority of the events I observed were targeted at "ordinary" couples, or at people who had been in or were seeking committed relationships. They ranged from relationship enhancement seminars to a tantric workshop, and from events for the recently separated to themed lectures. They did not address particular issues faced by individual clients or couples. Rather, the topics were general: for example, well-being, sexuality, separation, or simply couple relationships. Some of the more specific topics covered relationship rules, handling finances as a couple, or addiction. The events were collective, public, or semipublic occasions, held in different cities at venues ranging from public libraries to hotels. Some were organized by nongovernmental organizations or public institutions and charged no attendance fee; others were organized by religious or spiritual communities and were free or low-priced; yet others were commercial events with attendance fees, sponsoring companies, and sales of related products. Many had only a handful of participants, but the most popular attracted so many attendees that the venues struggled to cater for them all. My participant observation was fully or partially covert: I might contact the organizers of smaller events on potentially sensitive topics in advance to request access, but I just walked into larger public events. I considered this option the most ethical one, as I did not want my presence to distract participants from seeking advice, even if I did not hide my academic interests in potential encounters with participants.

The data analysis process was two-staged. First, I separated out occasions where gender equality or sexual rights became topical. I made tentative analyses by organizing the data thematically, yet at the same time I developed a sense of the data as entailing ambivalent and contradictory positions toward the issues of gender equality and sexual rights. Rather than trying to "fix" or stabilize the meanings of these occasions, I sought to acknowledge the multiplicity and ambiguity of the data. Nevertheless, as a result of this work I was able to identify the three distinct articulations that are introduced and discussed in detail in this article. Second, I continued the data analysis using tools from the emerging scholarship on affective methodologies (Knudsen and Stage 2015). Following Ahmed's (2004) notion of the productive role of affects, I sought to map how gendered and sexualized power relations are produced through affective registers. I therefore reexamined the three articulations from this relational perspective, which departs from the analysis of single, clearly named affects (Kolehmainen and Juvonen 2018). While this approach works with named

or otherwise expressed emotions, it also reaches beyond subjective, individual feeling by foregrounding impersonal capacities to affect and become affected (e.g., Clough 2008; Seyfert 2012).

As mentioned above, I found three ambivalent patterns in the data. First, there are statements to the effect that equality has gone too far, and these often portray men as victims. Second, many experts express awareness of the dangers of making generalizations, and make token critiques of norms to demonstrate that they are mindful of gendered stereotypes and sexual diversity, even while they remain invested in deeply depoliticizing views. Third, there are acts of resistance: Many embrace diversity and seek to expand everyday understandings of gender and sexuality. The coexistence of these three articulations both demonstrates and contributes to postfeminist sensibility. The notion of “sensibility” calls attention to features that operate through affect, public mood, atmosphere, or “structure of feeling,” and that might be missed with an approach that centers only on language (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020). In what follows, I provide detailed analyses of these three patterns. All names are pseudonyms, and in some places, I have altered or omitted other information for ethical reasons.

Equality Gone Too Far?

The data include several instances where gender equality is framed not only as having been achieved but as having “gone too far.” These occasions have different foci, but all articulate a pattern where equality is not regarded as a goal to strive for; rather, women already have too much power. Often men are portrayed as victims or an oppressed group, but there are also instances that construct women’s advanced position as a disadvantage for women themselves. Nevertheless, men’s entitlement to power is particularly at stake, as many are concerned about men’s position in couple relationships. For instance, Daniel, a psychologist and couples counselor, articulates his views on contemporary couple relationships and their challenges during a lecture in which he proposes that women nowadays boss men around. Daniel emphasizes gender difference as an essential part of couple dynamics. The reanimation of a language of gender difference has been identified as a recurrent feature of postfeminist sensibility (Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017; Salmenniemi and Adamson 2015). Reliance on a binary understanding of gender is also visible in Daniel’s suggestion that gender difference is a major challenge to couple relationships:

Men have become too nice, empathetic, they are too afraid to disagree with their girlfriends, they do not dare to say that “we won’t buy this mattress.” . . . Man says no, woman starts to cry, man says “let’s buy it.” Woman feels that she can boss the guy around.

Men are portrayed here as the victims of women’s power over them, making this a stellar example of the postfeminist argument that equality has “gone too far” (Hasanen, Koivunen, and Kolehmainen 2010; McRobbie 2009), as well as the idea that women are the new dominant gender (Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013). Daniel’s claim concerning men who have become too nice and empathetic is aligned with cultural anxiety about effeminization. Similar concerns are expressed even more directly by Joseph, who says that “men have no balls anymore” and that they “should man up.” These suggestions articulate the loss of male privilege, voiced here through the critique of men who have soft, feminine characteristics—or simply “no balls.” These articulations further exemplify how postfeminist sensibility operates through the affective and the psychic. The implication that women should not “boss” men around sends a clear message, without spelling out the hierarchy between men and women: the gendered status quo is renewed through an affective register that operates through feeling rules. Feeling rules govern how people try to feel “appropriate” to a situation, thus sensitizing human subjects to the “right” feelings (Gill and Kanai 2018; Hochschild 1979). Here what is considered right clearly differs for women and men, thus contributing to the reproduction of the gender hierarchy through gendered feeling rules.

In addition, “lost womanhood” is also discussed. Felipe talks about a woman whose “power dressing” he pathologizes by referring to her “not knowing who she was as a woman.” This is part of his lumping of several childhood problems together; he openly sees issues such as being a victim of neglect or suffering from loneliness as comparable with being “unaware of one’s gender identity.” Daphne tutors a women-only course, the core of which is to find our feminine selves or cores—an aim partly rationalized by references to lost womanhood:

At the beginning of the first meeting, Daphne says that women were oppressed for a long time, and after that women aimed to be on top of men. Now womanhood has been lost. . . . Women are permitted to be weak, too.

Daphne associates gender inequality with the past, because women are said to have been oppressed “for a long time.” Thus, Daphne’s course demonstrates one feature associated with postfeminism: the attempt to

locate inequalities in the past (Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017). The framing of the course is highly ambivalent: it aims to empower women and embrace womanhood—the quest for lost womanhood addresses femininity as worth “finding”—while at the same time casting the shift toward a more equal society as having been harmful to women themselves. Here feminism seems, in McRobbie’s (2009) words, to be both “taken into account” and “repudiated” (Gill 2017). This is also an example of an ongoing therapeutic trend where both the sources of problems and their solutions are located within women’s own psyches (Gill 2017). Women are represented as a group that made the mistake of aiming to “be on top,” and the course offers solutions that will emerge within the women themselves, rather than locating problems within structural inequalities (Rottenberg 2014). This is also an intriguing example of the centrality of emotion and affect to postfeminist sensibility.

Daphne’s words are problematic in that they address women’s *individualized* right to be weak. However, they simultaneously resonate with what Salmenniemi and Kemppainen (2020) call “the deep story of strong femininity.” This is closely connected with the long-standing cultural-historical discourse of the “strong Finnish woman,” which has been central to perceptions of femininity in Finland. Salmenniemi and Kemppainen (2020) argue that Finnish women who engage in therapeutic practices are seeking ways to embrace vulnerability and legitimize care for and appreciation of the self. The suppression of vulnerability is seen as a sign of women’s subordinated position in a masculine world; thus, women’s empowerment occurs through the cultivation of feminine energy. Similarly, the emphasis on weakness can be seen as an appealing alternative way to live and make sense of gendered power dynamics.

Joseph is a lay expert who organizes courses on couple relationships and sexuality. His viewpoint is—in his words—“spiritual.” In the following, Joseph appears to recognize women’s position as a disadvantaged group but locates this inequality in the past. When he talks about the current situation, men are framed as victims and women as the advantaged gender. This overlaps with the extract above: Both suggest that women’s emotional strength is a psychic or practical burden. Joseph justifies this teaching through “several stories” about women who control their partners:

Women have been oppressed for thousands of years. . . . Women often try to control how men engage with children. Let’s say, for instance, how children are dressed. I have heard several stories about this. For instance, if a

woman always complains about how a man cleans or changes the diaper, after a while the man quits doing these things.

A similar story is voiced by Jonathan, another lay expert. He depicts a family in which the mother does not let the father accompany their child to the dentist because the father is unable “to say the correct things.” It is typical of postfeminist sensibility to locate inequalities in the past, and to present remaining inequalities as “natural” or as women’s own choice (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020; Gill 2017). Here women are portrayed as an obstacle to gender equality. It is they who stick to old-fashioned gender expectations—especially when it comes to childcare. The implication is that heterosexual men are willing to take on more domestic responsibilities but are prevented from doing so by women, who cannot bear to cede responsibility (Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017). Hence, if women are burdened with care responsibilities or household chores, they have only themselves to blame, and their potential complaints appear unjustified.

Token Norm-Criticalness

The ideal of equality becomes clearly visible when experts repeatedly demonstrate that they recognize norms related to gender and sexuality. It is commonplace for them to be aware of the demands of political correctness as well as the dangers of making generalizations. Yet while counseling practices may acknowledge sexual diversity and recognize gender stereotypes, the mere acknowledgment of norms does not mean that experts challenge the status quo. The next pattern articulates token critiques that seemingly support gender equality and sexual rights but are often mobilized to invest in deeply depoliticizing views. Maryanne and Mike, a married couple, are speaking as lay experts at an afternoon relationship seminar organized by a Christian parish. This event entails a lot of ambiguity and contradiction. Although Maryanne and Mike display knowledge about the dangers of making generalizations, they nevertheless do generalize. In places, they emphasize the equal distribution of household chores; in other places, they promote the view that men’s work is waged work and women’s work is emotional work:

We are now going to talk about men and women, even though one shouldn’t generalize too much, Maryanne says at the beginning. . . . A little later, Maryanne and Mike demonstrate the differing needs of women and men. They say that men generate motivation through admiration and respect

from their wives, resulting in an increase in men's self-esteem. There is a woman behind every successful man. If a man does not get respect at home, he will begin to seek it elsewhere, at work or from another woman. The respect needs to be genuine.

Harry, another lay expert, highlights that men “need respect,” and a man should be able “to go into his cave, to read a newspaper. . . to go to the garage to tinker with his car.” In both examples, the importance of admiring and respecting men articulates a gendered feeling rule. Here women and men are not only assumed to feel in differing ways, but also advised to experience and interpret their feelings in ways that further suggests a gendered hierarchy between men and women—especially since men are not advised to admire and respect women. Women are expected to be responsible for the genuineness of their feelings and the emotional support of their male partners (Duncombe and Marsden 1993). Thus, a man needs to be respected at home, or a man should be allowed to escape to a man cave to withdraw from emotional intimacy with women, or to be able to define it on his own terms, making intimacy with women a source of control and autonomy rather than sharing (O’Neill 2018).

Miranda is lecturing about relationships as part of a wider event. She is a lay expert who has published a book on the topic. She is highly critical of the centrality of intercourse as the main way of having sex—an attitude that might be seen as undermining the heteronormative understanding of sex. Nevertheless, by sticking with what is “familiar” to her, she ends up legitimizing the exclusion of experiences that are not heterosexual or gender-conforming:

Miranda makes a comment that she will talk about relationships between men and women since that is what is familiar to her. She says that men and women are different when it comes to sex: men are active. . . . Men and women suffer from different kinds of problem. A woman cannot let loose but may be thinking about the children or what kind of bed linen they have, while a man can be too enthusiastic. . . . You shouldn’t judge these different ways or argue about the right way.

As with the two previous extracts, home figures here in a gendered manner. Unfair distribution does not threaten the couple’s relationship, but the woman’s inability to switch off does. The focus on bed linen and children is addressed as an individualized inability to let go, rather than as articulating, for example, an unequal division of household chores (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020; Eldén 2011; Rottenberg 2014). The

suggestion that women might be too concerned about their children or housework resonates with the ways in which neither social inequality nor structural problems are addressed in postfeminist sensibility. This recalls women's portrayal as both the problem and the solution: structural inequalities are sidelined at the expense of an individualized feminism that does not seek to mobilize collective politics (Rottenberg 2014).

Interestingly, the language used is openly depoliticizing: the different ways should "not be judged," and that the partners "should not argue." Miranda's example also articulates how postfeminist sensibility operates through "positive" affect, simultaneously outlawing "negative" "political" feelings (Gill and Orgad 2017). The importance of gendered consensus and harmony between partners is emphasized, and differences are emptied of any significant political content. In my data, this dynamic is not restricted to couple relationships. Lily, who tutors a tantric workshop, suggests that feelings of shame and guilt "make us sick," adding that women are particularly prey to shame, including "when men look at our boobs and bottoms." This overlaps with the culture of confidence in which lack of confidence is diagnosed as a source of women's problems (Gill and Orgad 2017): an appropriate response to sexism is to take individual pride in one's appearance and accept one's own objectification, rather than express collective anger or complaint. The lived experiences of sexism are perceived as individualized problems (Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013), indeed, as inappropriate (even "sickening") feelings.

The next example is from an event that focuses on well-being. The two speakers, Theresa and John, jointly run a well-being enterprise, and Theresa is also a sex counselor. Theresa acknowledges same-sex couples when talking about love:

Theresa claims that love has suffered from inflation in the sense that it is used to refer to all kinds of things nowadays. "In general, love is associated with couple relationships, the relationship between a man and a woman, or these days it could be a woman and a woman or a man and a man. But you can love clothes, let's say." . . . John echoes her. "I'm not narrow-minded. If someone loves chocolate, that's totally fine with me."

In this way, Theresa and John acknowledge non-normative sexualities and express their acceptance of diverse forms of sexuality. They both employ a humorous, entertaining tone. Yet their arguments can be seen as sarcastic and imbued with political meaning: the opponents of same-sex relationships have historically contrasted them with other "inappropriate" relationships. Similarity between same-sex and mixed-sex couples is also

emphasized by Yvette, a psychotherapist. She refers in passing to separations that have to do with one's gender or sexual identity, and characterizes them as similar "processes," underlining that "the same things apply, even though particular issues are accentuated." Same-sex relationships are thus taken into account, recognized, and accepted. However, writ large, such statements remain tokenistic in the sense that they do not touch upon the obstacles and discrimination that same-sex couples have faced and still face—issues that might matter, for instance, in relation to forming and ending relationships. Same-sex desire is acknowledged as one's "free choice" or respected as an individualized issue in the spirit of postfeminist sensibility, but it is not discussed as requiring any political pursuit.

Diversity and Resistance

Finally, my data also include events and occasions where diversity is welcomed, and where experts criticize and resist prevailing notions about gender and sexuality. This pattern contains acts of resistance, such as openly embracing diversity and intentionally expanding everyday understandings of gender and sexuality. Here equality is not rendered as already achieved, but as something to fight for. It is also understood more broadly than gender equality between women and men or basic LGBTIQ+ rights, and forms of diversity ranging from sexual justice to nonbinary experiences are considered important.

In a few places, experts display awareness of their own social positioning. When Liam introduces himself and his fellow speaker, Greg, he acknowledges their gender, saying "we are men, unfortunately"; Greg humorously corrects him—"not unfortunately." Such statements reflect increasing awareness of social hierarchies. However, references to manhood are sometimes made in ways that expand masculinity, rather than just mirroring politically correct ways of speaking. Jonathan is a lay expert and social media influencer. Although in a literal sense he relies on the idea of two (and only two) genders, he advances a view that seeks to overcome strict norms:

Jonathan introduces himself as a middle-aged man. . . . Later he talks about meeting his wife: "I didn't have to play the male role for her, nor did she have to play the female role for me."

In the data, making references to one's personal experience, as Jonathan does, is a typical way to justify one's perspective and construct one's (gendered) authority. Counseling professionals and lay experts alike (including

experts who identify themselves as LGBTIQ+) draw on their personal (gendered) experience as wives, husbands, mothers, or fathers—or alternatively, for example, as people who have been in several committed couple relationships and thus have insights about them. Jonathan’s statement is postfeminist in its framing of gendered behavior as individual choices and preferences, as if gender were mainly a matter of individual performance. He specifically identifies himself as a middle-aged man, which may reflect the feminist goal of making visible and thereby undermining the privileged perspective of middle-aged, middle-class, and heterosexual men. Nonetheless, there is an attempt to criticize strict gender stereotypes too.

In places this criticism is even more explicit. Lynne, a psychotherapist, refers to a blog post she has published. She suggests that even though the post was about girlhood, it could have been “either/or, or in-between” genders. Jodie is one of the few experts that seem to be actively trying to open a new pathway for genders and sexualities. She works in the health-care sector and insists that healthcare personnel should never ask if someone is a woman or a man. Later, she mentions cisgender—a great rarity in my data. While it is fairly typical for speakers to mention rainbow couples in passing, for Jodie the repertoire of diversity is wider than that:

There are different options, for instance asexual, pansexual, polyamorous. . . . Each of us experiences things in our own way, no matter if we are speaking about women, men, or something else. There is a diversity that goes beyond the differences between different sexes.

Here, the individualized language actually politicizes gender and sexuality, as Jodie highlights that each of us experiences things in our own way. Some other professionals and lay experts echo this view. Cherry expresses a wish that sex should limit nobody, that “it would not narrow one’s understanding of oneself or other people,” stating that the aim is to erode norms regarding gender. Iris speaks as an expert who is also a lesbian mother. Her lecture politicizes the status quo. However, the strategy she uses is not to mention diverse groups by name, but to shift the focus from marginalized groups to dominant groups by posing a personal question:

How many of you have been afraid to hold hands or show public affection toward your partner?

This question politicizes an (assumed) lack of fear by connecting it with privilege. Indeed, this simple question shifts the focus from the

experiences of marginalized groups to the experiences of heterosexuals or other groups who lack the individually felt but collective experience of being afraid because of their sexuality (Kolehmainen 2019b). Such questions also widen the idea of sexual rights and social justice, to encompass not only legislation, such as the gender-neutral marriage law (which came into effect in Finland in 2017) but also the realm of the affective and the psychic.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have analyzed how particular understandings of gender equality and sexual rights manifest in therapy events. I have identified three distinct articulations that circulate in Finnish relationship enhancement seminars: statements concerning equality “gone too far”; a token norm-criticalness that seems to support gender equality and sexual rights; and acts of resistance that expand everyday understandings of gender and sexuality. I consider these articulations to constitute a postfeminist sensibility, following an understanding of postfeminism as a sensibility that entails both feminist and antifeminist elements (see Gill 2017). Even if the term *postfeminism* is often used as a concept that only refers to a backlash against feminism, this kind of view does not enable seeing contradictions or entanglements within postfeminism (Gill 2017; Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017). Thus, while the first and second patterns might appear “postfeminist” because of their assumptions that equality has already been achieved, and the third pattern might appear “feminist” because equality is still seen as a future goal to struggle for, these are not the conclusions I wish to make. Rather, I conclude that these three patterns—each entailing ambivalences and contradictions—together manifest a postfeminist sensibility in which antifeminist and feminist ideas and practices coexist. Together, they complicate the idea that Nordic countries are straightforwardly “progressive.”

My analysis expands on the tenets of postfeminism especially in showing, on one hand, how feminist critiques become easily tokenized and emptied of their political content, and on the other hand, how the postfeminist emphasis on “freedom” actually supports sexual rights. In any case, postfeminist sensibility is a vital part of the therapy field. It may take local forms but should not be seen as external to or marginal in Nordic countries. Recently, scholars have indeed suggested that the relatively high level of gender equality in Finland supports postfeminist

articulations (Lamberg 2021), as does the country's simultaneously egalitarian and neoliberal ethos (Ikonen 2020). Like my study, these studies do not analyze the media in particular. While the concept of postfeminism emerged from media studies, my study too provides insights into postfeminism outside the media and thus widens the current understanding of postfeminist cultures. More exploration is needed on how postfeminism circulates "on the ground." My analysis has focused on therapy events, and I have provided examples of the ways in which experts frame gender equality and sexual rights. The patterns I have identified demonstrate that there is no consensus on what desirable equality looks like.

Furthermore, on a few occasions during my fieldwork, participants challenged experts who circulated gendered stereotypes or made heteronormative assumptions. Although such occasions were rare, this relative silence does not necessarily translate into widespread acceptance of those utterances. Rather, my study pinpoints that even today, certain conservative discourses and practices pass and circulate without further notice, at least in their localized and specific contexts. Experts at least occasionally do consider larger social-structural issues of inequality, but they are not necessarily able to see how those issues shape gendered and sexualized power relations here and now. It also seems that in many places, the recognition of gendered patterns and the renewal of gendered stereotypes are hard to distinguish. What for a scholar might look like gendered stereotypes are also born out of the everyday experience of living gendered relationships and experts may try to identify and solve everyday challenges rather than to deliberately maintain hierarchies. To advance societal progress, nevertheless, much more discussion and reflection about nuances, ambivalences, and paradoxes is needed, both in public and in the therapy field.

In the Finnish postfeminist sensibility that I have identified, gender equality and sexual rights are considered important, but only rarely are there traces of efforts to challenge the status quo. In particular, when gender equality is discussed, it is repeatedly addressed as already achieved. In several instances, women are seen as today's dominant gender, and men as the oppressed group. However, when sexual rights are discussed alongside gender equality, or when nonconforming gender identities are taken into account, equality seems to be a more distant future goal. While gender equality itself is rarely politicized in my data, there are efforts to resist strict gender stereotypes and to pave the way for increased sexual rights. There are asymmetries in how gender equality and sexual rights are dealt with. Gender equality is discussed much more concretely than sexual

diversity, which is often only referenced in passing. However, supporting individual freedom regarding sexual expression and identity while simultaneously framing these as personal rather than political issues aligns with postfeminism. It seems that postfeminist sensibility and the acceptance of LGBTIQ+ rights and sexual diversity in general go hand in hand, as one of the hallmarks of postfeminist sensibility is the emphasis on “freedom.” Moreover, the link between postfeminism and sexual rights requires more elaboration than has been possible in this article.

The study also raises the question of whether a wider cultural shift is taking place—at least in relationship enhancement seminars—where gender and sexuality are increasingly addressed as feelings, intensities, and energies. In my data, several articulations establish a new frame for questions of gender and sexual relations by locating them in the realm of the affective and the psychic. My analysis contributes to scholarship on the affective, cultural, and psychic life of postfeminism (Gill 2017), where especially media now sensitize us to the “right” feelings (Gill and Kanai 2018). However, my study provides novel insights into the nuanced registers that are crucial in the current fostering of inequalities. It has been pointed out how neoliberalism works by locating the self as a locus of change (Scharff 2016) and through remodeling our interiors (Gill and Kanai 2019). Yet my study reaches beyond the self and the subjective interiority with its emphasis on the intimate and the interpersonal. Framing gender and sexuality and related power relations as matters of the affective and the psychic is a manifold enterprise that acknowledges the variety of ways of living out gender and sexuality, such as embodied, affective, and psychic aspects, as well as the intensities, flows, and sensations that may become experienced and registered personally. However, this may make addressing asymmetries and hierarchies more challenging. In this vein, the article expands on the premises of postfeminism because it has identified how gender difference not only is reanimated or renewed through the affective and the psychic, it is also increasingly *located* in those realms—making it difficult to grasp and contest.

Finally, my study also shows that these events cannot be described as promoting gender-neutral advice—quite the contrary. Many of these events placed gender and sexuality at the core of intimate relationships. This is a departure from previous studies that have suggested that Nordic countries address intimate relationships in gender-neutral terms and expect relationships to already be equal (Danielsen, Ludvigsen, and Mühleisen 2012; Eldén 2011). Potential reasons for this difference might include differences among Nordic countries, as many of these previous

studies do not focus on Finland. However, another possibility lies in the differences in the data. The previous studies draw mainly on textual analyses of guidebooks, course materials, or television programs that, while providing fruitful insights regarding such materials, reveal little about the ways in which professionals and lay experts interpret and make sense of them. While participant observation also has its limitations, it does allow us to grasp in more detail how advice is delivered in practice.

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