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Negotiating Prejudice and Equality: Analysing Gender and Sexuality Discourse Among Supporters of Populist Radical Right Message in Switzerland and Finland

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ABSTRACT

Research on gender, sexuality and the populist radical right has revealed the contradictory positions of such parties and politicians regarding gender issues. However, less is known about the perspective of laypeople on these matters. This study focuses on supporters of a radical right populist message and analyses how prejudice is constructed in populist gender discourse. Analysing interview material from two countries, Finland ($n = 55$) and Switzerland ($n = 33$), this study adopts a discursive–rhetorical approach and identifies six key discursive practices: radical supporters of gender equality, privileged gender and sexual minorities, assimilating individuals as exceptions, sexual minorities excluded from normality, the unprejudiced self distanced from the discriminating party and the self aligned with the rational party. First, this study sheds light on supporters' constructions of equality, gender and feminism in contemporary discourse. Second, our discursive–rhetorical analysis shows how different categorisation strategies are used in negotiating prejudice. Third, the study further complements existing research on gender populism by examining gender issues from the demand side, illustrating the appeal of radical right populist ideology among voters. We conclude that discursive category constructions and exceptions allow including, excluding and delegitimising gender and sexual minorities and their supporters while distancing and aligning oneself with (un)prejudiced positions in gender discourse. Please refer to the Supporting Information section to find this article's Community and Social Impact Statement.

1 | Introduction

Recent cultural and political developments showcase that we live in a world that strives towards greater acceptance of progressive values. Across Europe, same-sex marriages are increasingly accepted and LGBTQ+ rights recognised. At the same time, the rising hate and transphobic rhetoric by politicians (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex association [ILGA-Europe] 2023), along with the proliferation of anti-gender and anti-feminist politics among the populist radical right across Europe (Dietze and Roth 2020; Graff and Korolczuk 2022), imply an opposite development. In right-wing populism, gender issues can be examined through the concept of gender populism (Norocel et al. 2020; Saresma 2018), which endorses the gender binary and heterosexuality (Saresma 2014). The resistance to liberal gender policies among radical right populist politicians collides with modern egalitarian and feminist discourses (Pettersson 2017; Pettersson, Payotte, and Sakki 2023), generating a complex environment for studying gender issues in populist discourse.

Research on the supply side that examines the rhetoric and communication of radical right populist parties and actors[i] (Mols and Jetten 2020), has revealed contradictions in their

rhetoric on topics including gender roles, feminism and sexual politics (Akkerman 2015). This means that radical right populist actors strategically construct both support and opposition towards LGBTQ+ and feminist issues (Pettersson, Payotte, and Sakki 2023; Wielowiejski 2020), allowing them to appeal to a wide range of supporters. However, little is known about the discourse of populist radical right supporters around gender and sexual minority issues.

Previous research has demonstrated that, instead of outright hostility and direct discriminatory language, people in contemporary societies tend to use subtle forms of talk to manage and justify prejudiced accounts related to social categories, such as gender, race and sexuality (e.g., Augoustinos and Every 2007b; van Dijk 1992). For example, Speer and Potter (2000) illustrated that individuals manage their accountability and identity when engaging in heterosexist talk by portraying themselves as reasonable, rational and unprejudiced. Despite the growing research on gender in radical right (e.g., Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Norocel and Pettersson 2023) and extensive literature on prejudice in social psychology (e.g., Augoustinos and Every 2007b; Billig 1988), a deeper understanding is needed about the negotiation of prejudice in the context of gender populism from the lay perspective. By lay perspective, we refer to the vernacular argumentation and rhetoric of ordinary citizens who engage in complex conversations on societal issues (Hauser 2007).

To address this gap, we ask, first, how supporters of a radical right populist message negotiate prejudice around gender issues in two contemporary societies: Finland and Switzerland. Both countries score high on gender equality (World Economic Forum 2022), yet their leading populist radical right parties support similar conservative views on gender issues (Akkerman 2015; Saresma 2018). Second, we ask how categorisation, defined as uniting a specific stimulus or feature into a general category, and particularisation, defined as the separation of a specific stimulus or feature from the general category or other stimuli, are flexibly used and selected in the argumentation of gender and sexuality discourse, and what their various social implications may be (Billig 1985).

Mainstream psychology approaches prejudice and its opposite, tolerance, as individuals' inner features (Pettigrew and Meertens 1995). By contrast, we approach prejudice as the negative evaluation of a social group that is flexibly negotiated and argued in talk for various interactional goals (e.g., avoiding, defending or claiming certain positions or identities; Wetherell and Potter 1992). Similarly, tolerance is understood here as a discursive action in talk mobilised for various purposes, such as negotiating the positions of certain individuals or groups (Verkuyten and Kollar 2021) or defending one's prejudiced position (Billig 1985). This discursive approach allows us to avoid labelling individuals as prejudiced and instead focus on the construction, avoidance and negotiation of prejudice in interactions (Augoustinos and Every 2007a).

Our aims are threefold. First, this study provides an understanding of the lay discourse on gender, sexuality and feminist issues in a cross-national context. Second, our discursive–rhetorical analysis shows how different forms of categorisation are used to negotiate prejudice in populist gender discourse. Third, we contribute to social psychological research on gender populism by examining gender issues from the less-studied demand side that focuses on the appeal of populist radical-right parties among voters (Mols and Jetten 2020).

2 | Theoretical Framework

2.1 | Multifaceted Gender Populism

Gender populism is a concept that includes the idea of two complementary and opposite genders, men and women, along with a belief in the '"naturalness" of heterosexuality' (Saresma 2018, 190). It often intertwines with ideologies such as homophobia, xenophobia and anti-feminism in populist radical right discourse (Lähdesmäki and Saresma 2014; Saresma 2018). Thus, gender populism is characterised by heterosexism (Lähdesmäki and Saresma 2014), ethnocentrism (Keskinen 2013) and white masculinity that intersects with hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic whiteness and heterosexuality (Norocel et al. 2020).

Heterosexism refers to a cultural and 'ideological system that denies…and stigmatises any nonheterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship or community' (Herek 1990, 316), thus providing a set of beliefs that enable the expression and justification of prejudice as natural. Relatedly, previous studies on the discourse of the populist radical right have demonstrated how notions of traditional masculinity are embedded in the promotion of the heteronormative nuclear family (Norocel et al. 2020; Norocel and Pettersson 2023). Defending the heteronormative nuclear family emphasises the preservation of Christian values, cultural traditions and child protection while also framing changes like same-sex marriage as threats to society and the family (Norocel and Pettersson 2023).

The concept of white masculinity in gender populism refers to a traditional hegemonic ideal of a hard-working, white, down-to-earth masculinity (Norocel et al. 2020). This predominantly white, patriarchal masculinity intersects with ethnocentric, anti-immigration and anti-Islamic views that oppose male immigrants, particularly Muslims, who are constructed as racialised others (Keskinen 2013). This opposition is framed as a means of protecting 'our' (national) women and their rights (Dietze and Roth 2020; Mayer, Ajanovic, and Sauer 2014; Norocel et al. 2020). The combination of feminist and anti-immigration notions aligns with Farris's (2017) theory of femonationalism, which suggests that the feminist and gender equality discourse of the radical right is used for othering purposes. According to the theory, gay equality discourse—drawing upon the rights of the gay community—can be effectively mobilised among traditionally homophobic radical right parties when opposing Islam and non-Western immigration, framing these as a threat to sexual minorities (Farris 2017).

In anti-gender populist politics, the term 'gender' is redefined and demonised by associating it with threats to modern life and the people, erasing natural differences and disrupting the

'natural order' (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 19–22). Graff and Korolczuk (2022) posit that anti-genderism is founded upon Christian theology which is used to argue against the unscientific and 'illogical' social constructionist nature of gender, defend Western (Christian) cultural values and to protect these values against the allegedly alarmist visions of the cultural left, such as radical feminists. Therefore, 'gender' differs significantly from its original purpose in gender studies, where it was intended to question the binary gender system and promote gender equality (Butler 1990). Butler's (1990) poststructural performativity theory challenges the notion of a natural, inherent and fixed gender identity, as understood by gender populism, by defining gender as culturally constructed, performed and independent from the biological notion of sex.

In this article, we approach 'gender issues' as covering gender and other related terms, such as sexuality, men, women and LGBTQ+,[ii] not as predefined or fixed collectives, but as terms used by laypeople in argumentation for certain social purposes (e.g., defending, justifying and legitimising certain positions). Examining the argumentation of laypeople, as opposed to political leaders, offers insight into the complex and dynamic ways in which the public deliberates societal issues in relation to their everyday lives (Hauser 2007; Pettersson and Norocel 2024). The focus on laypeople's discourse allows us to deepen our understanding of such vernacular discourses and how they may challenge the normative reasoning and modes of argumentation employed by those in positions of authority (Hauser 2007).

Outlining the predominantly masculine and heteronormative aspects of gender populism must be considered in the context of hegemonic equality discourse in liberal Western societies that emphasise advocating equality for all and non-discrimination. Although many Western European radical right populist parties hold conservative values, they are integrated in a liberal context, which requires them to also support gender equality (Akkerman 2015) and adopt more gay-friendly rhetoric (Wielowiejski 2020). Therefore, the various components of gender populism do not constitute systematic or internally consistent worldviews but consist of contrary themes that enable dilemmatic thinking and argumentation (Billig et al. 1988). This complexity is particularly evident in studies of radical right populist female leaders who balance between the societal norm of gender equality, on the one hand, and the patriarchal, nationalist and anti-feminist politics of the party, on the other (Pettersson 2017; Pettersson, Payotte, and Sakki 2023).

Hegemonic equality discourse itself may be counterproductive and even used as a tool for social exclusion (Farris 2017; Menard 2016). This means that invoking universal equality may function to perpetuate inequalities and marginalise minorities (Venäläinen and Menard 2022), because being a member of a sexual minority challenges the notion of conformity (Menard 2016). Consequently, hegemonic equality complicates efforts to reduce prejudices because it allows for the production of marginalising talk without provoking accusations of prejudice (Goodman 2014). Therefore, as populist radical right politicians, actors and supporters navigate within this hegemonic equality discourse, it becomes pivotal to examine the discursive and rhetorical ways in which prejudice is negotiated in gender and sexuality discourse.

2.2 | A Rhetorical and Discursive Approach to Prejudice

In a hegemonic egalitarian context, individuals seek to avoid appearing prejudiced and irrational by adopting more subtle and less openly discriminatory language (van Dijk 1992), thus conforming to cultural norms that reject discrimination (Billig 1988; Billig et al. 1988). Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) distinguished between blatant and subtle individual positions and argued that subtle positions align with the hegemonic egalitarian norm because they allow for the rejection of minorities in a socially acceptable or non-prejudiced way.

However, categorising individuals as prejudiced or non-prejudiced may oversimplify the ambivalences and complexities of social settings in which most prejudiced utterances are embedded (Potter and Wetherell 1988); for example, in the context of gender, individuals may express both heterosexist and anti-heterosexist views (Speer and Potter 2000). Understanding the complexities of negotiating prejudice in lay discourse is a challenging task and requires a more nuanced theoretical framework.

Rhetorical and discursive psychology (Augoustinos and Every 2007b; Billig 1988; Billig et al. 1988; Wetherell and Potter 1992) provide valuable tools for this purpose. Previous research has demonstrated various rhetorical strategies that are utilised to avoid being perceived as prejudiced, including denying prejudice, constructing a factual social world, presenting a positive self and negative other (Augoustinos and Every 2007b), using rhetorically self-sufficient arguments of egalitarianism (Wetherell and Potter 1992) and emphasising personal relationships with vulnerable minority members (Pettersson 2020). Especially regarding gender and sexuality issues, common strategies include portraying advocates of same-sex marriage as intolerant (Jowett 2017), discounting heterosexism and displaying a lack of understanding (Speer and Potter 2000). For example, the statement: 'I'm not homophobic, but...' exemplifies how prejudices can be both negated and expressed (van Dijk 1992).

While none of these aforementioned strategies are inherently discriminatory, they can nevertheless serve to protect the speaker from criticism and misunderstandings (Antaki and Wetherell 1999), ultimately legitimising, rationalising and justifying inequalities (Every and Augoustinos 2007). In other words, as Durrheim, Quayle, and Dixon (2016) argued, prejudice is paradoxically marked by various instances of appearing non-prejudiced.

Discursive and rhetorical psychology, which are often used simultaneously in empirical studies, provide a nuanced approach for examining prejudice through the concepts of categorisation and particularisation. According to the rhetorical–discursive approach, categorisation is a social action achieved through communication. Certain constructs of categories and stereotypes enable individuals to deny racism, define who deserves certain entitlements (Augoustinos and Every 2007a;

Potter and Wetherell 1987) and legitimise and justify the social order (Augoustinos and Walker 1998). Rhetorical analysis allows for the examination of the argumentative nature of categorisation (Billig 1985) based on culturally and historically available resources (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell and Potter 1992). The discursive psychological approach emphasises the importance of language, its performative nature and its consequences in categorisation processes (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998).

For example, Figgou and Condor (2007) examined how the majority population in Greece negotiated various category labels for the Muslim minority, revealing that the rhetorical invocation of certain categories demonstrated the constructions of Greekness and Otherness and allowed for (un)problematised racism. Essentialising, or viewing social categories as natural, unchangeable and fixed, can serve as a discursive act for making judgements about groups (Verkuyten 2003). As such, categorisation can have significant social, political and cultural implications, either reinforcing or challenging existing inequalities (Augoustinos and Every 2007a). In essence, the discursive–rhetorical approach is not only concerned with what categories people use, but also how they use them and for what purposes (Wetherell and Potter 1992).

Categorisation is not the only process at play in talk. Billig (1985) postulated a counterpart called particularisation, in which individuals argue for special cases based on a particular chosen feature, relevant dimension or a category. Therefore, particularisation refers to treating a stimulus or feature as exceptions or deviant, emphasising differences or distinctiveness. By contrast, categorisation is a process of uniting certain stimuli and emphasising similarities (Billig 1985). For example, a categorisation (e.g., "all feminists are radical") might be followed by a particularisation ("but X is not radical"), where X makes an exception to the radical feminist category. Importantly, the selection of these specific features that unite or distinguish, can have certain social implications, such as delegitimising gay people's rights or avoiding accusations of prejudice.

The notion of associating categorisation with prejudiced thought and particularisation with tolerance oversimplifies the inherently interconnected nature of both processes (Billig 1985). This means that a selection of certain features from a general category cannot occur without categorising first, which then allows arguing for a special case or exception to this very category. In this study, the concepts of particularisation and categorisation allow for analysing the features and dimensions that are used in talk to distinguish or unite the self and others in prejudice negotiations.

According to the discursive and rhetorical approach, language does not represent individuals' factual thoughts or inner psychological characteristics (Edley 2001; Edwards and Potter 1992). Instead, it allows for analysing the argumentative nature of thinking, such as the dilemmatic prejudice negotiation (Billig 1985), often overlooked in mainstream theories like SIA (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Argumentation can also manifest as ideological dilemmas that are contradictions in people's everyday thinking, conflicting views and commonplaces, such as supporting gender equality, yet opposing gender inclusivity (Billig et al. 1988; Edley 2001). Thus, applying a discursive–rhetorical approach provides insight into the complex ways in which people argue and negotiate their positions around gender and sexuality issues.

3 | Method

3.1 | Research Material

To address our research objectives, we collected interview data from Finland ($n = 55$) and Switzerland ($n = 33$) constituting distinct yet comparable contexts. Both nations exhibit high levels of gender equality (World Economic Forum 2022) and have legalised same-sex marriage (enacted in Finland in 2017 and in Switzerland in 2022). Despite their shared commitment to gender equality and the legal recognition of same-sex marriage, discrimination against these minority groups persists in both countries. According to the ILGA-Europe (2023), rising hate speech, especially transphobic speech by politicians and state representatives, was reported as a serious issue in both countries.

We conducted the interviews as part of a broader qualitative project aiming to explore laypeople's perceptions of the current political and societal landscape. Participants included individuals of various ages, ranging from young adults to pensioners, who supported different political parties and lived in both rural and urban areas. Regarding gender, we have relied on participants' self-identification as woman and man, or use of pronouns as a mean of determining their gender identity as she/her or he/him.[iii] Otherwise, the pronoun they/them is employed to avoid making presumptions about gender.

The project specifically focused on radical right populist voters, thereby including the supporters of the Finns Party (Fi: Perussuomalaiset [PS], Sv: Sannfinländarna [SF]) in Finland ($n = 25$) and the Swiss People's party (Fr: Union démocratique du centre [UDC], De: Schweizerische Volkspartei [SVP], It: Partito Popolare Svizzero [UDC]) in Switzerland ($n = 11$). The interviews were conducted by experienced interviewers, including the second author, and were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed by native speakers of Finnish and French. The first author translated the original Finnish and the second author, the French extracts into English. Although not the only official languages in the respective countries, the interviews were conducted in areas where Finnish and French were spoken by the majority; hence, the languages stem from the research material. Translation was done as closely as possible to the original text while striving to retain the rhetorical nuances as much as possible. Minor alterations were made when necessary to maintain the conversational style. The original language extracts can be found in Supporting Information. The interview scheme received ethical approval from the Ethical Committee of the University of Eastern Finland.

Given our interest in populist gender discourse, we included a gender-related stimulus statement from the PS and the UDC in the interview scheme for participants to comment on. Official

documents offer understanding of the parties' positions on these issues. In general, both parties are known for their anti-gender agenda that advocates for traditional family and gender roles (Akkerman 2015; Lähdesmäki and Saresma 2014; Saresma 2018) and are characterised as a 'modern conservative party' (Akkerman 2015, 47).

The statement in the municipal programme of the PS is as follows:

> Municipalities should not get involved in the fuss of small but loud ideological groups. We do not support wasting money on gender-neutral road signs, continuous campaigns against discrimination and racism, or artificial emphasizing of gender issues. We should not compromise on Finnish culture because of overly offended people. (The Finns Party 2021, 6).

The statement from the UDC is:

> The traditional marriage of a man and a woman is weakened because it is placed on an equal footing with any other form of cohabitation...Contrary to what their [same-sex marriage] supporters claim, these reforms do not lead to a liberal society but to nationalization of private life. They threaten important social concepts such as the family, associations, foundations, churches, neighbourly relations as well as village and local communities that exist independently of the state. (Union Démocratique du Centre 2019, 76–77).

We acknowledge the distinct content of the populist message in which the PS draws on gender inclusion as a waste of economic resources and a threat to Finnish culture while the UDC draws on same-sex marriage as a threat to traditional values and culture. However, this enabled us to broaden our analytical scope to examine the diverse use of social categories, similarities and differences, in prejudice negotiations. The use of these statements as stimuli aligns with the qualitative attitude framework, emphasising the argumentative nature of interview data without claiming to reveal facts about individuals' inner psychological attitudes (Niska, Olakivi, and Vesala 2018).

We proceeded to analyse participants' responses to these statements, dividing them into agreeing, disagreeing or ambivalent groups based on their responses. Given our focus on the populist gender discourse and argumentation of supporters of radical right populist message, we focused on participants who did not disagree with the statements. From the total of 54 participants (one participant was not asked the question) in Finland, 38 (63%) supported the PS' statement. These participants were supporters of the PS, the Christian Democrats, the Centre party and the moderate green-left. From the total of 33 participants in Switzerland, 15 (45%) supported the UDC's statement. They were voters of the UDC and the Swiss Party of Labour. Our final material comprised 53 participants whose responses to the stimulus statements were analysed.

3.2 | Analytic Procedure

Our analysis of the discursive negotiation of prejudice within populist gender discourse relied upon rhetorical (Billig 1985, 1987; Billig et al. 1988; Potter 1996) and (critical) discursive psychology (Edley 2001; Potter and Wetherell 1987). Within this framework, talk is perceived as inseparable from its context, as argumentative, and as serving specific interactional functions. We use the concept of discursive practice to refer to the particular patterned constructions of the social world (Potter 1996) and examine how discursive practices are built by conducting a three-step analysis of the content, form and function (Sakki and Pettersson 2016).

To analyse the content, we familiarised ourselves with the material through reading and re-reading it multiple times (Potter and Wetherell 1987), focusing on what is talked about. At this stage, we considered both the similarities and differences between the stimuli statements and the content of participants' talk. Moving on to the analysis of form, we examined the rhetorical methods (Augoustinos and Every 2007b; Wetherell and Potter 1992), particularly the categorisation and particularisation processes (Billig 1985), used in negotiating prejudices.

Analysing categorisation, we explored who is talked about (e.g., gender and sexual minorities, feminists, party) and, more importantly, how they are talked about. As for particularisation, we examined the particular features used to construct exceptions, deviances or special cases to the categories (Billig 1985). We examined how certain categories were used by the participants rather than predefining particular relevant categories (e.g., homosexuals; Edwards 1998), which allowed for examining the flexible and complex use of such categories. The material was systematically coded to identify these discursive methods used in the talk. Lastly, we conducted the analysis of function, examining why or for what purposes certain forms were used to identify the social and political implications of them.

Although participants' talk indicated important contextual differences regarding the analysis of content, the analysis of form and function revealed some significant similarities in their usage of categorisation and other rhetorical tools, which is why we analysed the material parallel rather than comparatively. Interviews typically draw on cultural resources that allow for connecting past discursive history with the present local context (Wetherell 2003), and therefore, the analysis also remained sensitive to contextual differences.

Throughout the analysis, one author took primary responsibility for the Swiss material, and the others focused on the Finnish material. However, all phases of analysis were conducted collaboratively, involving close cooperation and constant discussion reflecting on and interpretating the findings.

4 | Analysis

We identified six discursive practices that illustrate how prejudice is negotiated in populist gender discourse through different categorisation strategies. The first four discursive practices illustrate constructions of gender, sexuality and equality in relation to self and others (e.g., radical supporters of gender equality, sexual and gender minorities), while the last two focus on the constructions of self and the relevant in-group (i.e., the party). Even though the first two practices were identified in both discursive contexts, we have relied on one example for each discursive practice. We chose extracts that we considered the most illustrative of the research material as a whole and most clearly demonstrate the use of categorisation for certain interactional purposes in the dilemmatic gender discourse.

The findings are summarised in Table 1.

4.1 | Radical Supporters of Gender Equality

The first discursive practice, found in both contexts, shows how prejudice is negotiated through categorising active supporters of gender equality as radical, which allowed participants to claim an egalitarian position for the self and delegitimise women's rights movement (Extract 1):

The participant (UDC voter) expresses explicit support for gender equality and opposes the discrimination in equal pay 'between men and women' (lines 1–2) which serves to position him as a supporter of gender equality. This is, however, followed by categorising, or uniting the active supporters of gender equality based on their 'extreme' feature (line 3; Edley and Wetherell 2001). The participant expresses direct dislike towards those who 'demonstrate for women's rights' (line 3), illustrating a common distinction between supporting feminist values while problematising the feminist individuals and groups (Riley 2001). Moreover, categorising the other as 'extreme', allows claiming a more moderate, rational and sensible position for oneself (Edley and Wetherell 2001; Wetherell and Potter 1992) and serves to delegitimise the feminist movement and efforts for social change.

The participant employs a 'yes, but' argument to express brief agreement on equality but disagreement with the alleged goal of women's superiority (lines 4–5; Holtgraves 1997). The extract shows how men's superiority is constructed as a description of the past—'it's not because for 40 years these rights were inferior to men's'—while feminist ideology is associated with the future goal of women's superiority over men (lines 4–5). This allows the participant to deny the contemporary relevance of inequalities and construct the feminist movement as opposite to gender equality and even a threat to it (Edley and Wetherell 2001; Riley 2001; Venäläinen 2020). By shifting the focus from women's rights to men's issues, the participant draws on an argument similar to that of 'all lives matter', which is a seemingly inclusive strategy that here functions to undermine feminist efforts and decontextualise gender inequalities (Goodman, Tafi, and Coyle 2023). This dilution of gender differences, reflects the positions of radical right parties who frame gender equality in terms of opposition to the preferential or privileging treatment of women (Meret and Siim 2013).

Rhetorically, the extract demonstrates how the participant shifts footing to claim a seemingly more entitled and informed perspective to the issue (Goffman 1979). This alignment is done through the collective footing 'we' (lines 5–6; Condor et al. 2006), allowing the participant to bolster the argument and increase the credibility of his position.

Categorising the supporters of feminist movement as extreme, functions not only to discredit and to delegitimise the relevance of contemporary feminist struggles, but also avoid accusations of discrimination by claiming a moderate egalitarian position for the self. Delegitimising feminist movements is related to the common discourse of achieved gender equality used in managing discussions on gender and feminism (Venäläinen 2020; Venäläinen and Menard 2022) which serves to legitimise the victories of past feminist movements while positioning feminism as less necessary or irrelevant in today's society (Pettersson, Payotte, and Sakki 2023).

4.2 | Privileged Gender and Sexual Minorities

The second discursive practice, also found in both contexts, shows how recategorising gender and sexual minorities as privileged is used to negotiate prejudice (Extract 2):

In response to the PS statement, the participant (PS voter) uses a concession 'I don't have statistics about all of these...minorities but' (line 1), which emphasises the following claim about minority members being 'surprisingly few' (line 2; Antaki and Wetherell 1999). Drawing on statistics was a commonly used tool in this discursive practice to construct one's position as factual and reflecting the objective world (Potter and Wetherell 1988). The participant uses vague expressions 'all of these' and general category of 'minorities' (line 1) which dismisses the specific importance of gender and sexual minority issues (Riley 2001). The extracts shows the construction and delegitimisation of minority members as others by juxtaposing the small number of minority members 'them' with the 'rest of the population' as 'us' (Tileagă 2006; lines 2–4).

In the extract, the participant recategorises gender and sexual minorities as privileged to negotiate prejudice. This privilege is constructed through arguments such as getting more 'media space' and 'resources that this country has' (lines 3–4). Using words such as 'pushed' (line 4) further emphasises the alleged unfair distribution of resources (Potter 1996) and portrays diversity as something imposed on people. The recategorisation is done through meritocratic reasoning and the egalitarian principle of treating everyone the same (Billig et al. 1988), regardless of social group membership (Augoustinos and Every 2007b). Therefore, this discursive practice highlights the important notion of equality for all, which can be argued against the allegedly unfair special treatment of minority members (Menard 2016).

TABLE 1 | Summarised findings based on their content, form, function and contextual relevance in the two countries.

Discursive practice	Content	Form	Function	Context
Radical supporters of gender equality	Gender equality; feminism; supporters of feminist issues; activism	Categorising active supporters of gender equality as radical; shifting footing; drawing on gender-neutral arguments	Avoiding accusations of discrimination through moderate and egalitarian position; delegitimising equality efforts	Switzerland and Finland
Privileged gender and sexual minorities	Minority vs. majority; discrimination; (economic) resources	Recategorising gender and sexual minorities as privileged; concession; statistics	Justifying inequalities; delegitimising gender and sexual minority rights; maintaining the status quo	Finland and Switzerland
Assimilating individuals as exceptions	Relationships and experiences with homosexuals	Particularisation through personal narratives; self-sufficient arguments	Avoiding accusations of prejudice; appearing tolerant and non-prejudiced of gender and sexual minority members	Finland
Sexual minorities excluded from normality	Family; marriage; religion; tradition; biology	Categorising sexual minority members outside 'normality'; essentialist arguments; concession; self-sufficient arguments	Externalising the inequalities of sexual minorities to institutions; justifying prejudiced position; excluding sexual minorities	Switzerland
The unprejudiced self distanced from the discriminating party	Party; law	Distancing the self from the potentially discriminating party; footing	Externalising the responsibility of anti-discrimination from individuals to the system; avoid appearing intolerant	Switzerland
The self aligned with the rational party	Party	Self-categorising with the rational party; drawing on common sense and rationality	Using the party as a justification and warrant for prejudice and inequities; downplaying gender rights; shifting prejudice	Finland

EXTRACT 1 | Switzerland.

1. And personally, I fully support equality between men and women.
2. I find it hard to understand these differences in pay for equal skills.
3. And besides, I don't like extremes, these people who demonstrate for women's rights.
4. Yes, but it's not because for 40 years these rights were inferior to men's that, for the next 40 years,
5. they must be superior. I discuss this very often with my wife; I think we manage to agree.
6. We talk about equality, not superiority.

EXTRACT 2 | Finland.

1. I don't have statistics about all of these. All of these, well like, minorities but many times
2. it is, well, they're surprisingly few in the end when you look at the whole population, so, well,
3. they all, they all get a lot of like this like media space and, and well, in a way these like resources
4. that this country has, the resources are being pushed like a lfot in relation to rest of the population.
5. I don't know if it makes any sense so, like, the situation won't get better.

EXTRACT 3 | Finland.

1. Well yeah, partially agree, definitely that these road signs are insignificant [Fin. Jonninjoutava]
2. because it's not like, um, a gender-neutral person if you're, I know gays and lesbians, for example, so,
3. I've never heard them say anything about some road signs, and they say,
4. I have a colleague married to a woman, woman and she doesn't fuss about road signs,
5. she works like everyone else, so it's idle also the gender, this road sign thing.
6. And what was the first thing? I missed it...
7. [Interviewer: Yes. And then there was artificial emphasising of gender issues.]
8. Yeah, well that too, that's also quite true. There's no need, it's not like part of Finnishness.
9. One can be anything one wants but it doesn't need to be emphasised, especially if it's artificial.

The recategorisation further reflects Platow et al.'s (2023) study showing that practices such as equal marriage rights may be perceived as denying opportunities for others. The participant challenges this privilege of minorities by constructing

EXTRACT 4 | Switzerland.

1. Before being a civil institution, marriage has been a religious and cultural institution for
2. thousands of years, whether you're Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or of any other faith.
3. Marriage is the place where a man and a woman build a family. And I think that it is respectable.
4. And today, the notion of marriage is being distorted a little bit by no longer respecting all the
5. conditions that made marriage. That is, a place of union to build a family.
6. Now, obviously, homosexuality doesn't allow for a family, at least not a biological family.
7. And that's why I said to myself, perhaps in the liberal society of 2022,
8. we can't refuse two grown men or two grown women who want to live together the fact that
9. they can live together, but we mustn't give in on our traditions, our values, on this notion,
10. this important notion of marriage.

the situation as senseless (line 5), which is a way of problematising the issue (Speer and Potter 2000) without focusing on the individuals concerned. Despite recategorising minorities as privileged, the participant acknowledges the disadvantaged position of them (line 5). Questioning the efficiency of actions to improve the situation for minorities 'the situation won't get better' (line 5), was a commonly used argument to justify inequalities, delegitimise minority rights and maintain the superior position of the majority.

4.3 | Assimilating Individuals as Exceptions

The following discursive practice, notable in Finland, shows how exceptions are constructed through personal narratives of assimilating individuals (Extract 3):

In response to the statement, the participant (PS voter) 'partially agree[s]' with the PS by constructing gender-neutral road signs as 'insignificant' (line 1). The participant then provides reasoning for this by particularising or constructing certain individuals in the sexual minority group as exceptions through personal narratives: 'I know gays and lesbians...I've never heard them say anything about some road signs' (lines 2–3) and 'I have a colleague married to a woman...and she doesn't fuss about road signs' (line 4). Particularisation is done by distinguishing an ideal and acceptable gender and sexual minority member from the general category of non-confirming deviant minority group. Personal narratives further serve as living proof to position oneself as a supporter of minority members (Pettersson 2020; Wodak 2015) and protect oneself from accusations of prejudice (Billig 1985). Thus, exceptions are constructed as assimilating or 'ordinary' individuals which is linked with a broader equality norm in Finland that encourages uniformity and conformity (Menard 2016).

Additionally, inclusion and acceptance are constructed by positioning the individuals as average, ordinary people 'she works like anyone else' (line 5), which implies similarities between the groups.

This extract further exemplifies how the categories of gender and sexuality are often constructed as blended in lay discourse (line 2), illustrating the complexities around categories in gender discourse. Rhetorically, the participant uses a category entitlement (Potter 1996, lines 3–4), that is, constructs gay individuals as a relevant and reliable source to strengthen the argument and increase its legitimacy (Potter 1996), while positioning the self as informed (Potter, Edwards, and Wetherell 1993).

Additionally, the participant draws on gender blindness by discrediting the importance of gender and dissolving it as a relevant social category (lines 5–8). Yet, it is made relevant by excluding gender issues from the national identity, 'Finnishness' (line 8), which exemplifies the intersection of national and gender identity in gender discourse (Venäläinen and Menard 2022). The participant uses a common self-sufficient argument (Wetherell and Potter 1992) prevalent in both countries—'One can be anything one wants' (line 9)—highlighting individual freedom (Billig 1988). However, it is followed with a concession 'but' (Potter 1996) that reveals the participant's position in opposing the 'artificial' emphasising of gender issues (line 9), which was a common reaction to the PS statement.

4.4 | Sexual Minorities as Excluded From Normality

The following discursive practice demonstrates a category distinction between a normative nuclear family and non-normative sexual minority members through essentialist arguments which allows to externalise the accusation of discrimination and prejudice from the individual onto broader institutions and authority (Extract 4).

In this discursive practice, the participant (UDC voter) draws on essentialist arguments about history, religion and traditions (lines 1–3; Potter and Wetherell 1988; Verkuyten 2003). Religion is used as an authority to argue for the heteronormativity of marriage and to construct the inclusion of different faiths (line 2). However, this inclusivity is used selectively, as the participant chooses to differentiate homosexuals from the normative nuclear family by arguing that marriage's historical purpose of 'building a family' does not align with same-sex unions (lines 3–5). The essentialist argument of 'natural' and factual biological differences serves to justify the exclusionary treatment of minorities and maintain the status quo (Tileagă 2006). Rhetorically, a self-evident argument is used, 'obviously, homosexuality doesn't allow for a family' (line 6), to decrease the subjectivity and bolster the scientific factuality of the claim (Potter 1996). The constructions of category distinctions through essentialist arguments allows for excluding LGBTQ+ minorities from normality and for externalising the blame for potential discrimination and inequalities of sexual minorities to institutions.

EXTRACT 5 | Switzerland.

1. Well then, um, yeah, that's a good point. I'll just think about it. Yeah, I think what
2. they mean, it is my vision of the thing, is that in fact we have to...it's like everything,
3. in fact, we don't have to create differences anymore. It's like, for example: for me,
4. the day of homophobia is an aberration, because today we shouldn't ask ourselves
5. the question. We shouldn't dedicate a day to sexual orientation because
6. if you're homosexual you have the right to be a homosexual!
7. And if you're discriminated against because of your sexual orientation, there are laws.
8. And we have to enforce the laws because it's not normal to be discriminated.

The discursive practice further aligns with the arguments of populist radical right parties that emphasise the importance of a biological family (Meret and Siim 2013; Norocel and Pettersson 2023) and serves to obscure the discriminatory nature of the argument by framing it as a factual representation of established norms (Norocel and Pettersson 2023). The participant draws on the values of 'liberal society' (lines 7–8; Augoustinos and Every 2007b), which positions himself as a supporter of the co-living of same-sex couples. However, this is followed by a concession 'but' (line 9; Potter 1996) and strengthened with a list construction—'our traditions, our values, on this notion...of marriage' (lines 9–10; Jefferson 1990)—revealing the participant's opposition towards same-sex marriage. The particular differentiation in the Swiss context of supporting liberal rights and protecting sacred traditions allows the participant to justify prejudiced position. This aligns with the conservative positions of many radical right populist parties who oppose same-sex marriage but support some gay rights (Akkerman 2015).

4.5 | The Unprejudiced Self Distanced From the Discriminating Party

While the previous four discursive practices showed how constructions of categories and exceptions are used to negotiate prejudice in relation to self and others, the next two discursive practices indicate how prejudice is negotiated in relation to the self and the populist radical right party.

The first discursive practice, prominent in Switzerland, demonstrates how the self as a party supporter is distinguished from the potentially discriminating party (Extract 5):

The participant (UDC voter) starts by negotiating the potentially discriminatory image of the party she supports (Condor et al. 2006). Instead of disagreeing with the statement, the participant displaces agreement with hesitating prefaces 'Well

then, um, yeah' (line 1; Holtgraves 1997) and footing (line 1; Goffman 1979). This allows for the construction of the question as complex, uncertain and open to interpretation. By doing so, the participant differentiates the 'unprejudiced self' from the potentially discriminating party (Billig 1985), which serves to distance herself from the potential prejudiced associated with the party statement and avoid appearing intolerant. Relatedly, negotiating the discriminatory position of the party by rearticulating the meaning of the party statement, 'I think what they mean' (line 2–3), allows her to maintain a positive identity on behalf of the party (Condor et al. 2006) and functions to defend and protect the party from possible accusations of promoting discriminatory policies.

Similarly to the first two discursive practices, the extract demonstrates the common finding in our data that constructs sexual orientation insignificant in today's society—'today we must not ask ourselves the question. We shouldn't dedicate a day to a sexual orientation' (lines 4–5)—which allows for constructing equality as achieved while downplaying homophobia as a reality (Menard 2016).

The discursive practice further indicates how law is used as a central argument in Switzerland (lines 6–8) to justify one's position and argue against discrimination. Drawing on law as an authority allows for separating practical implications—that is, the reality and everyday discriminatory experiences of minority members—from legal obligations, externalising the responsibility of anti-discrimination from individuals to the system. The self-sufficient argument of anti-discrimination—'it is not normal to be discriminated'—(Wetherell and Potter 1992) is however framed around jurisdiction (lines 6–7), which allows to position herself as a supporter of minority rights through law while avoiding moralising the issue. Thus, this way of talking serves to dilute the focus from the morality of discrimination to external authorities and allows to avoid accusations of discrimination.

4.6 | The Self Aligned With the Rational Party

The last discursive practice is also built directly in response to the party message in Finland, showing how self-categorisation is used to include oneself as part of the 'rational party', which serves to use the party as a warrant for a prejudiced position (Extract 6):

EXTRACT 6 | Finland.

1. (laughs) wonder if I should join the Finns Party [fin. persut]? (laughs) Well yeah, I agree, I agree
2. like completely what, what is said about that money is spent on useless.
3. I've been thinking just, just about that like, like the road signs, is there anything more senseless.
4. Like I feel like people have lost their common sense, in the midst of all this fuss.
5. So what are really important things then, like that, that sometimes really annoys [fin. ottaa nuppiin].
6. So, the Finns Party are here like on the right. Not on track but on the right path.

The participant (Christian Democrats voter) responds to the statement with laughter and a rhetorical question: 'wonder if I should join the Finns Party?' (line 1), which both serve to indicate the obvious like-mindedness and approval with the party on this matter (Billig 2005; Potter 1996). This apparent agreement with the party allows the participant to discursively self-categorise herself as part of the party. This self-categorisation serves to shift the moral accountability for prejudice from the self to the group, which functions to warrant a more explicit prejudiced account.

The extract shows yet again the reoccurring argument of denying the relevance of gender in both countries (Venäläinen 2020). Constructing gender issues as insignificant, 'senseless' and a waste of money (lines 2–3) serves to shift the focus from the issue itself to the illogicality of it (Wodak 2015). Rationalisation is a common strategy to exclude and marginalise minorities in society (Augoustinos and Every 2007b). Here, regarding sexual and gender minorities, rationalisation functions as a means of downplaying gender rights.

The phrase 'I feel' is used to mitigate one's opinion when referring to people's loss of 'common sense' and lack of priorities (lines 4–5; Holtgraves 1997), which constructs supporters of gender issues as irrational. The constructed irrationality of others serves to juxtapose them with the rational voice of the PS on this matter (line 6). The self-categorisation with the logical and sensible party allows to include oneself in the 'rational' in-group. Mobilising rationality and aligning with the party on this basis is, however, used to shift the morality of gender issues from the self to the party (Billig 1988). The construction of the in-group as rational and the outgroup as irrational is in line with the findings of Platow et al. (2023) that showed that opponents of same-sex marriage perceived the in-group as unprejudiced, tolerant and truthful, while the outgroup of supporters was perceived as the opposite. Self-categorising oneself with the PS and their position on gender issues may, on a broad scale, strengthen the support for and appeal of the party and further warrant inequities.

5 | Concluding Discussion

In this study, we examined populist gender and sexuality discourse from a lay perspective in two contemporary societies, seeking to contribute to the existing social psychological literature in three ways. First, we shed light on the constructions of equality, prejudice, gender and sexuality among supporters of a populist radical right message in a cross-country context. Second, our discursive–rhetorical analysis showed how different categorisation strategies (i.e., recategorisation, category distinctions, self-categorisation) and particularisations (exceptions) are employed in dilemmatic populist gender discourse to negotiate prejudice. Third, by examining the less-studied demand side of populism (Mols and Jetten 2020), we contributed to the field of gender populism. In this article, we argue that various forms of discursive categorisation as well as elements of particularisation are used in lay argumentation around gender issues

for including, excluding and delegitimising gender and sexual minorities and their supporters while distancing and aligning oneself with (un)prejudiced positions.

The six discursive practices identified provide empirical evidence of how different types of categorisations can be used in argumentation and negotiation around prejudice (Billig 1985). We found two noticeable tensions in the lay discourse. The first tension was constructed through (re)categorising relevant groups (e.g., homosexuals, minorities, women) based on certain features and distinctions (Billig 1988). In the first discursive practice, categorisation was used to group the supporters of feminist issues based on the 'extreme' feature associated with them which allowed claiming a more moderate position as a supporter of gender equality for oneself (Edley and Wetherell 2001). The second discursive practice employed recategorisation to construct the gender and sexual minorities as privileged with the aim of delegitimising minority rights (Pettersson 2020; Sakki and Pettersson 2016).

In the third discursive practice, assimilating individuals were constructed as exceptions, or particularised, from the social category of non-conforming gay people through personal narratives (Pettersson 2020; Wodak 2015) which allowed avoiding accusations of prejudice and appear more tolerant. The fourth discursive practice demonstrated how distinguishing between normative nuclear family and non-normative minority members was used to marginalise and exclude homosexuals from the normative nuclear family category through essentialist arguments. These arguments further served to externalise potential discrimination and prejudice to institutions.

The second tension demonstrated the negotiation between the self and the populist radical right party's stance. In the fifth discursive practice, the 'unprejudiced' self was distanced from the potentially discriminating party through hesitating prefaces (Holtgraves 1997) and rearticulation to avoid appearing intolerant while defending and protecting the party from potential charges of prejudice (Condor et al. 2006). In the last discursive practice, the self was categorised as part of the rational party to align with the party's stance on the issue, which allowed using the party as a justification and warrant for more explicit prejudiced accounts. These discursive practices demonstrated how different categorisation strategies are used in dilemmatic gender discourse to include and exclude the self and others based on selected criteria (Billig 1985).

Our analysis of the rhetorical form of the discourse indicates an employment of collective footing (Goffman 1979) and category entitlement (Potter 1996) in the argumentation. Footing allowed both aligning oneself with the members of a relevant category, including women (Extract 1), to gain entitlement and credibility for one's argument and distance oneself from the potentially discriminating views of the party (Extract 5). Category entitlement was employed by drawing upon gay individuals as an authority to gain legitimacy for one's argument (Extract 3). Furthermore, participants in both nations drew on self-sufficient arguments (Extracts 3 and 5; Wetherell and Potter 1992), promoting individual freedom and anti-discrimination. However, emphasising the equal rights of all individuals serves to uphold the present social order, including its inequalities.

Contrary to the majority of qualitative discursive research that has been conducted in one context (e.g., Augoustinos and Every 2007b; Wetherell and Potter 1992), our two country context provided a broader understanding about the populist gender and sexuality discourse. Our empirical results indicate a distinction between mobilising common sense and rationality in Finland and the authority of law, traditions and science in Switzerland to justify inequalities. However, despite these contextual differences, our study demonstrates that the discursive processes of uniting and distinguishing based on particular social features are useful in negotiating prejudice within the normative hegemonic discourse of achieved equality and equality through assimilation (Menard 2016; Venäläinen 2020; Venäläinen and Menard 2022), delegitimising efforts to enhance gender equality and sexual minority rights.

Theoretically, examining gender populism from laypeople's perspectives in a cross-national setting furthers our understanding of the interplay between the demand and supply sides (Mols and Jetten 2020). In Switzerland, the stimulus statement addressed an opposition to same-sex couple's equal rights to marriage. In a contemporary context, this may seem to be a relatively unprogressive view, requiring individuals to balance between the conflicting positions of the self and the potentially prejudiced party (Extract 5). By contrast, in Finland, the statement opposed recent gender affirmation actions. Therefore, the common response of laughter and direct agreement constructed the PS as a rational party that says the unsayable (Billig 2005), making it more compelling for the audience to align with the party's position and use it as a warrant for prejudice (Extract 6).

This may imply that framing gender issues in terms of same-sex marriage discourages some supporters of populist radical right parties from positioning themselves in line with the party or pushes them to manage the prejudiced image on behalf of the party (Condor et al. 2006). In contrast, framing gender issues solely in terms of irrationality and as a threat (Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Rapley 1999) may appeal to individuals other than traditional populist radical right voters (Norocel and Pettersson 2023) and reinforce prejudiced attitudes towards marginalised groups.

This study is not without limitations. We focused on populist gender and sexuality discourse as such, consciously avoiding labelling radical right populist voters or prejudiced individuals that could exacerbate the present intergroup divide (Platow et al. 2023). However, we acknowledge the potential influence of party identification in shaping participants' talk. We are also aware of the fact that the terminology used in the stimuli statements may have guided the participants' talk. Finally, despite considering the contextual differences between the two countries, our analysis has sought to examine the forms and functions of talk rather than cross-country differences in terms of its content (Sakki and Pettersson 2016).

Regardless of the slight oversize of the Finnish corpus, the qualitative approach and cross-country setting proved useful in capturing the nuances of laypeople's argumentation beyond a single country context. Our findings may lack generalisability to countries or regions with differing socio-political contexts. Nevertheless, our theoretical contribution—shedding light on

the demand side of gender populism and its intertwinement with the supply side—is relevant for countries with similar characteristics. With a growing body of research and interest in gender populism across various contexts (e.g., Dietze and Roth 2020; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Norocel and Pettersson 2023), future studies could benefit from combining the social psychological discursive framework of categorisation with an intersectional approach to further analyse the intersecting social identities around gender issues (Venäläinen and Menard 2022). Examining the intersection of multiple categories, such as gender, sexuality, class and race may further advance our understanding of how macrolevel structures of power and privilege are maintained in microlevel social relations and experiences (Venäläinen and Menard 2022).

In conclusion, this study shows that gender issues are not only dilemmatic and diverse on the supply side (Pettersson 2017; Pettersson, Payotte, and Sakki 2023), but also on the demand side. Given the recent rise in transphobic rhetoric by European politicians (ILGA-Europe 2023), understanding the appeal of such messages and public argumentation on LGBTQ+ issues is crucial for comprehending lay constructions of prejudice and equality.

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Ethics Statement

The interview scheme received ethical approval from the Ethical Committee of the University of Eastern Finland.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that supports the findings of this study will be available at the Finnish Social Science Data Archive for research and educational purposes after the project is completed.

Endnotes

[i] We align with Mudde's (2007) conceptualization of 'populist radical right' that highlights the primarily nativist but also populist nature of the PS and UDC. To maintain coherence, we employ the term 'radical right' throughout the study to refer to other ideologically similar Western political parties.

[ii] We acknowledge the various abbreviations for a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. 'LGBTQ' is used to indicate the most often used social categories in our data and '+' to signify the possibility for other gender identities.

[iii] It is important to note that in French, gendered pronouns are used, whereas in Finnish, gender-neutral pronouns are employed.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.