

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Nobody cares for men anymore : Affective-discursive practices
p̈y around men s victimisation across online and of

Venäläinen, Satu

2021

Venäläinen , S 2021 , ' Nobody cares for men anymore : Affective-discursive practices
p̈y around men s victimisation across online and offline contexts ' , Europ
Cultural Studies . <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211021097>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/336090>

<https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211021097>

cc_by

publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

Nobody cares for men anymore: Affective-discursive practices around men's victimisation across online and offline contexts

European Journal of Cultural Studies

1–18

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/13675494211021097
journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs

**Satu Venäläinen** 

University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

Men's victimisation is a central topic in online discussions, particularly in the manosphere, where its emphasis is often combined with a strong anti-feminist stance. This article examines the interplay of affects and discourse in meaning-making around men's victimisation both in online discussions and among social and crisis workers asked to comment upon meanings circulating online. By using the concept of affective-discursive practice, the analysis shows how this meaning-making reiterates socially shared interpretative repertoires and positionings that mobilise affects based on sympathy, anger and hate. Furthermore, the article demonstrates how the practitioners respond to these affective meanings by adopting positions of responsibility, while also redirecting and neutralising online affect. The article contributes to knowledge on the interaction between online and offline meaning-making around men's victimisation, and to building an understanding of affects and discourse in seemingly moderate meaning-making around this topic that however resonates and links with the more extreme anti-feminism of the manosphere.

Keywords

Affective-discursive practice, anti-feminism, gender, intimate partner violence, manosphere

Introduction

The digitalised manifestation of extreme men's rights advocacy known as the manosphere has gained increasing visibility in recent years. Several studies have explored its

Corresponding author:

Satu Venäläinen, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 54, Helsinki 00014, Finland.

Email: satu.venalainen@helsinki.fi

dynamics, networked character and ideology, and its widespread reach (e.g. Ging et al., 2019). The manosphere has its roots in the men's rights movement (Marwick and Caplan, 2018), which has gained significant momentum in the last few decades due to the technological affordances of the Internet and social media (Ging, 2017). As a result, the manosphere has evolved into a loosely knit collection of communities dispersed across various Internet sites, which are nevertheless fundamentally tied together by a misogynous and anti-feminist orientation. One of the central tenets of the manosphere is the notion of men as victims of various forms of societal discrimination. Men are frequently also portrayed as the forgotten victims of violence, specifically in the context of intimate partner relations.

This article focuses on the constructions of men's victimhood in online discussions and among social and crisis workers commenting on online discussions. The aim of the study is to shed light on affective and discursive dynamics in the construction of men's victimhood in these contexts, and to show how these dynamics both overlap and partially depart from each other. Instead of focusing on the blatantly misogynist rhetoric and practices that several studies have already shown to be pervasive online (Lumsden, 2019), this article analyses somewhat milder forms of highlighting men's status as victims that circulate both in online and offline contexts. I argue that these milder forms are highly impactful in shaping contemporary understandings about issues such as gender, power and feminism in ways that largely align with the ideology of the manosphere, while retaining a sense of reasonableness and fairness that make such understandings appear as cultural commonsense.

Discourses of men's victimhood in online and offline contexts

The boundaries between the manosphere and more general meaning-making around gendered power relations and men's societal status and, in particular, victimhood are highly permeable and difficult to establish, as the views expressed within the manosphere continue to effectively spread to other online and offline contexts (Ging et al., 2019). Several studies have demonstrated how misogynous and anti-feminist ideas circulate online in the form of common tropes or specific terminology (Marwick and Caplan, 2018; Sundén and Paasonen, 2018), memes (Horsti, 2017) and hashtags (Dragiewicz and Burgess, 2016), as well as videos, articles and hyperlinks (Ging, 2017). These ideas have also come to inform everyday linguistic practices beyond online contexts through the infiltration of sites such as the Urban Dictionary (Ging et al., 2019). Moreover, the circulation of the manosphere's ideology has been connected to harassment and violence towards women both online and offline – which further undermines the boundary between these contexts (Gotell and Dutton, 2016; Jane, 2016; Lumsden, 2019). Nevertheless, the Internet appears as a specifically conducive context for reproducing normative forms of white heterosexual masculinities through anti-feminist meaning-making (White, 2019), where such reproduction tends to be enacted in a particularly aggressive manner (Ging, 2017).

The wide appeal of the ideas circulating within and beyond the manosphere has been explained not only by the rise of extreme, polarised anti-feminist politics, but also, for

instance, by their seeming rationality, commonsensicality and apparent reliance on scientific thinking (Saresma, 2018; Tileagă, 2019; Van Valkenburgh, 2018). This is especially the case with online rhetoric on common interest sites that borrows from the manosphere in its forms of reasoning and argumentation, but is more subdued and less aggressive in its tone (Venäläinen, 2020b). The different versions of online anti-feminism have their equivalents offline; there have been several factions of men's movements since their birth in the late 1970s, some of which have been built on non-aggressive notions of healing and finding lost masculinity, while nevertheless viewing feminism as the source of men's plight (Kimmel, 1995; Messner, 1997). Messner (2016) has claimed that the subtler forms of anti-feminism might be even more influential in the contemporary context than the extreme ones. This is due to the fact that they skilfully employ equality and individualistic discourses that have been so powerful in the era of neoliberalism and postfeminism. Indeed, many of the concerns over the plight of men in contemporary societies, such as the gendered shame experienced by men as victims discussed in research on men's victimisation (e.g. Åkerström et al., 2011), may seem to tap into relevant, gendered social dynamics, and thus, it may appear as worth addressing for the sake of social justice. However, a closer look at the discursive functions of raising such concerns specifically in online discussions tends to reveal their close entwinement with a highly exclusionary, anti-feminist stance (Venäläinen, 2020a; Messner, 2016; see also Edley and Wetherell, 2001).

The offline prevalence of the discourse highlighting men's victimisation includes academic research on violence in intimate relations, where it has been articulated in opposition to a feminist discourse of gendered violence that has shed light on gendered patterns and specifically vulnerable position of women as victims of domestic violence (Dragiewicz and Burgess, 2016). Therefore, focusing on men's victimisation in intimate relations often links with attempts to show the invalidity of feminist research and theorisation on domestic violence. Calls for increased focus on men victims are frequently based on claims that instead of a feminist, gender-sensitive approach, domestic violence should be considered as a gender-neutral phenomenon equally experienced and perpetrated by both women and men. These notions have a close affinity to the rhetoric of the men's rights movement on not only domestic violence (Dragiewicz, 2011; Mann, 2008) but also sexual violence (Gotell and Dutton, 2016; Marwick and Caplan, 2018). Hence, while departing from the explicit anti-feminism seen in the manosphere, this discourse is based on a parallel stance towards feminist approaches based on viewing them as detrimental and outdated.

By drawing on both online data and focus group interviews among practitioners (more specifically, social and crisis workers), this article contributes to knowledge on the interplay between online and offline meaning-making pertaining to the topic of men, gendered power relations, and victimhood in the context of intimate partner relations. In order to facilitate a deeper understanding of processes involved in the circulation of meanings around the topic of men's victimhood across various contexts, the article employs a conceptualisation of affective-discursive practice (Wetherell, 2012; Wetherell et al., 2015) that highlights the facility of affects and discourse to reinforce each other and to together contribute to the spread of certain kinds of meanings. The next section further outlines this approach and shows its utility for the study at hand.

Theoretical framework: the circulation of meanings as affective-discursive practice

Alongside an interest in discourse and its significance for meaning-making in the media-tised contemporary culture (Couldry, 2012), affects and their significance in the formation of views among the public about politically and socially significant issues (Papacharissi, 2015), including anti-feminist and feminist stance-taking (e.g. Sundén and Paasonen, 2018), have been discussed in several studies in recent years. This article combines an interest in affects with a discursive analysis by utilising the conceptualisation of affective-discursive practice developed by Margaret Wetherell (2012). Previously, this conceptualisation has been applied to the study of racist and nationalist meaning-making (Hokka and Nelimarkka, 2019; Nikunen, 2018; Ojala et al., 2019; Wetherell et al., 2015), but for the most, not to the analysis of the manosphere, or more specifically to the meaning-making around men's victimisation. Overall, even though affects such as anger or a sense of aggrieved entitlement have been frequently noted as playing a central role in the current manifestations of anti-feminist men's rights advocacy (Ging, 2017; Kimmel, 2013), studies illuminating in detail how affect functions in such advocacy, and specifically how affect and discourse co-operate in it, are scarce. The utility of such studies has also been suggested by de Boise (2018), who has described the affective aspects in online anti-feminist men's rights advocacy as based on 'collective rage', cultivated by affective online practices relying on notions of men's privilege as under attack, and gaining affective force in the process of collective action facilitated by and taking place through online communication.

Wetherell's (2012) notion of affective-discursive practice provides a fruitful perspective on the shaping and travelling of meanings and the associated affects both within and across online and offline contexts. As such, it sheds light on the processes also described with concepts such as circulation (Couldry, 2012; Titley, 2014) and spreading (Jenkins et al., 2013), with a broadly similar emphasis on non-linearity and performativity in the production and dissemination of meanings, in which both media users and the affordances of various sites are seen as actively participating. Such dispersed practices have been seen as influential in the creation and drawing upon of shared social imaginaries (Valaskivi and Sumiala, 2014) that shape the envisioning and enactment of social relations, including those in which gender and power come to matter.

Departing from non-representational approaches in affect studies that attempt to attune to affect in separation from discourse, Margaret Wetherell (2012: 20, 74–76) has instead argued for approaching affect and discourse as closely entwined. According to Wetherell (2012: 19, 52), discourse provides affect with the means to travel, in addition to having the capacity to incite affect. The notion of affective-discursive practice is based on viewing the co-operation of affect and discourse as both patterned and fluid (Wetherell, 2012: 85–87); their interaction can for instance contribute both to the reproduction and altering of hierarchical gender relations (de Boise, 2018). Affective-discursive practices comprised constant, routine doing that makes certain understandings and affects appear as normal components of commonsense (Wetherell et al., 2015). Wetherell (2012: 20–21; Wetherell et al., 2015) has suggested that the operation of these practices can be usefully unpacked with concepts derived from critical discursive psychology (CDP) – a

synthetic micro- and macro-discursively oriented approach that views humans as both agentic and simultaneously guided by prevailing discursive configurations in their meaning-making (e.g. Edley, 2001; Edley and Wetherell, 2001).

A central concept in CDP is interpretative repertoires, which refers to culturally shared building blocks for meaning-making that are flexibly utilised according to the interactional demands of any specific context of communication (Edley, 2001; Wetherell et al., 2015: 61). The employment of particular kinds of repertoires makes available the associated subject positions (Davies and Harré, 1990), that is, discursively constructed locations from where to speak and to view the world and other people. By being positioned in alignment with the available positions, the speakers and those spoken about become socially recognisable actors; hence, positioning is a means of identity work. Importantly, the positions taken up also entail the potential for certain kinds of emotive states and reactions (Wetherell et al., 2015: 61). Together, these conceptual tools allow for the disentangling of the discursive and affective processes whereby certain understandings and associated affects, such as those around men's victimisation, become a part of everyday meaning-making (Wetherell et al., 2015).

Based on the affective-discursive approach described earlier, then, this article has sought answers to the questions of (1) how the discourse on men's victimisation is constructed and gains particular kinds of affective potential that contribute to its spread, (2) how the affective and discursive dimensions co-operate in this, and, finally, (3) how the associated affective interpretative repertoires and positionings are customised to fit context-specific identity work in both online and offline contexts.

Materials and methods

The analysis is based on the following two separate datasets: online discussion threads focusing on violence committed by women against men in heterosexual intimate relations (dataset 1), and focus group interviews conducted with social and crisis workers who were asked to comment on online discussions (dataset 2). Both of these datasets were collected for a larger project focusing on contemporary discourses on violence and societal inequalities in Finland and how they were mobilised both in online and offline contexts. Dataset 1 was collected in April of 2017 from some of Finland's most popular online discussion forums and the comment areas of popular blog sites. The discussion threads were found by conducting Internet searches on Google and site-specific text-search tools with the search terms 'violence + women', 'women's violence' and 'intimate partner violence experienced by men'. Discussion threads for a span of 10 years (2007–2016) were included in the dataset. These discussion threads came from six distinct discussion forums and nine blog sites. With respect to the discussion forums, these included one general online discussion forum and the forums of a national newspaper, a regional newspaper (from northern Finland), a youth magazine, a baby-focused magazine and a science magazine. All of the comment areas on the blog sites were accessed through a popular blog section of a web-based newspaper. Several writers of the blogs used for data collection were politically active, and one of them has become well-known as an advocate of the men's rights movement in Finland. Ultimately, dataset 1 consisted of 98 discussion threads and 3190 comments. Ten of the threads were prompted by a

newspaper article discussing violence committed by women against men, while the rest followed a blog post or discussion piece by a non-reporter in a discussion forum. Following the established ethical guidelines for Internet research (e.g. Markham and Buchanan, 2012), in order to ensure the anonymity of the writers on these sites, any further information about these forums, as well as the names or pseudonyms of the writers themselves, have been omitted from this article. The extracts from dataset 1 are followed by the number of each discussion forum and the month and year of publication.

Dataset 2 was collected in the second phase of the project that consisted of focus group interviews among social and crisis workers employed by organisations that provide support in situations of violence, and are, therefore, in a key position in the enactment of everyday interventions into it. In the focus group interviews, the participants were asked to comment on statements that were formulated by the researchers on the basis of predominant views expressed in online discussions about violence among different groups of people. The participants were also asked to choose which of the statements (seven altogether) they wished to start a discussion on. Due to its interest in discourse around men's victimisation, this article focuses on the commenting among the workers triggered by the following statement that taps into this particular issue:

Finnish women and men are equally violent in intimate partner relationships, and violence committed by women is equally severe or sometimes even more severe than violence committed by men. It is irritating that people everywhere are ranting on about violence against women without any concern for male victims.

Altogether, six focus group interviews with 3–5 participants each were conducted between May and September of 2018, with 21 participants in total. The participants came from six different organisations, three of which were located in Southern Finland and three in Eastern and Central Finland. In order to protect the participants' anonymity, no further information is provided about these organisations. A total of 17 of the participants were women, and four were men. Two facilitators led each focus group interview, with the author being one of the facilitators for three of the interviews. The focus group interviews lasted approximately 2 hours.

The focus group interviews were both video- and tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. Prior to conducting the interviews, ethical approval was acquired from the Ethical Board of the university from which the project was led, along with research permits from each of the organisations whose employees participated in the study. Informed consent was requested in writing from each participant. The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the responses were anonymised in the process of transcription. The extracts from dataset 2 are followed by the number of the focus group and that of the participant in it.

The initial analysis of dataset 2 showed that the practitioners predominantly expressed agreement with the claim about men's victimisation. All of the participants who had selected the claim started their discussion by stating their agreement, and often accounted for their choice by saying that of all of the claims, they had found this one to be the easiest to agree with because of its reasonableness and moderateness, and/or because it was most in line with their own observations. As the 'Analysis' section below illustrates,

besides such explicit expressions of agreement, much of the participants' sense-making was patterned by a reliance on the same discursive resources for meaning-making as the online discussions.

In practice, the analytic process began by coding both datasets separately in order to grasp patterns in their meaning-making. The analysis presented in this article is a product of repeated readings of the two datasets side by side, through the affective-discursive lens described earlier, after the initial rounds of coding and analysing sense-making in each. The dialogical readings of the datasets aimed to trace similarities and differences specifically in the construction of men's victimisation, which had arisen as a central theme in both datasets. Based on these readings, the interpretative repertoires that encapsulate the most centrally recurring ways of attaching meaning to men's victimisation were formulated. This was done by grouping together consistent ways of talking about men's victimisation with the use of recognisable themes, arguments, tropes and figures of speech (Edley, 2001; Edley and Wetherell, 2001). This was followed by analysing how these repertoires were mobilised in the specific contexts of their use, with a focus on their affective capacities and the related positionings of actors into the subject positions made available by the repertoires. This stage included examining how repertoires and positioning evoke images or narratives of events, reasons or motives, thoughts and people's experiences and feelings, and the kinds of affective potentialities such images unite with (Wetherell, 2012: 72–73). Therefore, the analysis employs emotion labels such as anger, sympathy or hate, not for the purpose of identifying emotions attached to individual bodies, but rather as a means to describe the quality of affective potentialities that certain discursive descriptions allow for.

Analysis

The analysis identified two interpretative repertoires and the related affective-discursive subject positions that recurred with particular salience across the online and focus group contexts. These will be discussed in the sub-sections below, followed by a third sub-section that sheds even more light on the ways in which the practitioners not only aligned with online meanings but also disaligned with the affective positionings attached to them, while simultaneously customising them to better fit their doing of professionalism.

The neglect repertoire

The neglect repertoire largely united the online commenting in different forums, and the related positioning of men as the forgotten victims of violence occupied centre stage in the claims making in their context. As illustrated below, this positioning powerfully mobilises sympathy for men victims, and puts on offer positions of responsibility for the audiences that call for and justify abandoning current understandings and practices around violence and gender in order to rectify what is portrayed as a severe societal injustice. Actors specifically held responsible for the neglect of men victims in online discussions are feminists and feminist researchers, ministries and (women) politicians, the press and Amnesty International. The following extract was triggered by an initiating

comment on Amnesty's campaigns aimed at raising awareness of violence against women. The campaigns were portrayed both in the initiating comment and the majority of comments following it in the same thread (as well as several other discussion threads) as concrete examples of the neglect of men as victims:

Research has shown that men face just as much violence in families and intimate partner relations as women. Despite this, male victims of violence have been 'forgotten' and women's violence is still a taboo. The threshold for seeking and receiving help when victimised is because of this much higher for men. It would therefore be worthwhile to campaign against violence in a gender-neutral way. Amnesty claims to be a human rights organisation, but it does not care for men's human rights. Male victims of violence are left without help and alone precisely because of actors such as Amnesty. (F11/2/2016)

While the analysed online comments were frequently somewhat aggressive in tone, the earlier extract is an example of a less hostile style of argumentation, geared primarily towards evoking sympathy but yet still in sync with indignation entailing seeds of anger. Here, the affectiveness of argumentation rests largely on factualisation, enacted, for instance, by referring to scientific research findings – in line with the pseudo-scientific tenor commonly deployed in men's rights' advocacy (see, for example, Messner, 1997). In the extract, factualisation constructs the claims of neglect as legitimate, and thereby, strengthens the evocation of sympathy towards men victims positioned as facing specific difficulties in seeking and receiving help. By constructing the neglect of men as victims in campaigning against violence as a human rights violation, the extract creates a sense of deep injustice that legitimises resentment towards the prevailing system of intervention, and more specifically towards actors such as Amnesty, positioned as responsible for sustaining such inequality. Hence, the rational tone of the comment is combined with and adds to the affectiveness of appeals to a sense of justice by capitalising on the value of equal opportunity and treatment for all – mobilised here for the purpose of inviting online users to join the writer in their critique against campaigns targeted at violence against women (cf. Berns, 2004). Similar rhetorical mobilisations of notions of inequality and neglect recur across online discussions:

Or why does equality policy not take into account violence against men, but only against women? Shouldn't public authorities even be required to respect equality and fairness? Men pay taxes but receive nothing from the authorities in return. Even men's lives and health are not considered equal to women's. (F10/2/2016)

The sense of injustice created in online discussions has the potential to justify anger as a response to the illegitimacy of neglect highlighted by several posters. Similar potential is also cultivated in the online discussions through the mobilisation of gendered shame. The discourse of victimhood as being shameful for men due to its clash with hegemonic forms of masculinity is often present in studies of men's experiences and accounts of victimisation in heterosexual intimate relations (e.g. Åkerström et al., 2011), and is also recurrently employed in the online discussions. The following extracts illustrate how discourse of shame is drawn upon in positioning men as in risk of being ridiculed when they disclose their experiences of victimisation:

This society no longer cares for boys and men; we have a lack of empathy towards the male gender. When a man is abused, everyone laughs at him. (F13/7/2015)

People minimize and laugh at violence against men. Because of these attitudes men don't report any small matters to the police or go to the doctor. (F10/1/2010)

The potential position as the object of ridicule evoked in the extracts effectively justifies anger as a response to the lack of empathy towards men, which here is presented as a wide-reaching orientation towards men in contemporary society, as well as having concrete consequences for men's help-seeking. The positioning of men as disregarded by the society in the extracts capitalises on the immorality of both violence and the lack of caring towards men, together constructing a deep sense of men as societal outcasts with the right to feel anger at the social system that is discriminating against them. The potential of shame therefore justifies and further enforces the potential for anger. This is supported by historically recurring associations between anger, masculinity and a sense of entitlement (de Boise and Hearn, 2017; Wetherell, 2012: 8, 13), in the light of which anger appears as a legitimate response to mistreatment by men, and on their behalf. Furthermore, these associations also invite responding to anger linked with images of men's wrongful treatment as an authentic emotion that tells the truth of how things are (de Boise and Hearn, 2017; Wetherell et al., 2015: 62).

The sense of legitimacy gained by the affective positionings above was reiterated in the focus groups, where the practitioners engaged in dialogue with the calls for taking men's victimisation seriously in their self-positionings. The participants recurrently situated themselves as professionals, and the organisations they represent, in positions of responsibility by highlighting their attentiveness to their clients' needs and their motivation to recognise men's victimisation:

This speaks to me as a professional. For our organisation, it is very important to acknowledge that a man can also be a victim of violence in intimate relations as well as a woman, and in other violent relations, we know that young men are at much greater risk of being victimised. And women and men are just as capable of doing violence, both mental and physical. (G5:P2)

In the extract, commenting on the triggering claim begins with an expression of agreement and framing the speaker's viewpoint in terms of their self-categorisation as a professional. This is accompanied by an insinuation that a consensus prevails in their organisation concerning the expressed view. The implied shared knowledge about the frequency of men's victimisation works in the extract as a means of doing professionalism by warding off the possibility of being positioned as culpable for neglecting men victims. The enacted self-positioning is, therefore, geared towards caring for men victims in response to the lack of care expressed in the triggering claim and the online discussions represented by it. The same speaker mentions later in their turn that there is a danger of not recognising men's victimhood because it is 'culturally easier' to talk about women's victimisation, thereby enacting a similar gender comparison as that in the first extract from the online discussions, with men being positioned as facing a disadvantage.

As the extract below shows, the delicacy of addressing the issue of men's victimisation, constructed in the online discussions through the evocation of gendered shame, also appears in the practitioners' talk. The notion of shame is also drawn upon as a discursive resource used for positioning oneself as a professional, who not only accepts the more abstract responsibility of avoiding the continuation of silence around men's victimhood, but who is also deeply dedicated to professional practices aimed at avoiding the ridiculing or minimisation of men's victimhood:

So right at the moment when the man tells someone about it [being victimised], it would be extremely important that we immediately attend to it and absolutely do so without any belittling. (G2:P1)

While taking any talk about being victimised seriously and demonstrating respect towards the client is the cornerstone of practitioners' work, what is significant in these research materials is that such talk gains support from the culturally commonsensical discourses around the shameful nature of men's victimisation and the associated potential risk of ridiculing men victims circulating in the online discussions. The imperative tone in the practitioners' talk as exemplified by the extract earlier is accomplished through the use of extreme case formulations such 'extremely', 'right away' and 'absolutely not' that evoke a sense of urgency and position the practitioner in unquestioning alignment with the goal of avoiding the neglect of men victims. These formulations simultaneously deepen the sense of moral failing attached to not taking men's claims of victimhood seriously, and constitute it as the negatively valued opposite to the position of care towards men victims adopted by the practitioners. The normative evaluations enacted here remain close to online sense-making, and so do the associated affective positioning: the calls for sympathy and the sense of urgency in online discussions are mirrored by the keen sense of responsibility in practitioners' talk, geared towards avoiding the perpetuation of neglect highlighted in online sense-making.

Prejudice repertoire

The repertoire of neglect co-occurred in the online discussions with the prejudice repertoire. In line with the former, the latter is also built on the notion of societal disregard for men's victimhood, which in this repertoire, however, revolves particularly around the themes of truth and conspiracy. The societal disbelief in men's victimhood established through this repertoire is attributed to the workings of cultural prejudice against men that hinder seeing them as victims by maintaining their purported misrecognition as perpetrators of violence to a greater extent than women. Gendered prejudice therefore positions men in this repertoire as suffering from double victimisation, with the potential of further strengthening the sense of injustice and the affect of resentment in the online discussions. This is vividly evident in the following extract, where the distinction between women's societal advantage and men's disadvantage, due to prejudice directed at them, is highlighted by depicting a sequence of events claimed to take place when a man tries to act in order to escape violent abuse in an intimate heterosexual relation:

If the man leaves, then the woman ALWAYS gets the children, and the man is forced to pay alimony.

If the man calls the police, then the woman will say that the man beats her. Then she will say that the man has raped her and sexually abuses the children.

The man will be sentenced for all these deeds based purely on the woman's word. This has happened several times.

The law is completely on the women's side. (F14/5/2013)

The misogynist tone in the extract is generated by positioning women as manipulatively and ruthlessly exploiting the skewed social system that favours them. Men, in turn, are positioned as helpless in facing this exploitation. With the use of singular form 'man', this plight is constituted as a fate shared by everyone belonging to that category. With the linguistic structure 'if-then' combined with pluralisation and extreme case formulations such as 'always', given specific weight with capital letters, the described unequal scenario constructs a sense of unavoidability and reiteration, which further reinforces the evoked affect of hopelessness on behalf of men.

A similar kind of narrative of men being framed that reverses the gender profile of victim blaming – identified by feminist scholars as another form of resistance to feminist views on domestic violence (Berns, 2004) – also appeared in the practitioners' talk:

Many male victims with whom I have talked, and with whom I talk in my work, have indicated that the one thing that makes it difficult for a man to seek help in such a situation is the fear that it will then after all be twisted around. That it would be easier for the officials to believe that the situation is nonetheless the other way around. In a way, the violent spouse's capacity to manipulate is believed to be so strong, that the idea that I as a man could keep this victim status is seen as rather small. (G5:I2)

In this extract as well, the singular form 'man' is used with the function of homogenising the experiences of all men. This works together with pluralisation to construct a recurrence in the indicated men's fear of not being believed if one comes forth with their experiences of victimisation. Even though the spouse, to whom the capacity to manipulate is attributed, is not explicitly gendered here, the constructed narrative closely resembles those circulating online, where women are explicitly positioned as those responsible for sustaining the purportedly false belief in men being more likely to be the perpetrators than the victims of violence. Also here, then, men's victim status is constructed as fragile and difficult to attain due to prejudice among officials, as well as men's emotive experiences based on the belief that their partner's deceptive version of events is privileged over theirs. This sense of fragility effectively reinforces the discursive construction of men's societal disadvantage and difficulty in being regarded as victims.

The prejudice repertoire echoes anti-feminist meaning-making within the manosphere, specifically through positioning feminists as culpable for the prejudice faced by men due to disseminating purportedly distorted, conspiratorial understandings of violence that falsely frame men:

Feminists lied for decades about the nature of intimate partner violence. The guilty ones were almost exclusively men. Only with the internet and online activists has the truth started to be revealed. (F11/11/2014)

The extract shows a common tendency in online discussions to evoke a contrasting pair: lies or truth; which is used here to portray the practices of ‘online activists’ as heroic pursuits of the virtue of truth aimed at exposing feminist views as deceptive. This positions online discussants, such as the writer themselves, as truth-tellers who assist others in seeing the reality as it is. The positioning reiterates the ‘red pill’ ideology of the manosphere, where, in order to truly see the reality one lives in, one must swallow the red pill that gives access to a more accurate perception of discrimination against men that is purportedly otherwise hidden from view due to the predominance of feminist views (Van Valkenburgh, 2018). This positioning of feminist and non-feminist actors in relation to truth heavily leans on the affect circulating in the manosphere that crystallises into hate and anger towards feminists and, more broadly, towards women. At the same time, the online commenters criticising feminism gain the feel of objectivity and rationality that attaches a sense of validity to their claims. This is enabled by the gendered associations attached to the culturally commonsensical contrast between emotionality and rationality, with the former attached to women and feminists and acting as a means of devaluation, while the latter, conventionally associated with men and the tradition of science, allows for a positive self-portrayal through being distinguished from the former (Wetherell et al., 2015: 62).

While the practitioners did not, in general, speak as directly against the value of feminist understandings, in addition to the vast advocacy of the gender-neutral approach in opposition to a feminist one, there were also instances in their talk that expressed more directly the view that feminist understandings led to the misrecognition of victimised men:

I would perhaps like to see in my field of work increased attention towards this [men’s victimisation], since the current situation is quite unequal. I claim that our predominantly female field of employees also approaches this perhaps more from a kind of habitualised feminist perspective. And that is another reason why it is not equally recognised. (G3:P1)

The extract illustrates how the practitioners’ talk typically differs from online rhetoric in its moderateness, enacted here through hedging through the repetition of the word ‘perhaps’. Despite this stylistic difference, feminists as well as the ‘female field of employees’ are positioned by the speaker, similarly to online discussions, as responsible for the neglect of and prejudice towards men as victims. By expressing their desire for change in this respect, the speaker in the extract positions themselves as in disagreement with actors who have adopted a feminist perspective and who have therefore purportedly contributed to the inequality experienced by men. The speaker thereby utilises the prejudice repertoire and the associated positioning of feminists as being blinded by a gendered bias, seemingly for the purpose of doing professionalism by distancing themselves from such a position. By so doing, they comply with and reinforce the negative affect attached to the figure of a man-hating, deceptive and biased feminist that

pervasively crosses online and offline as well as national boundaries (see, for example, Scharff, 2012; Tyler, 2007).

In sum, the analysis in this section illustrates how the affective potential attached to the positioning of feminists as hateful villains in the meaning-making around men's victimhood becomes functional in pulling speakers away from an alignment with feminism in their self-positionings. These affective-discursive dynamics in positioning closely align with historically continuous patterns in relating to feminist actors, vitalised in the spreading of anti-feminist meanings among and beyond the manosphere (Marwick and Caplan, 2018; White, 2019). Specifically in online materials analysed in this article, these affective resonances are reinforced by the discursive reiteration of meanings associated with truthfulness and its opposite, which in the contemporary context is often labelled as 'fake news'. The emotive associations mobilised through such a discourse work to discredit and devalue feminist views while attaching heroism, rationality, fair-mindedness and objectivity to the actions and identities of those positioned as resisting such views and aiming to expose their distortedness.

Detachments from online affect

This final section of the analysis outlines in more detail how the practitioners enacted self-positionings in distinction from the affective styles they attributed to online discussions. Even though the positionings enacted in the practitioners' talk aligned in many ways with the meanings made available by the triggering statement, there were also instances of disalignment both with the statement and Internet discussions in general. Often these disalignments were enacted by describing the statement as too extreme and expressing a hope for more reasonable discussion of the topic:

Well, my first thought about this [statement] was that a sort of a juxtaposition is being done. But that's how it always goes when some phenomenon is raised, so that it must be placed against the other pole. But I always get irritated over it, for surely women's violence does not foreclose men's violence, nor the other way around. So they are two serious phenomena, and we should be able to intervene in both. (G6:P2)

In the extract, the speaker expresses both a critique and partial understanding of the polarising tone of the triggering statement, and redirects the expressed irritation towards a form of zero-sum thinking evident in the statement. This is coupled with an equalisation of the seriousness of violence committed by women and men, again in alignment with gender-neutral discourses on intimate partner violence (e.g. Dragiewicz and Burgess, 2016). This gender-neutralisation allows for a self-positioning that departs from online affect through a refusal to reiterate polarisation that places the regard for men in opposition to that for women. The refusal to participate in gendered polarisation works here to legitimise the speaker's authority as a helping professional dedicated to the pursuit of neutrality and equitability in attending to social problems such as violence. Such an affective-discursive self-positioning is 'cool, not hot' (Wetherell et al., 2015: 62), and aligns with a so-called therapeutic repertoire that places specific value on dialogue and reconciliative talk (Wetherell et al., 2015). This alignment further attaches a sense of

maturity and reasonableness to their positioning, which allows for positive distinction-making in relation to the more heated affective style of online discussions.

Similar neutralisation was also evident in the ways in which some of the practitioners explicitly commented on the affect expressed in the triggering claim, namely irritation due to the cultural emphasis of women's victimisation at the cost of neglecting men victims. In their commenting, in line with the therapeutic orientation described earlier, the affect of irritation is taken under scrutiny and reshaped into a more constructive affective positioning:

I myself somehow question this, that it is irritating that everywhere people only talk about violence against women. I am delighted that in recent years especially, violence encountered by young men has been raised as an issue more and more, but also violence in intimate relations encountered by men has been discussed more often as well, and violence encountered by little boys in families is also being talked about more often. (G5:P2)

In the extract, the irritation characterising the triggering claim is disaligned with and shaped into a more cheerful and optimistic positioning based on celebrating progress in the recognition of men's victimisation. This positioning neutralises the negative affect circulating online by simultaneously customising the neglect repertoire to provide the basis for a progress narrative (Venäläinen, 2020b) and the associated hopeful positioning both for men and the practitioners working with them. By discursively expressing the emotion of delight, the speaker positions themselves as a personally engaged proponent of men's rights to be seen and heard as victims. Thus, despite the partial detachment from the affective dimensions in online meaning-making, captured in the triggering statement, the repertoires circulating online and the positions they offer are closely aligned with this extract, here in a fashion that attaches a sense of normativity and obviousness to siding with efforts to reveal men's perceived plight in contemporary society.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article discussed the uses of interpretative repertoires of neglect and prejudice, and illustrated how both of these structure the meaning-making around men's victimisation both in online discussions and among practitioners. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrated how the positionings of men as suffering from neglect and discrimination, due to gendered prejudice purportedly sustained specifically by feminists, effectively cultivate and legitimate the potential for affects such as sympathy, resentment and anger. These in turn encourage the uptake of particular kinds of positionings in relation to the issue of men's victimisation and contemporary gender relations more broadly. The analysis also showed how the practitioners responded to these affective meanings by adopting positions of responsibility geared towards rectifying the purported lack of care for men highlighted in the online discussions. However, while largely aligning with the online meaning-making, the practitioners also redirected and neutralised online affect in ways more fitting with their identity work as professionals.

By focusing on relatively moderate forms of meaning-making around men's victimhood, the analysis tapped into the processes whereby notions about discrimination against men gain a feel of commonsense that facilitates their widespread, uncritical acceptance in both online and offline contexts. Commenting on contemporary politicised masculinities and associated affects, de Boise and Hearn (2017) have warned against such acceptance in research by stating,

Many white men in global Northern countries, for instance, feel discriminated against on the basis of gender and/or ethnicity. Focusing only on these feelings, however, risks detaching research from broader intersectional, feminist concerns around how power influences the dispersion and circulation of embodied affect. (p. 12)

In the contemporary postfeminist cultural climate, the affective potential attached to a concern over discrimination against men plays a central role in the spread of moderate forms of anti-feminism, thereby facilitating their infiltration into everyday understandings about gender, feminism and societal power. These normalisation processes work against critical engagements with those concerns and the associated affects. As the analysis earlier demonstrated, the underlying logic also in the rhetoric that highlighted men's victimhood without being explicitly linked to anti-feminist affective meaning-making closely resonates with the more hostile, harassing and explicitly anti-feminist and misogynous practices of the manosphere (e.g. Lumsden, 2019; Marwick and Caplan, 2018, see also Venäläinen, 2020b). The affective-discursive practices of contemporary men's rights advocacy can, therefore, be seen as exhibiting continuity across contexts and different manifestations on one hand, as well as fluidity on the other hand, as it takes different context-specific shapes and simultaneously invites affects with various valences and intensities (Wetherell, 2012: 12–14).

Considering the macro-contextual features of the analysed meaning-making, it is noteworthy that in Nordic countries such as Finland, with an image as progressive, women-friendly welfare states, the frequently employed discourse of 'equality gone too far' enables a sense of reversed discrimination, which may effectively feed into a collective rage among or on behalf of men with heightened force (de Boise, 2018; also Venäläinen, 2020b). However, the more micro-level context-specific indeterminacy in how these affective-discursive practices spread, mutate and are responded to (de and Boise, 2018 ; Wetherell, 2012: 12) also became evident in this study, specifically through the practitioners' disalignments with the affective positionings made available to them, while nevertheless reiterating the interpretative repertoires circulating online. Based on the assumption that both interpretative repertoires and positionings are employed in a variable, context-specific manner, whether or in what manner the repertoires identified here may also inform their practices in other communicative contexts remain however an open-ended question.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the practitioners' talk analysed here was generated in the context of commenting on a prompt statement that, although very closely reiterating the wordings recurrently used in online discussions, was compiled by the researchers. Hence, instead of direct engagement with online discussions, theirs was mediated by the researchers also acting as focus group moderators, and who, therefore,

played an active, double role in facilitating the circulation of meanings across the online and offline contexts. By re-invigorating the online discourse, we as researchers made it available for the practitioners' alignment in ways that were not naturally occurring. Nevertheless, the affinities between the practitioners' and online meaning-making cannot be reduced to this contrived connection; as close analysis of the underlying discursive and affective dynamics above has shown, the focus group participants reiterated, drew upon and responded to many of the other elements circulating online around the topic of men's victimisation and societal status that exceeded the meanings made explicitly available by the prompt statement. This suggests a trans-contextual reach of the identified repertoires. However, the fact that the practitioners also re-evaluated the online meanings in the focus groups suggests that there are more complex possibilities for engagement and disengagement with these repertoires. Future research could fruitfully address in more detail such possibilities, along with the various forms and functions of talk about men's victimisation in not only online, but also offline, contexts.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Kone Foundation.

ORCID iD

Satu Venäläinen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3298-1336>

References

- Åkerström M, Burcar V and Wästerfors D (2011) Balancing contradictory identities – Performing masculinity in victim narratives. *Sociological Perspectives* 54: 103–124.
- Berns N (2004) *Framing the Victim: Domestic Violence, Media, and Social Problems*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Couldry N (2012) *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Davies B and Harré R (1990) Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 19: 43–63.
- de Boise S (2018) The personal is political . . . just not always progressive: Affective interruptions and their promise for CSMM. *Norma* 13(3–4): 158–174.
- de Boise S and Hearn J (2017) Are men getting more emotional? Critical sociological perspectives on men, masculinities and emotions. *The Sociological Review* 65(4): 779–796.
- Dragiewicz M (2011) *Equality with a Vengeance: Men's Rights Groups, Battered Women, and Antifeminist Backlash*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Dragiewicz M and Burgess J (2016) Domestic violence on #qanda: The 'Man' question in live Twitter discussion on the Australian broadcasting corporation's Q&A. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 28(1): 211–229.
- Edley N (2001) Analysing masculinity: Interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positions. In: Wetherell M, Taylor S and Yates SJ (eds) *Discourse as Data: a Guide for Analysis*. London: Sage, pp.189–228.
- Edley N and Wetherell M (2001) Jekyll and Hyde: Men's constructions of feminism and feminists. *Feminism & Psychology* 11(4): 439–457.

- Ging D (2017) Alphas, betas, and incels: Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere. *Men and Masculinities* 22(4): 638–657.
- Ging D, Lynn T and Rosati P (2019) Neologising misogyny: Urban dictionary's folksonomies of sexual abuse. *new media & society* 22: 838–856.
- Gotell L and Dutton E (2016) Sexual violence in the 'manosphere': Antifeminist men's rights discourses on rape. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 5(2): 65–80.
- Hokka J and Nelimarkka M (2019) Affective economy of national-populist images: Investigating national and transnational online networks through visual big data. *new media & society* 22: 770–792.
- Horsti K (2017) Digital Islamophobia: The Swedish woman as a figure of pure and dangerous whiteness. *new media & society* 19(9): 1440–1457.
- Jane EA (2016) *Misogyny Online: A Short (And Brutish) History*. New York: Sage.
- Jenkins H, Ford S and Green J (2013) *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Kimmel M (1995) *The Politics of Manhood: Profeminist Men Respond to the Mythopoetic Men's Movement (And the Mythopoetic Leaders Answer)*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Kimmel M (2013) *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*. New York: Nation Books/Perseus.
- Lumsden K (2019) "I want to kill you in front of your children" is not a threat. It's an expression of a desire': Discourses of online abuse, trolling and violence on r/MensRights. In: Lumsden K and Harmer E (eds) *Online Othering: Exploring Violence and Discrimination on the Web*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.91–115.
- Mann RM (2008) Men's rights and feminist advocacy in Canadian domestic violence policy arenas: Contexts, dynamics, and outcomes of antifeminist backlash. *Feminist Criminology* 3(1): 44–75.
- Markham A and Buchanan E (2012) Ethical decision-making and Internet research: Recommendations from the AOIR Ethics Working Committee (version 2.0). *Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR)*. Available at: <http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf> (accessed 17 December 2018).
- Marwick AE and Caplan R (2018) Drinking male tears: Language, the manosphere, and networked harassment. *Feminist Media Studies* 18(4): 543–559.
- Messner M (1997) *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements*. Oxford: Alta Mira.
- Messner MA (2016) Forks in the road of Men's gender politics: Men's rights vs feminist allies. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 5: 6–20.
- Nikunen K (2018) From irony to solidarity: Affective practice and social media activism. *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 10(2): 10–21.
- Ojala M, Kaasik-Krogerus S and Pantti M (2019) Presidential speeches and the online politics of belonging: Affective-discursive positions toward refugees in Finland and Estonia. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22(2): 164–179.
- Papacharissi Z (2015) *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Saresma T (2018) Gender populism: Three cases of Finns Party actors' traditionalist anti-feminism. In: Kovala U, Palonen E, Ruotsalainen M, et al. (eds) *Populism on the Loose*. Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän yliopisto, pp.177–200.
- Scharff C (2012) *Repudiating Feminism: Young Women in a Neoliberal World*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Sundén J and Paasonen S (2018) Shameless hags and tolerance whores: Feminist resistance and the affective circuits of online hate. *Feminist Media Studies* 18(4): 643–656.

- Tileagă C (2019) Communicating misogyny: An interdisciplinary research agenda for social psychology. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 13(7): e12491.
- Titley G (2014) No apologies for cross-posting: European trans-media space and the digital circuitries of racism. *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* 5(1): 41–55.
- Tyler I (2007) The selfish feminist: Public images of women's liberation. *Australian Feminist Studies* 22(53): 173–190.
- Valaskivi K and Sumiala J (2014) Circulating social imaginaries: Theoretical and methodological reflections. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17(3): 229–243.
- Van Valkenburgh SP (2018) Digesting the red pill: Masculinity and neoliberalism in the manosphere. *Men and Masculinities* 24: 84–103.
- Venäläinen S (2020a) “What about men?” Ideological dilemmas in online discussions about intimate partner violence committed by women. *Feminism & Psychology* 30(4): 469–488.
- Venäläinen S (2020b) Reversing positions: Constructions of masculine victimhood in online discussions about intimate partner violence committed by women. *Men and Masculinities* 23(3–4): 772–787.
- Wetherell M (2012) *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*. London: Sage.
- Wetherell M, McCreanor T, McConville A, et al. (2015) Settling space and covering the nation: Some conceptual considerations in analysing affect and discourse. *Emotion, Space and Society* 16: 56–64.
- White M (2019) *Producing Masculinity: The Internet, Gender, and Sexuality*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Biographical note

Satu Venäläinen is a postdoctoral researcher in Social Psychology in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her research focuses on discourses, identities and affects linked specifically to the shifting gender relations both in online and offline contexts.