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### Liberal Liability: Students' Understanding of a Gender Perspective in Social Science

Research has shown that teaching gender theories tends to be an educational challenge and elicits student resistance. However, little is known about students' learning processes in social science. This study aims to explore these learning processes by drawing on feminist pedagogy and conceptual change theory. The results show that when students are asked to perform analysis from a structural gender perspective, they recurrently introduce other explanatory frameworks based on non-structural understandings. The students' learning processes involve reformulating questions and making interpretations based on liberal understandings of power, freedom of choice and equality. We argue that this process is due to the hegemonic position of the liberal paradigm as well as to the dominant ideas about science. Clarifying the underlying presumptions of a liberal perspective and a structural perspective may help students to recognise applied premises and enable them to distinguish relevant explanations.

#### Keywords:

gender, higher education, conceptual change, liberalism, political science, feminism

#### 1 Introduction

What do university students do when asked to engage in a gender perspective in an educational setting? Several studies have addressed how students react to and grapple with course content that employs a gender and power perspective or that stems from a feminist approach. Many of these studies call attention to students' resistance and reluctance to acknowledge a structural gender perspective as a legitimate field of knowledge (Webber 2005; Langan, Davidson 2005; Sánchez-Casal 2002; Sasaki 2002; Keränen 1993). Studies have focused on how gender structures and knowledge production are intertwined, and an important goal has been the introduction of more inclusive teaching practices (Jansson et al. 2008; Jansson et al. 2009; Maher, Tetreault 2001). In these studies, student resistance is often theorised as the result of the gender order. In this article, however, we argue that resistance can also be contextualised and interpreted as part of a learning process. By combining insights from feminist educational studies and conceptual change theory, we highlight the complexities involved when students approach a structural gender perspective. An important focus within the educational studies field of conceptual change has

been the impact of taken-for-granted ideas and students' prior knowledge on the learning processes (for a bibliography, see Duit 2009). In this study, the conceptual change perspective provides a focus on student learning and enables a more profound understanding of the conceptions and taken-for-granted ideas that are involved when students learn to apply theoretical perspectives. This study contributes to the field of conceptual change in social science. As Lundholm and Davies (2013) state this area of knowledge is meagre in comparison with research on conceptual change in natural science. We will show how established liberal conceptions as well as mainstream ideas about science inform students' readiness to make use of a structural gender perspective.

The overarching purpose of this study is to explore the learning processes that take place when students are required to problematize gender and power relations by using a structural gender perspective in their analytical work. More specifically, we pose the following questions: When and how can students make use of a structural gender perspective in their interpretations? What challenges do they encounter in their learning? When and how are their analyses diverted from a structural gender perspective?

#### 2 Theoretical Considerations

Feminist studies of education and instruction as well as studies of conceptual change have examined gender in learning situations. A common interest has been to explore how gendered experiences affect approaches to science. Accordingly, both fields discuss the ways that learning strategies differ between women and men (Clinchy 2002; Bunce, Gabel 2002; Scantlebury, Martin 2010). However, there are differences in perspective. Whereas conceptual change research investigates the individual's learning processes and development of knowledge, feminist educational studies are primarily

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concerned with how gendered structures influence knowledge production and condition student learning. For example, feminist epistemological studies have shown that what is regarded as scientific is bound to male experiences and constructions of masculinity (Smith 1987; Harding 1986; Lloyd 1993). Furthermore, a number of studies have examined how this connection with male experiences affects women in the academy with regard to issues of female subjectivity and identity formation (Davies et al. 2001; Hughes 2001; Erwin, Maurutto 1998). In this line of research, Danielsson (2012) calls attention to how the male bias of the physics discipline as well as expectations and gender norms affect female physics students and shape women's learning experiences. Regarding the social sciences the gender perspective continues to be marginalized in the curriculum (Oechsle 2005; cf. Keränen 1993). When it comes to political science more specifically, this discipline "has remained immunized against feminist perspectives for longer than other social sciences" (Oechsle, Wetterau 2005, 6).

When a structural gender perspective constitutes the learning content, as in the present study, specific learning challenges are actualised. Studies that discuss students' encounters with feminist theory emphasise different aspects of resistance in the classroom. On a general level, the connection between science and masculinity obstructs a gender perspective (Rich 1979; Howie, Tauchert 2002). Furthermore, researchers have discussed how this perspective challenges students' identities and their position in power structures. As Titus (2000) notes, men may resist acknowledging their privileged position, whereas women do not want to identify themselves as victims (cf. Good, Moss-Racusin 2010; Carse, De Bruin 2002; Moeller 2002). Moreover, social barriers in the classroom hinder the acknowledgment of hierarchies and differences between women and men. A pleasant and consensual atmosphere is threatened when the possibility of identifying privileges and inequalities among the students is actualised (Morrison et al. 2005). These different dimensions of resistance are, of course, interconnected. Furthermore, resistance against a structural gender perspective is neither expressed at random nor manifested haphazardly. Rather, it is systematic and often grounded in common-sense versions of a positivist view of science and liberal understandings of the world. Hence, in the present study, we focus on resistance as part of the learning process of a structural gender perspective.

Within conceptual change theory, scholars note that people use a different explanatory framework within everyday settings compared to the framework they may use at a physics seminar (Solomon 1983; Driver et al. 1994). Frameworks are defined in relation to conceptual contexts. A major debate within conceptual change research is whether lay knowledge, often discussed in terms of common sense, hinders conceptual change and

therefore must be abandoned (Posner et al. 1982; Strike, Posner 1992) or whether learning can be understood as a problem of contextualisation, i.e., to determine the contexts in which different explanatory frameworks are adequate (Caravita, Halldén 1994; Halldén 1999). Consistent with the latter line of reasoning, we note that students tend to shift from a structural gender perspective to more established theoretical perspectives. These cannot be viewed as common sense in terms of lay knowledge; rather, they must be viewed as competing theoretical and scientific paradigms.

Although the majority of studies within conceptual change research focus on learning in the domain of natural science, a number of studies have examined the process of learning political concepts by focusing on children's conceptual development (Helwig 1998; Berti, Benesso 1998; Berti, Vanni 2000; Berti, Andriolo 2001). Investigations of children's and adults' conceptions of gender have shown that children and, to some extent, adults have essentialist beliefs (Gelman et al. 1986; Gelman et al. 2004; Taylor 1996; Taylor et al. 2009; Prentice, Miller 2006). In contrast to these studies, this article does not explore students' understanding of gender categories. Rather, we focus on what students do when they apply a gender perspective in which structures of gender and sexuality are viewed as closely connected to power.

Our analytical perspective is based on conceptual change theory, specifically the idea of alternative frameworks. This line of reasoning proposes that students may interpret tasks and questions differently depending on their prior knowledge and their interpretation of the situation (Caravita, Halldén 1994; Driver et al. 1994; Halldén 1999; Larsson, Halldén 2010; Solomon 1983). Ola Halldén (1999) draws attention to the risk of jumping to conclusions when determining what students do not understand. A student who gives an answer different from the answer intended by the teacher does not necessarily demonstrate that s/he does not understand. Instead, the student may be interpreting the situation differently and consequently may be answering the question from within a different framework. This approach may suggest a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics involved when students use gender as an analytical tool.

Using insight from conceptual change theory, this article will focus on understanding what students are *doing* when they engage with learning content (Halldén et al. 2007) that involves a structural gender perspective. By examining the questions students pose and answer in their discussions and how they use comparisons and counter-examples, we are able to discern students' alternative frameworks that are actualised when they approach an assignment (Driver, Easley 1978). We argue that conceptions that may be interpreted in terms of resistance and misconceptions vis-à-vis a structural gender perspective may be interpreted from a learning



perspective as adequate conceptualisations because they stem from an alternative framework.

### 3 Material and Methods

In this study, aspects of the learning processes are analysed based on material produced by students attending a first-year university course in political science in a Swedish University during spring term 2008. The data consist of audio recordings from the students' group discussions during a seminar with the theme "Gender and media". This study includes 14 students (6 women, 8 men) divided into four groups. This small sample of students and our qualitative approach do not allow us to make generalising claims. However, in our experience of several years of teaching this course, this group of students does not seem to deviate from previous (or subsequent) groups we have met in terms of group composition or in their ways of reasoning and handling the structural gender perspective. However, one difference is that male students are somewhat overrepresented in our sample. Generally, we see a majority of female students in these courses, which are offered as part of a teacher programme. This specific course was taught over a period of five weeks<sup>1</sup>. A central aspect of the course was the presentation of a perspective that problematizes gender *inter alia* in relation to the construction of the nation. Consequently, literature and lectures addressing these topics were introduced.

The group discussions analysed in this study addressed three different course readings that problematize questions of gender representations in the media. In "Den politiska föreställningen" [The Political Performance], which discusses Swedish political leaders in the media, Tom Olsson (2000) underlines the historical connections between masculinity and political leadership. In "Women Framed: The Gendered Turn in Mediated Politics", Karen Ross (2004) discusses how female politicians are represented as deviations from the norm. In "Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Lesbian and Gay People in the Media", Larry Gross (1996) focuses on how homosexuals are stereotyped in media representations. All of these texts depart from a structuralist theoretical perspective and analyse media as a site where different identities are reproduced in ways that uphold societal inequalities.

Before the discussions, the students were instructed to read the course readings and also to read four newspaper articles, each covering a portrayal of a leader of a party in the Swedish parliament. This series of interviews was published in Dagens Nyheter ("Daily News"), the largest morning paper in Sweden, in May 2006 and was part of the media coverage of the campaign for the parliamentary elections in September. The newspaper articles included pictures of the four politicians. The male Prime Minister, Göran Persson, is photographed standing in the forest, hugging a tree, illustrating the news article's attention to the

environmental focus within the social democratic party<sup>2</sup>. The male leader of the left party, Lars Ohly, is portrayed violently cheering on his favourite soccer team. Maria Wetterstrand, spokesperson of the Green Party, is seen sitting in a sandbox with her child. Finally, one picture shows Maud Olofsson, female leader of the Centre Party, leaning back in a chair with headphones on and her eyes closed, enjoying music.

The students were instructed to begin with these articles and discuss how different structures of power became salient in the media material. The assignment demanded that the students apply elements and concepts from the course readings to the newspaper material. The questions were formulated in explicit relation to the course readings presented above and were centred on issues of how the female politicians were described and whether the "patriarchal order" and norms regarding heterosexuality and the nuclear family were reproduced or challenged. These questions asked the students to adopt a critical gender perspective when analysing the news items.

As noted earlier, the analyses of the material are based on insights from conceptual change, especially the alternative frameworks theory. Hence, we examined the recordings by focusing on what the students are actually *doing* (cf. Halldén 1999; Halldén et al. 2007), such as comparing or using irony to question the validity of the perspective. We also considered *what questions they are posing and answering*. By investigating the conceptions the students give voice to, we are able to identify *alternative frameworks*. For example, students actualise competing theoretical formulations of democracy, justice and power or scientific assumptions stemming from other scientific paradigms, such as positivist ideas about testing.

The empirical section is divided into four parts based on different "doings" of the students, which are generated from recurring patterns of actions in the material. The first part focuses on how students make use of *comparisons*, whereas the second focuses on how students grapple with acknowledging power inequalities and hold on to the idea of equilibrium, a section we call *retaining balance*. The third section considers how students use *disclaimers* toward their own structural gender analyses. Finally, the fourth section, *retaining innocence*, shows how students use liberal notions of power and how this complicates their ability to apply a structural perspective.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Comparisons

In their discussions, the students frequently make use of comparisons. The most common is a comparison between how women and men are described in the media material. Another type of comparison occurs when students change the gender of the politicians to test how language is gendered by changing "he" to "she" and vice versa. We call this latter type of comparison



“reversal”. The comparisons often enable the students make use of a gender perspective, but they may also lead to a discussion in which the students lose sight of the gender perspective.

The simple manoeuvre of comparing leads students to conclude that women are described as more passive and vulnerable, whereas men are presented as potent actors. Here, the students begin to pinpoint gendered differences and successfully employ the structural perspective. One group compares the pictures of the politicians. A male politician is portrayed at a football game, and a female politician is shown in the park with her child. The group (3) comes up with alternative ideas as they question how the political leaders could be pictured, such as why women are not portrayed delivering political speeches or working out in the gym. This comparing exercise opens the door for a gender analysis that criticises the connection between women and passivity and men and activity.

Comparison can also enable students to pinpoint the use of different words and adjectives in relation to men and women. In the following scenario, the students in this group (2) distinguish even the minutiae regarding how women and men are addressed.

Maria: Yes. But then I think – what is the difference (...) But it feels like ... you know, Maria Wetterstrand is described somewhere in the article – I don’t remember in what part – that she has a cocky approach. Little cocky, little new, little exciting like that. While Lars Ohly – he is tough.

(...)

Erika: ‘Tough’ stands more for – it is something constant. ‘Cocky’ – then you’re on one level and supposed to get up to another.

(...)

Maria: ‘Cocky’ I think is more non-serious; just a bit new and cocky.

Erika: She hasn’t learned how to play yet, but “You only cackle here since you are a newcomer here. Now when the big established guys are coming, then it will be rough against the sideboards”, so to say...

In this example, the comparison of how the media use different words to describe men and women allows the students to position the media material within a broader societal structure.

Reversal works similarly, but it has a different dynamic because it allows the students to switch the male and female politicians in a way that makes gender stereotypes salient. For example, group 3 tests the sound of a sentence describing the male prime minister passing on used baby clothes to the minister of finance (who is also male). Reversal is used to problematize details in the wording of the articles. The students ask themselves, “Would the prime minister be described as ‘quick-spoken?’” [‘snabb-käftad’ in Swedish]. Most likely not, they lament. The act of comparing is an established

scientific method, and the students recognise this. Consequently, comparing grants the exercise scientific legitimacy and the use of a gender perspective may consequently seem less biased.

Comparison is closely connected to finding differences. Although these differences often seem to be fruitful because they address the workings of the gender structure, they also cause the discussion to move away from gender and from a structural perspective. In the excerpt from group 3’s discussion below, the age of the politicians and other individual personality traits are placed in opposition to the gender analysis.

Johan: But, does it have more to do with personalities than with gender?

Hanna: No, but it feels very typical that it is a woman that is sitting in the sandbox.

Peter: But, it is difficult anyway, because they are in different generations and also different life situations. And that is why it is difficult to know, like in the picture of Maud Olofsson ... I could have pictured Persson instead. Like a picture where he sits and relaxes after a meeting. I mean, it is not as obvious. And the question is, if it couldn’t be a picture of Ohly if he had kids, you know, that were younger. I don’t know, maybe he has.

Hanna: Doesn’t he have a fairly young kid?

Johan: I think they are teenagers.

Hanna: Was there not anyone that was a bit younger? Maybe not.

The first line in the scenario is open to interpretation on an individual level. However, Hanna argues that it is typical to place a woman in the sandbox. Thus, she states that this can be viewed as part of a gender structure.

At this point, Peter introduces generational difference as an option. In doing so, he questions the possibility of using this material to analyse gender structures because there may be underlying variables that explain the difference, such as age. His argument also implies that if this underlying variable were considered there would be no gender difference. If Lars Ohly had been younger and had small children, he too could have been placed in a sandbox. Hence, if age were controlled for, there would be no gender difference and, accordingly, no gender structure. Our interpretation is that Peter uses a framework in which science equals processes of testing and falsification. In this case, ideas of how to practise science become an obstacle in pursuing the task of creating a structural gender analysis of the media material.

In several groups, gender is rendered invisible as students move away from discussing women and men and begin comparing age and ideological differences between the politicians. The patterns that they discern are explained as a result not of gender but of generation and party politics (group 2; group 3). In the search for other explanations, group 4 asks whether the articles



were all written by the same journalist and whether the journalists are men or women. When they conclude that it is not the same journalist and that a woman has written what they perceive as the most stereotyping portrait, this discussion comes to an end, and they begin to discuss how much time they have left and whether they are allowed to take a break. Two things can be noted in their reasoning. First, the explanatory framework is on an individual level, i.e., the gender of the journalists. Second, the logic of their reasoning is that if a women journalist reproduces gender inequality, this cannot be interpreted as an example of a patriarchal structure. Reaching this conclusion, the members of the group seem to have reached a consensus on an individual-centred framework, and the gender perspective disappears.

#### 4.2 Retaining Balance

In their discussions, the students rely on an unarticulated idea of societal equilibrium. Normality is characterised by balance, and deviation must be explained.

The idea of balance is clearly illustrated in the following scenario. In the preceding discussion, the students reached several conclusions as to how gender is constructed in the material. However, Erika and Maria (group 2) conclude that the descriptions do not constitute a democratic problem because all politicians are treated in a similar way.

Maria: So, I think ... I can't see any democratic problem here with these articles. I really can't.

Erika: No.

Maria: Except for Maria Wetterstrand, which I think is a little too much, you know?

Erika: Yes.

Maria: But otherwise, I think they also soften up Ohly very much.

Erika: Mhm. So basically, they are somewhat ideal or somewhat good.

Maria: Yes, they have really gone in for "now it is the leaders that are supposed to get... they should get the same kind of coverage".

In this scenario, the students seem to argue from an understanding in which democracy is the same as non-discrimination or equal treatment. Although the task was designed to encourage students to talk about power structures in relation to democratic ideals, the more liberal understanding of equal treatment as the heart of democratic virtues seems to be the students' immediate frame of reference. Because both women and men can be described similarly manner, there is no problem. The structural perspective is deemed irrelevant because Ohly (male) also "gets softened up" and is thereby described as feminine, which, according to the students' reasoning, balances and outweighs the feminine description of Wetterstrand (female). Hence, the desirable goal is a

type of equal treatment in which the leaders "get the same sort of reports", as Maria says.

Another example of how the discussion can turn into an issue of individual discrimination rather than an issue of structural norms can be found in the group discussions addressing hetero-normativity. The students seem to have problems analysing this issue because there are no homosexuals amongst the politicians, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues are not discussed in the articles. As Björn (group 4) argues, "It is a bit difficult to see this here...I mean, none of the texts mentions any LGBT-questions". He continues,

Björn: (...) if one knew that Maria Wetterstrand was gay. Then, it would be, if they don't mention it, then, it could be a question of making it invisible, for example. Or if they had brought up some negative points about it, then it could have been stigmatising.

Björn's approach presumes that there is no way of identifying a structure if no one in the material represents a deviation from the norm. He also seems to change the question of hetero-normativity into a question of discrimination based on sexual orientation. Because no one is discriminated against on these grounds, it is not possible to analyse this as a structure.

In the students' discussions, liberal ideals of equal treatment and the individual as the prime political subject seem to actualise specific understandings of what social science is and how it should be performed. In this frame of reference, the notion of gender as a variable is central. In the scenario below, the discussion is concerned with the different attributes that are given women and men in the material. Peter (group 3) explicitly addresses what he perceives as a problem in that social science cannot use controlled experiments.

Peter: I just think it is damn difficult to know, because...it is, as always in regard to social science, that you can't have a closed experiment, you know, where you test under the same conditions, same age and so on. So it is damn difficult. But, just to what extent she appears to be ... something that sticks out, you know. The absence of that could also be interpreted as stereotyped, I mean.

In the quote above, gender is viewed as one of many possible variables, and the only way to determine which variable carries explanatory force is to perform an experiment in which the conditions are controlled, which is difficult to arrange in social science. The reasoning regarding variables is founded on scientific ideas where the point of departure is that deviation from the expected outcome (that is, equilibrium) must be explained.

Another example of how gender as a variable is introduced in the discussions is found in the discussion between Peter, Hanna and Johan (previously reported).



Hanna's view is that portraying Wetterstrand in the sandbox represents a female stereotype. However, Hanna's interpretation is overruled by Peter's variable paradigm when he introduces age as a possible explanation. At this point, Hanna is forced to enter Peter's framework to argue for a structural interpretation by using an individual-centred argument. Hence, she proposes that Ohly has young children as well. The only way her structural interpretation now can be legitimised when Peter's framework has gained the status of interpretative prerogative is if Ohly actually has young children, which would make it reasonable to put him in the sandbox as well.

The issue is no longer how the picture of Maria Wetterstrand can be interpreted as an example of a broader gender structure but rather the "fact" that she is the only one who has young children. Therefore, it makes sense that she is pictured in such a context. In this sense, the structural perspective can be rejected by easily checked "facts". Hanna's dilemma is that she is caught in a situation in which the structural question she asked is replaced by a question of individual personality and family situation.

A shift to an explanatory framework that does not acknowledge structures is a common feature of the discussions. It is striking that students accept this shift even if they have just performed a structural analysis. One way of interpreting this is that the students simply do not understand the difference between the explanatory frameworks; therefore, they do not object to the change. However, the reverse does not occur. When an explicitly individual-oriented perspective is established, a change to a more structural perspective does not occur in the discussions. We are inclined to think that this is due to the dominance of liberal and mainstream scientific ideas that are conceptualised in terms of neutrality and non-discrimination, experiments, testing and causality. Our interpretation is that the students' method of abandoning a structural perspective is related to the widely accepted idea of equilibrium; that is, eventual structures appear to be an anomaly that must be explained rather than taken as a point of departure for analytical work.

### 4.3 Disclaimer

In the student discussions, what we call "disclaimers" are frequent phenomena. Disclaimers are phrases that undermine the analyses one has just made or is about to make, such as "this might be overinterpreting, but..." Disclaimers take different forms; they may explicitly question the validity of the analysis or, more implicitly, may be presented as a joke or an ironic comment. A disclaimer can function to enable analysis as well as to end to the discussion of a certain issue.

In the scenario below, Hanna's (group 3) goal appears to be to pinpoint the unnoticed use of words that can reveal gender patterns.

Hanna: But, I was thinking more like... what I was fishing for when I said what I said before, it was, you know, if there were any small... because here like it is so clear that you... I don't know, sometimes, in some texts, you read, it can be pretty clear. But they are trying to hide little words that are like, that you can trace to...

Johan: I think maybe there is. Then, there is always the risk of overinterpretation. "But, Maria Wetterstrand sounds pretty cocky" it says in one place. Would you write like that about a male politician? I don't know. Like, it is maybe like cocky and directness are a given – a part of – but when she then... but I don't know, it could be to overinterpret, you know

Hanna: No, but I too reacted a bit to that: cocky. But, at the same time..., other stuff that they...well, yea. I don't know how to really interpret it.

In the above quote, Johan simultaneously agrees with Hanna's analysis and safeguards himself from taking responsibility for the underlying structural perspective. He both begins and ends by explicitly talking about the "risk of overinterpretation". Between these two disclaimers, he produces a structural analysis that notes the taken-for-granted gender norms that accompany media representations of male and female politicians. Through the use of disclaimers, Johan appears both to insert doubt regarding the validity of his own analysis and to question the structural gender perspective. We note that despite the presence of this doubt and ambivalence, the structural interpretation has been explicitly verbalised and is thereby given legitimacy as a possible way of analysing the media material.

We have also identified disclaimers that function as a way to dismiss an analysis. In the following scenario, the students (group 4) are discussing how the concept of male/female is connected to active/passive and strength/vulnerability. However, this analysis ends when Erik introduces the risk of the discussion becoming "forced".

Gustav: She [Maud Olofsson] wants to close her eyes. She is really fragile. While the alpha male here [Ohly], he is really active.

Björn: Yes, exactly. It is really a war picture, you know.

Erik: It can become a bit forced to make these kinds of judgments when it is one picture of every party leader. It is difficult when you don't have more.

Gustav: Yes, it is always like that. When one reads these kinds of texts and everything, it is easy to overinterpret, I think.

This scenario elucidates how effective a disclaimer can be in a discussion: Gustav immediately accepts and confirms Erik's claim that the analysis he has just conducted lacks authority. In contrast to Johan's analysis in the previous example, which was made between his



own disclaimers, Gustav's interpretations were performed without this type of safeguarding. By calling attention to the need for more pictures of party leaders, Erik changes the level of explanation. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that he answers another question: not how gender is constructed in the picture, but rather whether this picture is representative of how gender is constructed in pictures of party leaders in Sweden. After this discussion on overinterpretation, the group turns to the topic of how differences in age can explain why the two women are portrayed differently.

Disclaimers may also take the form of jokes or irony. In the group scenario below, a certain amount of irony can be heard throughout the discussion. In this way, the students (group 1) distance themselves from the material presented as well as from the assignment. However, in the part of their discussion presented below, irony and humour work at the same time to make a structural analysis possible.

Maja: [turning over pages in a book] To fight...What was it they said Ohly did?

Daniela: Wasn't it something... *demanding* ministerial posts.

Maja: While she, Wetterstrand, would very much *like to have* something...

Daniela: Yes. It is a bit of fun; 'demand' and 'would very much like to have...'

Maja: Please, sir, can I have some more?

In this brief exchange, the students discuss the differences in expressions chosen by the journalists between male and female politicians wanting a seat in the government. Maja confirms the feminist analysis and strengthens the case by jokingly rephrasing the expression ascribed to Maria Wetterstrand. Choosing to quote Charles Dickens in English, she makes the (female) "would very much like to" sound even more submissive in relation to the (male) "demand". We interpret this as an enabling disclaimer. It is possible for her to strengthen the argument, but, at the same time, she inserts a moment of doubt regarding her own inclusion in this perspective.

We conclude that there is apparent uncertainty regarding the authority of the gender perspective that results in the use of disclaimers. A disclaimer inserts ambivalence because it is a way of saying, "I'm doing it, but I'm not"; that is, it is a statement that both *conditions* and *enables* what is to come in the ensuing conversation.

#### 4.4 Retaining Innocence

Disclaimers can be understood as expressions of a student's reluctance against an understanding of gender relations in terms of power. We stress the complexity of the students' struggle with the contradiction between structuralist perspectives and what we interpret as a basically liberal idea of power.

More specifically, interpretations in terms of power and structural inequality are positioned against explanations that focus on individual choice. In the following scenario, the students (group 4) appear to argue that if, for example, the politicians themselves have the opportunity to decide how they are pictured in the paper, then the pictures themselves cannot be interpreted as signs of a gendered social structure.

Erik: But, hasn't she chosen to sit in the sandbox? I think she has chosen to sit there.

Lars: I think so, but it doesn't look like she thinks it is a particularly good idea to be photographed.

Erik: I was thinking that she wanted to convey some sort of like, "I have a rock hard attitude", although she is sitting there with her [baby]... So, "I am damn tough, but I am sitting here with a little baby".

Lars: You thought like that. I just get the feeling that she really doesn't like it there.

Erik: Then it is really stupid that she has ended up there.

Lars: But, isn't she looking really damn tough also because the copying is damn bad? It looks like she is smiling a bit maybe. Actually.

In the above quote, the students are concerned with establishing whether the pictures are the results of the politicians' free choice. If the politicians have freely chosen how they are represented, this rules out the possibility that this representation is a question of power. The issue of free choice explains the effort that the students put into establishing the politicians' state of mind. Is she smiling in the sandbox? Is it his choice to be hugging a tree? (Group 4)

The idea of free choice is accompanied by the idea of individual responsibility. In the discussions, the students begin from a liberal understanding in which inequality and illegitimate power differences only can be said to exist if they can be attributed to specific actors. The implication is that there must be an individual victim as well as an individual actor who is responsible for the inequality for an interpretation in terms of power to be possible. When discussing Wetterstrand in the sandbox, one student states that if she has accepted the newspapers' coverage of herself, then the responsibility is hers; therefore, the article cannot be interpreted as an indication of gender inequality.

The issue of individual responsibility appears to be closely tied to ideas of blame and guilt. Positioning Wetterstrand as the responsible agent serves the purpose of establishing innocence. Neither the paper nor the journalist is guilty of upholding gender inequality because Wetterstrand herself has not objected to how she is portrayed.

The students also actualise ideas regarding what reality "really looks like" in a way that rules out a power perspective. This means that if the media representations convey "the true story", then the

representation cannot be interpreted in terms of gender inequality. One example is when a politician's personality – that is, how the person actually "is" – is proposed as a justification for the differing ways the politicians are portrayed. To support these interpretations, the students build upon what they see as their own first-hand knowledge of the politician's character traits. The leader of the left party is very informal and walks around town in a jeans jacket, according to the students (group 2). Such bits of supposedly correct information about the different personalities are offered as "proof" that the media representations are, in fact, value-free and cannot be interpreted as examples of a gender structure.

We want to emphasise that the students appear to rely upon an implicit understanding that power can only be present between specific individuals and enacted by one person over another. This is the classical liberal position as described by Robert Dahl in his famous definition, "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl 1957, 202-203).

In Dahl's terms, the students perform a number of analytical steps. First, they look for a female B who has been treated unfairly. Various facts are proposed to indicate that no unfairness is present because she wanted it or did not object to a certain representation, and the representation simply reflects the individual's personality. When no ill-treated individual can be identified, there cannot exist an A. Once the fact that there is no A is established, the argument goes on to state that no power is present, which, in turn, can be reflected as a statement that there is no political matter at all. Hence, the statement, "She just likes children".

One important consequence of the liberal paradigm is that students are placed in a position where they believe that they are required not only to note a victim but also to identify the person who is guilty of acting badly. Interpreted in this way, it is not difficult to understand why students hesitate and why they attempt to avoid passing judgment, laying blame and distributing guilt.

## 5 Concluding Discussion

In this study, we aimed to understand the learning processes involved in what can be seen, from a feminist instruction and educational studies perspective, as students' resistance to a structural gender perspective. The ways that the students handle the learning challenges posed by a structural gender perspective lead us to conclude that what is at stake is the relationship between taken-for-granted liberal values and premises, on the one hand, and a structural power perspective, on the other. The students are placed in a position where this tension must be negotiated. From previous research, we know that resistance towards structural theories of gender is connected to making privileged positions visible and thus destabilising identities of both women and men. Accordingly, the theoretical tension that is actualised in the assignments may hold deeper

motivations for resistance. However, being in a situation in which this theoretical tension must be addressed provides an opportunity for a learning process to occur.

We can conclude that the students' learning processes exhibit alterations between different frameworks. More specifically, we have shown that the students recurrently introduce explanatory frameworks that are based on positivist ideas of science as well as liberal understandings in which the given and primary unit of analysis is the individual. In many cases, the students enter this framework without effort, although it conflicts with what has just been said. Another example is that when a structural analysis is questioned through the introduction of a positivist framework that aims to test what students identify as the hypothesis that a gender order exists, the specific questions that the students answered changed to questions such as, "Is there a gender order?" and "Might there be confounding variables that explain gender differences?" If so, no gender order exists. In other words, an analysis from a structuralist perspective regarding the function of the gender order is replaced by an analysis that aims to establish whether there is a gender order at all.

Students can relate gender differences to structures and can identify the male norm when comparing men and women. However, they have a more difficult time identifying how structural norms are reproduced where the norm cannot be contrasted with anything. One example is the students' difficulty in seeing how heteronormativity is reproduced in newspaper articles in which no LGBT persons are represented. Faced with this challenge, the students reformulate the question in terms of discrimination and thereby change to a liberal, common-sense framework that focuses on the individual. We have identified different ways that students change to this framework, which entails certain assumptions about the nature of power, democracy, justice and freedom of choice. We would like to stress that the students' answers should not be interpreted as "misconceptions" (see, for instance, Vosniadou, Brewer 1992). Rather, the answers become reasonable and make sense because they emanate from other frameworks (cf. Caravita, Halldén 1994).

From a learning perspective, the problem is, of course, not liberal values and notions in themselves but the fact that they are taken for granted and given interpretative prerogative and are therefore hidden from scrutiny. Establishing the terms of the discussion is the privilege of a hegemonic framework. In this sense, liberal presumptions condition the analysis the students can make, even when the assignment is to use a structural gender perspective.

This liberal hegemony has consequences in other areas as well. Feigenbaum (2007, 337) notes that as universities have adjusted to a neo-liberal paradigm in which values such as competition and self-sufficiency are dominant, a harsh individualism has gained priority. Feminist research has also underscored that a backlash





against feminist values and ideals is a consequence when universities and higher education organisations adapt to political demands and ideological shifts, such as neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideas (Good, Moss-Racusin 2010; Rönblom 2009; Webber 2006). When employability overrules critical thinking as the central value, this has adverse effects on students' incentives to engage intellectually in critical perspectives.

As feminist researchers and teachers, we want to provide students with the tools necessary to scrutinise taken-for-granted understandings. An implication for teaching is the need to clarify the differences between these perspectives. One way to do this is to explicitly discuss the underlying presumptions of the perspectives (cf. Tiberghien 1994; Caravita, Halldén 1994; Halldén 1988), which may help students to recognise applied premises, thereby enabling them to distinguish the types of explanations that are relevant when working from a particular perspective. Such an endeavour may also avoid placing students in a position where they – like the students in the present study – attempt to make structures visible by allowing explanations on an individual level to prove or disprove the existence of social structures.

The paradox here is, of course, that for students to effectively use a structural power perspective, teachers must actively engage with basic liberal assumptions. In other words, successful teaching about a structural gender perspective also involves teaching about liberalism. Liberal premises and values are taken for granted to such an extent that it becomes necessary to relate to them even if the intention is to introduce a different framework. The choice seems to be to either actively engage these assumptions in the classroom or to allow the same taken-for-granted assumptions to impede student learning.

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#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> In Swedish higher education, students take one course at the time. During an academic year students enroll in 8 courses of 5 weeks each.

<sup>2</sup> "Tree-huggers" (Sw: trädkramare) is a somewhat pejorative term for environmental activists.

