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GENDERS IN EUROPE:

A qualitative study on the construction of gender-neutral language - Sweden as an example

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Abstract

The visibility of individuals who advocate for and identify with genders outside the gender-binary has risen during recent years, but these individuals still face discrimination in many ways. With regard to this the European Commission launched a strategy in 2020 with focus on equal rights for LGBTIQ individuals with an indication that healthcare and gender-inclusive language are pivotal areas for strengthening equality and representation. Therefore, this thesis is aimed to examine the structure of gender-neutral language in medical and healthcare contexts, in regard to how different gender identities and pronouns are represented. Whether it is inclusive or not. With a delimitation to Sweden this was done through a qualitative discourse-based text analysis of ten articles from the healthcare sites 1177 Vårdguiden and UMO.se. Several theories from gender studies were applied to explain the current structure and composition of the gender-neutral language used in the articles. The result indicates that a gender-neutral language currently exists to the extent where neutral concepts as “person”, “your” and similar are used. However, it is not particularly inclusive regarding usage of different identities and pronouns.

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Operationalisation of terms

For this paper several concepts are utilised that can have various meanings depending on the context they are used in. Therefore, the below definitions of the terms are provided in relation to how they were used in this specific paper.

Gender identity: refers to an individual's self-experienced gender. That is, the gender one feels that one have and identifies with. It can be woman, man, non-binary or other.

Gender binary: refers to the expectation and notion that there are only two genders, either male or female (man or woman) based on the anatomy of the genitals. The assigned gender at birth aligns with the social constructs of masculine and feminine expressions and identity.

Non-binary gender: are on the other hand here used as an umbrella term for every individual who identifies themselves with a gender outside of the gender binary of male and female. These different genders may be agender, genderfluid, bigender, demigender, genderqueer etc.

LGBTIQ: is used as the collective name for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans, non-binary, intersex and queer individuals. The first three refers to sexuality, the following two refer to how one identifies their gender, intersex refers to how the body breaks norms about gender and queer can be about both sexuality and gender identity. This specific definition of the term is used since it is the one the source material for this thesis uses.

Hen: is the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun that is used in situations where someone's gender is irrelevant, or their identity is unknown. It can be used by non-binary individuals instead of using the gender pronouns of she or he. The English terms they/them are the closest pronouns that can be compared to *hen*. However, *hen* will be the term used in the results and analysis since it has its own definition and they/them are more directly linked to the Swedish de/dem and will solely be used in relation to those.

(Transformerer, 2021; RFSL, 2021).

1. Introduction

During recent years there has been a rise in visibility of individuals who advocate for and identify with genders outside the gender-binary of female and male, which may be referred to the umbrella term of identifying as non-binary (Twist & de Graaf, 2019; Richards et al., 2016). It results in, among others, an increase in the usage of gender neutral or third-personal (other than he/she) pronouns. Although the rise of advocacy has led to an increase of recognition in legal and medical systems and resulted in a growing social acceptance along with changing attitudes towards different genders identities and pronouns, this group of individuals is still being marginalized and face discrimination in many ways (Richards et al., 2016; European Commission, 2020).

In regards to the continued exclusion and discrimination towards individuals identifying outside what is still considered the “norm” of gender, the European Commission adopted “The LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025” (COM(2020)698) in November of 2020. This strategy is the first ever comprehensive Commission strategy aimed at focussing on the equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, non-binary, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) individuals across the EU. The purpose is to build a Union, together with all member states and actors, where diversity is recognised and valued, and individuals can be whomever they wish, free from discrimination, exclusion or violence. The strategy indicates that healthcare is an area pivotal for increasing equality and representation in the way that it mentions how many individuals hide the fact that they are LGBTIQ from medical staff and healthcare providers, in fears of being misunderstood or discriminated. The strategy therefore suggests that work for equality needs to be done within healthcare systems on many levels. Part of the strategy is also to strive for an inclusive working environment by, for one, significantly improve the usage of gender-inclusive language in all communication (COM(2020)698).

This means that language issues are one, amongst the problems that non-binary individuals face, and hence, the thesis is going to focus on this particular issue. A problem with the current language usage in this specific situation lies in the lack of various and correct gender identities and pronouns in different forms of contexts due to the fact that referring to and assume someone’s gender as female or male is still considered the norm. The usage of binary genders

or gendered pronouns may result in a situation where non-binary individuals feel frustrated and discriminated because of the invalidation of their identity (Moser & Devereux, 2019). Studies (Moser & Devereux, 2019; Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck & Lindqvist, 2015; Gustafsson Sendén, Renström & Lindqvist, 2021) have shown that the usage of diverse gender-neutral language in texts and speech over time may lead to an increase of not only usage, but acceptance of gender identities and pronouns amongst the general population. However, it is still unclear what affect the usage of gender-neutral, or inclusive, language and the followed acceptance for individuals identifying outside the norm of female/male are. Furthermore, there is also very little knowledge of how a gender-neutral language is used and structured in different forms and if such a language should be better structured or not.

1.1 Aim

With regard to the Commissions strategy's acknowledgement of healthcare and language usage, and to the lack of knowledge on gender-neutral language the aim of the essay is therefore to explore what a gender-neutral (or gender-inclusive) language might look like in medical and healthcare contexts. And if such a language exists, look at the format and the shape of it, in what way is it inclusive and not.

Since examining the whole of EU might be too broad for the thesis this will be done through a delimitation to Sweden, by looking at a Swedish medical and healthcare context as a form of critical case (Yin, 2018 p. 49). From an EU perspective the Swedish context are of interest since the work for general equality amongst individuals are considered to have come further there than in majority of EU members states. For example, the Swedish government have launched both a strategy and an action plan (Regeringskansliet, 2014, 2021), like the one the European Commissions introduced, regarding equal rights for LGBTIQ individuals. In the strategy, "En strategi för lika rättigheter och möjligheter oavsett sexuell läggning, könsidentitet eller könsuttryck" (Regeringskansliet, 2014), suggestions similar with the Commission strategy can be found. Another relevant element is that it also indicates that healthcare is an area pivotal for enhancing quality and representation. The Swedish strategy suggests that everyone has the right to care without discrimination, exclusion or negative treatment regardless of gender identity

and sexual identity. The strategy also acknowledges that the civil society plays an important role in the maintenance of human rights and spreading of knowledge through communication, among other things. In addition, Sweden is also one of few European countries where a third-personal pronoun, *hen*, is semi established in the general language usage in both speech and text form.

Through this view point Sweden is therefore considered to be one of the most gender advanced countries. So, if the gender-neutral language are constructed and used in a specific way there, then what is true for the rest of EU? If Sweden is supposed to be the best and a gender-neutral language are found to be non-existent or ill-structured, then how far could the other EU member states have come with their gender-neutral language. It is therefore important to first explore the Swedish context before broadening the research to other EU member states since they, in this aspect, cannot have come further than Sweden in their work for a more neutral and inclusive language structure and usage.

In relation to the above, research questions that this paper intends to answer are thus the following:

RQ1: How is gender neutral language constructed in medical and healthcare texts, in regard to how different gender identities and pronouns are presented?

RQ1a: Is it inclusive or not and in what way?

2. Theory and previous research

2.1 Previous research

In regard to previous research on gender issues, there is a fair number of studies in general, since the subject is a well-established element of contemporary social sciences. However, when it comes to the issue of gender identities and gender-neutral language the research is still rather limited in comparison to other aspects of gender research (presumably given to the fact that inclusion and recognition of differences is relatively new in many different levels of society). This chapter therefore focuses on three main themes found in current research that centre around the paper's specific angle: perceptions of the binary and the non-binary genders, rights and representation for non-binary persons and gender-neutral language.

2.1.1 Perceptions of the binary- and non-binary genders

The term gender has long been seen as an interactive and attributed phenomenon which refers to masculine or feminine feelings of oneself, in other words the perception of one's own internal self regardless of the genital anatomy. Robert Stoller describes gender "As a psychological state, a complex evolving intrapersonal and interpersonal experience" (Kirkpatrick, 2003, p. 560), something that can be a constant changing process.

Since notion of gender often refer to masculine or feminine traits, based on social stereotypes and norms, research on gender identity often has focused on the genders of men and women. However, gender identity can in fact include the feeling of being either female, male- hence the feeling of a binary gender identity, or ambiguous - the feeling of a non-binary gender identity (Kirkpatrick, 2003; Nicholas, 2019). Identifying with a binary gender can be understood as feelings of being either male or female. The gender binarism often refers to the concept of understanding that only two genders exist, or as Nicholas (2019) and Matsuno and Budge (2017), among other calls it, bigenderism or the two-gender system. Matsuno and Budge (ibid.) point out that this system means that an infant gets assigned a binary gender right at birth and is therefore brought up with binary expectations and intuitions that are considered to be within the norm.

A non-binary gender identity can instead be seen as an umbrella term for a range of identities and experiences for those individuals who identify with anything but the gender binary. These identities may be in-between or fall outside male and female, both male and female- all the time or at specific times, or it can be that one does not wish to have a specific gender identity (Monro, 2019; Twist & de Graaf, 2019). A few terms used by those who are non-binary to describe their identities are agender, genderfluid, bigender, demigender, pangender, trigender, genderqueer and so on. Twist and de Graaf (2019) point out that individuals may use a variance of terms to describe their identity that may also change within time and contexts. These identities may also have different meaning to given individuals, and the definitions of the terms are something that people themselves decides.

These various diverse non-binary identities are often something that is seen as a challenge to different social institutions and contexts that maintain the binary genders. As said above one gets assigned a binary gender at birth and is therefore brought up within the norm. But for non-binary individuals this assignment of gender and perception of the norm, often lead to difficulties in gaining acceptance of their identity from others and society (Monro, 2019). West and Zimmerman (1987; Darwin, 2017) suggest that even though there is a shift in gender norms where gender is starting to exist in a less restrictive form, social change will not happen unless the gender debate starts to evolve beyond a binary framework. Non-binary genders have the potential to do just that, transform gender into something more inclusive, but this ability is still conditional because it remains dependent on being recognized by others, both society and gender theorists.

2.1.2 Rights and representation for non-binary persons

In order to equally recognise non-binary gender identities, with the binary gender identities, changes in their social perceptions are required. Nicholas (2019) and Matsuno and Budge (2017), amongst others, show that the higher rate of discrimination and marginalization non-binary individuals are exposed to may be to the fact that their genders is considered to be a deviation from the gender binary, bigenderism. These attitudes may therefore lead to social consequences such as expressions about how non-binary identities are less legitimate or how non-binary individuals often need to justify their own identities. Moreover Nicholas (2019)

especially discusses how this hostility may come from the lack of knowledge, social- and cultural resources outside of the gender binary that makes it impossible for non-binaries to be understood in these heteronormative contexts.

While Nicholas (ibid) mentions that some research point to a solution to the problems that non-binary individuals face, the solution itself stems from these individuals and not from the areas in society where the attitudes toward genders stem from. In contrary to this Nicholas (ibid.) argues for an approach where focus lies on the mindsets of the binary population in a variety of social contexts. Specifically, they speak of a long-lasting aim towards encouraging a positive mindset of otherness, which would reduce the harmful perception of gender and create a more inclusive environment. Nicholas (ibid.) claims that this would be more valuable and long lasting than attempts to tackle individualized attitudes. However, these are proposals that needs further examination and valuation.

Additionally, research also show that non-binary genders are increasingly being recognized as a social identity, which have led to changes in norms and structures. For example, in legal, medical, psychosocial systems and by adding non-binary identity options in some countries. Monro (2019) also points that these new possibilities for the expression of gender can be both fragile and selective. Richards et al. (2015) take up the matter on that many non-binary groups may chose the easier way in using their birth-assigned gender in day-to-day business because many systems only recognize the binary genders, even though third options may be available. Most societal structures and institutions, including languages, bathroom systems and clothing stores are as of now therefore not very inclusive regarding diverse gender identities. This makes everyday life challenging for these individuals where many walk around in fear of rejection and discrimination. Researchers claim that a way of changing these different systems even further is to educate clinics, schools, legal institutions and so on, on how to approach and communicate with individuals in an inclusive and non-discriminating way. This may be done by showing an openness for diversity and using gender-inclusive language in different forms (Matsuno & Budge, 2017; Monro, 2019).

2.1.3 Gender-neutral language

Even though there has been a usage of gender-neutral language for some time, this usage has not had quite the same motivation as the one promoted for non-binary identities. According to Gustafsson Sendén et al. (2021) most language improvements has so far been done to make women more notable compared to men. For instance, by promoting the generic use of he/she instead of only he, or humankind instead of mankind. But since there has been an increase in awareness for genders outside the binary, this gender-neutral language rather results in a gender-inclusive one.

Now there is rather a suggestion and initiative, as mentioned above, aimed at different systems and individuals in society to use the correct gender identity label and preferred pronouns in all forms of communications. The reason for this is that many non-binary individuals often use different pronouns than he/she to express their gender. Instead, they may use more neutral ones as they/them/their or zie/hir/hirs from the English language, or other various ones depending on which language one uses (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Different research (ibid.; Twist & de Graaf, 2019) has shown that using the correct pronouns and gender identity or gender-neutral terms in general is a sign of support for diverse identities which may lead non-binary individuals to not feel misgendered, unsafe and misunderstood. The same research (Twist & de Graaf, 2019) also show that adolescents (the subject of their study) best understood their genders through support from social media, tv programmes, other non-binaries, family and friends and their own inner feelings.

One specific study by Gustafsson Sendén et al. (2015) and the follow up (2021) showed the importance of time when introducing gender-neutral words into a language. While exploring the use and perception of the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun *hen* during the first years after its introduction into the Swedish language, they found out that time was an important factor in usage and perception. While their study showed that a gender neutral (or fair) language may be met with negative reactions and attacks at first, they also saw that these attitudes turned into something positive rather quickly during a two-year period. There was also change in the usage of the word, even though this change was not as fast and broad. Regardless the authors point out this as an important message, in the way that it should motivate a language change even

though there may be strong reactions against such an implementation in the beginning (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015, 2021).

Another study by Jetubhai and Ghosal (2019) focuses on literature and what impact usage of ungendered narratives in stories may have on and for individuals. They point out that when one reads a story of some sort, they immediately get a mental picture of this character, their gender, looks, personality and so on. In their meaning writing characters that are kept as anonyms as possible instead of descriptive, by using an ungendered narrative with gender-neutral pronouns and descriptions, may lead to a more gender-inclusive environment. Even though this may not happen immediately they point out that an increase of a gender-neutral language usage might be a possibility over time. Other research that Jetubhai and Ghosal (ibid.) mentions do in fact point to this, where they also note that since languages reflect societies and institutions attitudes, the usage of a proper language is of significance for non-binary individuals' recognition.

2.2 Theory

Gender studies (or gender theory) are in many ways similar to the feminist scholarship which is often used when working with gender equality in different societal and scientific contexts. Hence, it is an appropriate approach to use as a theoretical framework for this paper. There are a few key theories in this approach, where four of them are applied here: intersectionality, performativity, heteronormativity and biopower.

2.2.1 Intersectionality

The term intersectionality was popularised by Kimberlé Crenshaw as a mean to criticize the perception, in gender research, of women as only women and that there were other factors to discrimination such as race or ethnicity (Davis, 2011, p.43ff). According to Crenshaw (mentioned in Dahl, 2005, p.23) and Nina Lykke (2005) intersectionality can be seen as a concept that aims to describe how different levels of socio-cultural hierarchies and power structures are intertwined with each other to create inclusion or exclusion around constructed categories. How different forms of social phenomena can reconstruct and transform each other, such as representation of different forms of identities, in this case gender identity and pronouns.

Concisely, it can be described as the scientific take on discrimination and oppression as a result of intersections of many social factors that results in production of various power relations (Wojnicka, 2020).

Intersectionality is relevant when it comes to understand, highlight and problematize the mechanism behind the principles for supremacy and subordination in social positions regarding gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity and what these positions may result in (Molina Vega, de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2003, p.160f). According to de los Reyes and Mulinari (2010) this perspective begs the question on how power and inequality are intertwined with the assumptions of (amongst other things) gender and heteronormativity which constantly recreates perspectives of “we” and “them”. This is done through linguistic construction, material terms and everyday actions and is therefore seen as something variable that can solely change over time and space.

Due to this de los Reyes and Mulinari (2010) refers to the fact that it is important to use and see intersectionality in a critical way since it opens a way for new and old truths in the production of knowledge. The thinking of categorization is an important part of the exercise of power, and the understanding that this power structure can change also means that the meaning behind specific categorization can change. For example, the separation between what is considered the gender norm and what is not may change over time, but only if the structure behind the categorization gets questioned and challenged. Hence, the utilisation of intersectional approach may make one see the reality in a different point of view and get one to question the social order that we live in (de los Reyes & Martinsson, 2005, p.19f).

2.2.2 Performativity and heteronormativity

Performativity is the concept used to emphasize the fact that all humans are involved and actively link to a specific gender order (which here refers to the gender of male/female), whether it is intentionally or not. According to Judith Butler (Butler, 2011; Butler, Rosenberg & Lindeqvist 2005) genders does not really exist until a gender is assigned to an individual. This can be done through expressions such as ‘it’s a boy/girl’ just after the birth is completed (Butler, 2007, 2011), which then in the theorist’s sense results in an active creation of differences

between genders. Performativity is hence a manner in which social actions create and reconstruct genders, where the ways individuals act and speak are the primary factors that maintains normative perceptions and ideas about genders. If it were not for these kinds of social actions the thoughts of a gender order, which differentiate the genders, would not exist.

Linked to this, the concept of heteronormativity, is based on the concept of the existence of two genders, female and male, though in different ways. Heteronormativity is based on the notion that only two genders exist (who are additionally supposed to desire each other) where anything else is deviating. Hence the notion that masculine=manly=man and femininity=female=woman is the norm and anything outside of this is non-normative. Butler defines this as the heterosexual matrix, which:

“...denotes a model of gender coherence that presupposes that culturally comprehensible bodies must be based on stable sexes. To put it simply: Bodies are not comprehensible in themselves but culture creates comprehensible bodies through the heterosexual matrix that requires a gender order with two distinctly identifiable sex/genders: one female/feminine and one male/masculine...”. (Butler et al., 2005 p. 10)

It is the notion that presumes the natural way to live is through heterosexuality, which is maintained through structures, languages and actions based on the idea of the binary gender perception (Butler et al., 2005; Butler, 2007).

Having said this, Butler (2007, 2011; Butler et al., 2005) also indicates that there is a possibility, since gender is socially created in this perspective, to make conscious resistance in the making of gender by acting in a non-normative way. Even though performativity and heteronormativity mainly point to the genders of male and female this thought, along with the changing perception of the concepts, makes them relevant to use for this thesis when exploring the construction of a gender-neutral language.

2.2.3 Biopower

In the 1970's Michel Foucault (2002) introduced the concept of biopower to describe the different power structures that shape populations, in other words power over lives. Rather than external power figures the concept of biopower is mainly based on norms embodied by individuals or groups. For example, the biopower categorizes gender and bodies in a way that defines how one speaks about them. In Foucault's words (2002; Taylor, 2013) this so-called power is created and reproduced in every situation and moment and impacts all levels of society. While this power is there to control individuals in a way that make sure they do not deviate from the norm, this power also creates opportunities and resistance in different aspects.

3. Method and material

In the following chapter the method and material chosen to answer the paper's questions are presented and discussed, starting with the chosen method.

3.1 Method

Boréus and Bergström (2018) refers to the fact that texts relate to humans in a way where they have created them, but how humans are also the one's the texts addresses. Texts in all their forms reflect conscious and subconscious ideas about many different subjects, where these ideas reproduce and reinforces but also questions the power behind them. The method that has been used in this paper is therefore a qualitative text analysis in the form of discourse analysis, since it relates to the posed research questions, the material and the chosen theory.

The method is useful in a sense that includes studies of the meaning-making behind different phenomena and questions. Discourse analysis is hence a sufficient method because it also aims to study questions related to power, power relations and the usage of language in discourses. In Foucault's words this point to the fact that power not only can be seen in negative terms, since it also can be productive in a way that it produces categories and ideas which differs from other. One can therefore both benefit and be disadvantaged from the effects that power has on conceptions of reality (ibid.).

In the aftermath of Foucault's definition of discourse analysis, this method may also be seen as an approach to study how certain lore are created, maintained and reproduced. It relates to the thought of Foucault in a sense that this lore, just like power, have different effects for various people. Boréus and Bergström (2018) gives the example of how one can be interested in something framed as problematic. Then one can explore how social practices handles this problem and how the problem can shape and steer over people (like the conception of power).

For this paper it is about the way gender-neutral language is constructed, if it is inclusive or not, and how this may affect individuals identifying outside the binary. It therefore relates to the concept of language as something socially constructed, which affects individuals in various

ways depending on if one is considered to fall into the line of the binary or non-binary. Note, however that this form of analysis does not point out language to be a form of reality, rather it is understood as one element of the reproduction of perceptions of things. A discourse is also a notion that changes over time depending on social conditions and changes in the interaction that is associated with the actors behind them. In other words, it means that the way gender-neutral language is constructed right now have a possibility to change over time (ibid.).

3.2 Material

Both mentioned document from the European Commission and those produced by the Swedish government brings up the importance for everyone to be able to be whoever they want and do whatever one wants without discrimination. Therefore, both documents mention healthcare and language to be important factors for this. The same goes for the previous research presented in the thesis that further show that a proper language usage is of significance for non-binary individuals' recognition. But there is a question on how such language structure looks like, not only in general but also when it comes to healthcare.

In relation to this, and the choice of using discourse analysis, the material used for this paper to answer the research questions consists of different articles and information from two healthcare sites. The sites 1177 Vårdguiden and UMO.se (Ungdomsmottagningen), which aim to gather and spread information on different topics related to health, care and body. The sites are very accessible to the public and are frequently used to look up health related issues through texts. The language in these texts should be inclusive and norm critical in accordance with the site's common linguistic guidelines (UMO, n.d.G; 1177 Vårdguiden, 2019b). Since both sites are said to use such a language to promote equality, they were fitting examples to use to explore the question of the thesis.

3.2.1 1177 Vårdguiden

This site is aimed for all citizens who wants to access information about diseases, treatments, rights and rules. 1177 Vårdguiden is Sweden's gathering place for user friendly information

that eases one's connection to healthcare in a way that promotes health and increases the public's knowledge of it (1177 Vårdguiden, 2021b).

The read material from 1177 Vårdguiden are information from twenty-five different articles on the site, this has been done to get an overview of the page. However, when looking at the language structure more in detail the focus has been on five specific articles to make the analysis clearer. These articles include; "Gender identity and gender expression", "Menstruation", "Puberty", "Teenagers 13-18 years" and "What we mean when we write man or woman" (1177 Vårdguiden, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2021a, 2021c). The reason for using these specific articles is due to that the topics that some of them address target specific parts of the anatomy and development of the body that are considered to be linked with specific genders. Since they target, what one can consider, readers with specific genders these articles are interesting texts to analyse in relation to other information-based texts found on the site that have a more anonymous and factual language structure.

3.2.2 UMO.se

Just like the abovementioned site UMO.se, short for the youth clinic, is aimed at those who want information about care and health. Although, the difference is that UMO.se is primarily aimed for young people in the ages between thirteen and twenty-five, and focuses a lot on knowledge about the body, sex, feelings, psychological health and more. Their primary goal is for everyone, no matter who you are, to feel that UMO.se is a site one can use to get knowledge about your rights and possibilities (UMO, n.d.E).

The material used from the site, is similar to the information used from 1177 Vårdguiden to make it easier to compare the two sites in the analysis and because they share the same linguistic guidelines. Therefore, the read material consists of twenty-four different texts from the site in total, with a specific focus on five texts just like the former. The analysed texts are as follows; "What is equality", "Your gender does not determine who you are", "Sexual orientation and gender identity", "About menstruation" and "To enter puberty" (UMO, n.d.A, n.d.B, n.d.D, n.d.F & n.d.H.). Similar with 1177 Vårdguiden, the material consists of articles that address

topics that may be considered to be linked with a specific biological anatomy. Hence, why they are appropriate for being analysed in relation to the research question.

3.3 Method- and material discussion

By using the discourse analysis in relation to the posed question, the previous research and chosen material, this thesis makes a small contribution to the research gap on gender-neutral language. This is done by examining how a gender-neutral language might be constructed and used in its entirety instead of looking at the effects of the usage of specific neutral terms, as previous research has shown. However, the chosen method and material have some limitations which are discussed below.

While discourse analysis is a relatively useful method for the thesis, there are a few flaws to it depending on how it is used. When choosing material for the discourse analysis one must consider if the texts reflect the chosen discourse or if it may be too narrow (Boréus & Bergström, 2018, p.289). In relation to this thesis the material might seem narrow in the sense that it focuses on just two sites, 1177 Vårdguiden and UMO.se. However, since the theme on gender-neutral language is relatively new and the research is very limited, this analysis which is narrowed to Swedish medical and healthcare texts to see how it might be constructed, still seems to be enough. Another issue to keep in mind is the relationship between the author and the discourse, what their position is in regard to the theme and material. In this case it is important to keep in mind that different authors may get other results from an analysis of the material than this one, depending on who they are and their relationship to the discourse.

When it comes to the chosen material from 1177 Vårdguiden and UMO.se, this as well might be considered flawed in some ways. Even though the collected material is relevant for the posed questions, it can be seen as deficient to the extent that the sites texts are fairly similar to each other due to the fact that they have a certain amount of cooperation regarding both the text structure and linguistic rules. However, this might also be a strength as it enables to see whether articles, despite the same rules, differs in their sentence structures and in their usage of a gender-neutral language and terms. Another strength in the material lies in the fact that the information on the site's reaches out to a lot of individuals and is easily accessible. Which possibly makes

the language more elaborate and neutral than perhaps the language that less public sites may use. However, by focusing on the Swedish context this material might not give an overview in general, but rather a smaller close-up of the phenomenon. But, as said above, it is sufficient since the research on gender-neutral language is still very limited.

4. Results

With regard to the initial research questions for the thesis: *How is gender neutral language constructed in medical and healthcare texts, in regard to how different gender identities and pronouns are presented? It is inclusive or not and in what way?*, and the choice to use discourse analysis to examine how a gender-neutral language is constructed in the chosen material, qualitative discourse analysis was performed. The collected material is analysed through three main themes; representation of the gender binary, representation of the non-binary genders and pronouns and general structure-neutral, inclusive or neither. This is followed by a comparison of the two sites 1177 Vårdguiden and UMO.se to look at the differences and similarities between them.

4.1 Representation of the gender binary

4.1.1 1177 Vårdguiden

While the site is leaning towards a language with a norm critical view to make the texts more inclusive and not point out some things as “normal” or “non-normal”, usage of binary terms man and woman (or boy/girl), female and male, female/woman- and male/man bodies are still present in some of the articles. Such usage of terms is motivated by the fact that as many readers as possible should be able to understand and consume what is written (1177 Vårdguiden, 2019b).

For example, the terms mentioned above, are frequently used in the article about puberty where the site refers to the fact that “**Girls usually reach puberty earlier than boys**” (1177 Vårdguiden, 2018) in relation to the fact that girl bodies and boy bodies enters puberty at different ages and evolves differently. Examples of such practices in the texts are the description of how girl bodies often get wider hips, boy bodies broader shoulders, girl bodies get stretch marks on the thighs and breasts, while boys get them on the back and shoulders, girls’ voices change less than boys do in the puberty voice change and how boys might also have a beard growth. One sentence in the specific article that displays this is the following: “...*this is what is usually called*

puberty voice change. It happens to both boys and girls. But boys' voices change more than girls..." (ibid.).

There is also another usage of these terms in relation to gender identity where an example is given on how someone might have a male identity but was assigned the female gender at birth (1177 Vårdguiden, 2021c). Here there is a dialogue on what it means to identify with a gender identity outside the norm of female and male and therefore begs the question on what is meant by female gender or male gender since there is no definition on it. For example, the article cites that someone who is a cisperson (someone who identifies with their assigned birth gender) may *"feel like a man, are male according to the population register and have a body that looks like a male body is expected to do."* (ibid.). Or how a transexual person might be female to male in the sense that one feel like a man but was assigned the female gender at birth, which is a different usage of the word man than the one of boy in the puberty article. In the former the terms are used in a way that refers to the anatomy and appearance of the body while in the latter it more refers to the feeling of oneself in combination with the appearance. The question here is whether it is meant to reference the anatomy as well, or if boy in the puberty text and the usage here are two different concepts.

However, just like 1177 Vårdguiden have a motivation for the usage of such terms, there is also a definition behind them which can be found in an article of their own or in a definition box at the bottom of articles that use them. The following definition is made of the term's woman and man: *"When we write the word woman, the word is used to describe someone who has what is usually considered a female body. When we write the word man, the word is used to describe someone who has what is usually considered a male body"* (1177 Vårdguiden, 2017). While this explanation makes it clear that the terms refer to bodies, there is no explanation to what a female or male body are. Rather by constructing sentences in such a way that describes both the changing anatomy and bodily appearance during puberty, but also the feeling of gender it leaves it open for readers to define what man, woman, female body and male body really means and what it relates to in the articles. Thus, this very open definition plays into the reproduction of the gender norms that the texts are supposed to criticize and challenge. This is because the framing of words depicts a difference between bodies that conforms with the heteronormative and performative view and thinking of genders as only two.

4.1.2 UMO.se

The language in the texts on UMO.se is based on a norm critical view and therefore questions the norms that affect a person's way of living as they want. Hence the texts are structured in a way that avoids reproduction of such social norms, and is based on their linguistic rules (UMO, n.d.C,G). However, gender binary terms like girl, boy, girl- and boy body are frequently used in the texts, even when it is not necessary, which kind of goes against the linguistic recommendations.

One primary example of this emerges in the structure of the text about puberty. This text is built on the use of sentences such as “*On **girl bodies** the first sign that you are in puberty...*” and “*...many **boy bodies** also get enlarged mammary glands...*” (UMO, n.d.A) when describing differences between the bodily development during puberty. It also refers to girl- and boy bodies in how girls might get wider hips and boys' broader shoulders and how “*...**boy voices** change more than **girl voices**...*” (ibid.). When using these gender binary terms, the site motivates it by writing that as many people should be able to understand the text and when writing girl or boy it refers to what is typically seen as a girl- or boy body. It also makes clear on the fact that “*Having a **biological boy body** as a **boy** and a **biological girl body** as a **girl**...*” (UMO, n.d.H) might not apply for everyone. However, these deceptions and motivations does not explain what it is meant by writing boy- or girl voices, since voices does not have a relation to the anatomy of the body.

The text explaining what equality is (UMO, n.d.H) also uses the terms girl and boy very often while describing the concept of equality. Here equality is defined as a notion that makes it possible for the genders girl and boy to have the same rights in different aspects of societal life. This of course makes sense, since there is a gap between the status of genders boy and girl when it comes to work, money, crime and so on. Nonetheless the text also brings up issues when it comes to care, discrimination and opportunities in school, which is said to apply for everyone; “*Schools must work for **gender equality** and for **all** students to have the opportunity to be who they want to be, **without being guided by gender**” (UMO, n.d.H). The issue here is that even*

though this includes everyone, the texts still only bring up the equality problems between the binary genders which excludes other genders that also falls into categories of inequality.

4.2 Representation of the non-binary and pronouns

4.2.1 1177 Vårdguiden

When it comes to gender identities and pronouns outside the gender norm the term *hen* is the most significant one. While some articles use, as mentioned above, man/woman to point out differences between bodies, most texts are written in the perspective of the reader. This means that a majority of the focused articles use terms as “person”, “you”, “your” and “those” in reference to individuals, which makes the language rather gender-neutral and exclusive, not inclusive, which can be both negative and positive. The only frequent usage of gender-inclusive terms lies in the usage of *hen* when the articles refer to a third person. For example, sentences like “*On the weekends it is good if **hen** can sleep longer in the mornings*” (1177 Vårdguiden, 2019a) are used in the article “Teenagers 13-18 years” where the aim is to help parents (or other guardians) navigate their teenagers world. There are quite a few similar sentences to be found in other texts too, but only in relation to a third person or in the definition of what a pronoun is.

Apart from that the articles are, as said, more gender-neutral in their explanations by being written in the readers’ perspective. The article about menstruation, which relates to a specific anatomy, are also very neutral in its language construction in way that the text never mentions a specific gender and only refers to a person. Two examples on the text’s construction are: “*How much **you** bleed, the number of bleeding days and the number of days between bleeding vary from **person to person***” or “*As long as **you** have menstruation every month, it is possible to get pregnant and have children*” (1177 Vårdguiden, 2021a). Although it might seem like nothing, the fact is that there is no mentions of the word woman or female anywhere in the text, which makes it more inclusive to individuals with vaginas who might not identify with the female gender. There is also a section which is specifically aimed at those who feel discomfort and gender dysphoria when they have their periods. Likewise, there are parts of the puberty texts that do not mention specific genders and instead refers to those with specific bodily

anatomy; “*In those who have a penis...*” and “*In those who have a vagina...*” (1177 Vårdguiden, 2018) are both examples of this.

As said earlier, different gender identities outside the norm do not really appear in the articles, except for when there is a given definition on what non-binary are; “*Non-binary describes a person who neither identifies as male nor female, or sometimes both and or no gender at all. The word can mean different thing to different people. Other words that can mean about the same thing are for example agender, intergender and genderqueer*” (1177 Vårdguiden, 2021c). Although the explanation itself is correct, the way that other identities are framed make it seem like they are not as real and significant as the non-binary identities.

4.2.2 UMO.se

When reading the texts on UMO.se one can easily see that there is a lack in usage of both the pronoun *hen* and different gender identities. Since the texts are written in the readers perceptive, the language is instead constructed of terms like “people”, “they” and “you” and is therefore more gender-neutral instead of being both neutral and inclusive. For instance, menstruations are described as phenomena that varies from person to person and are not limited to a specific gender; “*Menstruation is the body’s way of showing that **you** are sexually mature*” (UMO, n.d.D). Yet there are aspects of the texts which can be perceived as targeting a specific gender, depending on who the reader is. Sentences as “*Most friends may have already received it and you feel relieved that you are finally **one in the “gang”***” (ibid.), can be harmful for individuals who have periods but do not identify with the expectant gender of female, which the text insinuates by writing one in the gang. This is because one’s period often starts in the teenage years, where peer groups often are divided between the binary genders and where those expected to have their period often hang out with each other. By writing one in the gang, it invalidates those individuals who might also get their period but does not fall into the same expected gender category.

Other texts are very neutral or anonymous in their construction but lacking the usage and description of what other genders than girl and boy might be. When writing about gender identity there is mention on how someone might identify with something outside the gender

binary on multiple occasions; “Which gender you know yourself as is usually called gender identity. It could be that you feel like a guy, a girl, both, or none of it.” (UMO, n.d.F). Besides fragments similar to this, examples on what other identities might be are never given, which is very excluding considering the site is supposed to be norm critical and inclusive.

Another illustration of this is found in the text about how one’s gender does not define who you are (UMO, n.d.B). Here a discussion is made on the social norms and invisible rules that one is expected to follow, but how in reality everyone should be whoever they want. Hence, the texts work from the norm to display the arguments through sentences as “...if you are a **guy** and **dress as girls** usually do, or if you are a **girl** and **dress as boys** usually do...” and “A thing that is seen as **girly** in one place, can be seen as **boyish** elsewhere” (ibid.). While it is understandable why they are structured like this, it also makes it seem like the gender binary are the only validated genders, since there is no mention of other identities through the whole text. This is reinforced by the fact that other parts of the text, which seem neutral at first in the way that it is written how no one gets to be treated badly because of their identity (if its boy, girl or other), also lack examples of other genders and still refers to boy/boyish or girl/girly. Additionally, there is no description of what is meant by girl or boy clothes, which is discussed further in section (4.3.2).

4.3 General language structure- neutral, inclusive or neither

4.3.1 1177 Vårdguiden

In its entirety 1177 Vårdguiden uses a very neutral, but exclusive, language rather than inclusive. This does not necessarily mean something negative, but it might indicate that the construction of language needs a little more work to become even further neutral or inclusive. Many of the texts are currently composed of sentences, which combines a neutral and exclusionary language, instead of being neutral or inclusive in its entirety. Like the article about puberty (1177 Vårdguiden, 2018), where even though there is a frequent use of terms related to the gender binary, this usage is combined with neutral language as well. Some parts of the text use binary terms in relation to what happens during puberty such as “The mammary glands are often enlarged on **male bodies** as well” (1177 Vårdguiden, 2018), to then switch to a neutral

language in the section after, as the example with the genitals. Only for it to switch back once again to a more exclusive language in the following section by writing things as “*When the testicles begin to grow, it is a sign that a **boy’s body** is in puberty*” (ibid.). Except from some parts in articles that are constructed in this manner, the language is very neutral and careful in a way where the authors try to use neutral language and try to not indicate that it concerns a specific gender but only you or a person. While this is positive, the usage of some terms can still be problematic and can in fact easily be replaced by other words than the ones used in the text. For instance, the structure and inclusiveness of the texts would change a lot just by replacing words like boy and girl body with the anatomy instead, or just specify that the anatomy is what it refers to, like they do in the article about menstruation.

4.3.2 UMO.se

In UMO.se text about the norm-critical perspective they use, three standpoints (amongst others) are addressed: to question norms, avoid reproduction of norms and shed a light on both individuals and groups within and outside the norm (UMO, n.d.C). An overview of UMO.se make it clear that they are trying to be as neutral and norm critical as possible in their texts, but the current structure has its flaws as it is slightly disorganized and switches between a neutral and exclusionary language. Examples of such practices can be found in one of the texts on sexual orientation and gender identity, where trans and cis is explained. Here the texts are written with a neutral language structure in full when describing how all individuals may feel different about their gender and what trans and genders mean. However, problematic sentences can be identified, for example; “*It can also be about you being **a guy** but like to wear **typical girl clothes***” or “*But you feel good about dressing in **clothes** that are seen as **typical of another gender...***” (ibid.). Unlike the use of the term girl and boy, which at least provides definitions to them, terms like typical girl clothes, boy/girl voices and girly/boyish leaves it up to the reader to decide what is defined to be girl clothes or what a boy voice are. Hence it plays part in the recreation of the norms and gender binary since it assumes that people define and categorize genders in different ways and already have a vision of what girl, boy or gender typical clothes might be.

Another point is that the terms of boy or girl, or similar binary terms, are sometimes used in parts where they are not necessary. While writing how gender does not define you and are allowed to be whom you want sentences as *“Many feel freer and happier when they dare to break invisible rules for how you should be as a **girl or boy**”* (UMO n.d.B) are found. Or when talking about invisible rules for sex *“When it comes to sex, there are also things that are seen as **girly or boyish**”* (ibid.). The text is supposed to include everyone, regardless of gender so why use sentences as these when they can easily be rewritten into something more neutral? Especially the part on sex since the invisible rules themselves are written in a gender-neutral language. Just by changing the terms girl and boy to ‘a specific gender’ would make it more inclusive and neutral. Just further up in the text there are examples of such neutral language where they refer to that children may be treated differently depending on which genitals they have: *“Those who have a **vagina** may be praised when they are calm and sweet. Those who have a **penis** may be praised when they are active and tough”* (ibid.). They do not reference a specific gender in regard to it being a boy or girl, they simply just point to those who may have specific genitals.

4.4 Comparison of the sites

Since the sites share linguistic rules and at times reference each other in articles, it is interesting to compare them and see if the language structure and usage of terms differs between the two. After reading similar texts from both sites one can easily see that there are both similarities and differences in the way they have chosen to structure the language. For instance, both sites, as written above, use a more gender-neutral rather than neutral and inclusive language. This is defined by sentences written from the perspective of the reader, where terms as “person”, “those”, “you” and so on are used instead of different gendered terms. A difference in their writing is, however, that 1177 Vårdguiden uses *hen* more frequently and in boarder context than UMO.se does. While the former uses it in relation to third persons UMO.se only mention it a few times, mainly when giving suggestions on pronouns.

Another similarity between them is that some sentences and whole parts of texts are the same, which means that the collaboration between sites are relatively considerable. One example can be found in their texts on puberty where parts on how the genitals change are identical and 1177

Vårdguiden even has a clickable to UMO.se in their version of the section. There are also sections where the texts only have changed a little between them, like the parts on the voice change. While 1177 Vårdguiden writes “*It happens to both **boys and girls**. But **boys’** voices change more than **girls**...*” (1177 Vårdguiden, 2018), UMO.se writes “*It happens regardless of **your gender**. **Boy voices** change more than **girl voices**” (UMO, n.d.A). Just these short quotes point to that while 1177 Vårdguiden might have a more gender-neutral language structure in some parts, UMO.se can have it at other times.*

Even though they are based on the same conditions and rules, these differences between them might be to the fact that UMO.se focuses on information to younger individuals while 1177 Vårdguiden articles is aimed for the general public. The formers’ structure is more user-friendly and use a very simple language while the latter’s structure is stricter and more factual.

5. Analysis and Conclusions

The results display that the language structure is rather gender-neutral in the material on most occasions, however it is more of an exclusionary language than inclusive at various levels. In this chapter an analysis and discussion on what this means in regard to the theories and previous research on the problem are presented. What the thesis contributes to the research and how this research can be developed are also discussed.

As seen in previous research, the perception and attitudes towards genders outside the binary have started to transform into something more inclusive, but the non-binary genders are still dependent on the society to recognize them. Hence, a specific social change is not entirely possible yet, which results in the fact that identifying with a non-binary gender can be highly challenging because the discrimination and exclusion one may face (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Darwin, 2017). Among the reasons for current social perception of gender, as mentioned in previous research (Nicholas, 2019), lays the fact that there is not enough knowledge about identities outside the norm within social structures. Therefore, researcher (Matsuno & Budge, 2017; Monro, 2019) suggest making attempts to change the attitudes and perception from within the structures for example by encourage the use of gender-neutral and inclusive language. Other research (Senden et al, 2015, 2021; Jetubhai & Ghosal, 2019) has shown how gender-neutral terms may change attitudes and usage for the better and how using a gender-neutral language might result in different mindsets. There are still a few gaps in knowledge to fill, for instance how such a language might be structured and how gender-inclusive terms are presented which is what this thesis have done by looking at Swedish healthcare texts.

When looking at the results of this thesis, one major problem with the current language is that it lacks explanations for certain terms, which allows readers to develop their own individual definitions. These terms, such as man/boy body, woman/girl body, girly and boyish, are those who display the norm of the gender-binary and the way they are used may be explained by the concept of performativity (Butler, 2011; Butler et al., 2005) and heteronormativity (Butler et al., 2005; Butler, 2007). The concept of performativity is that gender is not made until it is assigned to someone, which the material plays onto to by using terms as girly and boyish which does not exist without it being made (Butler, 2011; Butler et al., 2005). However, it might be

done unintentionally in the material since the aim is to be gender-neutral and inclusive, but the theory builds on the fact that everyone actively links to the gender order (female and male) even if it is unintentionally. This is why the language detected in the material is based on norms that distinguish genders from other genders. Performativity also builds on how normative perceptions are maintained by the way a language is used. By not defining words the material recreates those normative thoughts since readers base their interpretation of girly and boyish on their own perception of gender which still often are norm based.

The discussions about being a girl or boy, how they act in a certain way and get divided into two different categories are also enhanced by the heteronormative view. Hence, the notions of masculine=manly=man or femininity=female=woman are addressed in the material without context. Rather it is based on the fact that readers know what it means, thus that the norm is to be female or male. Although the texts make it clear that everyone can be whoever they want, the way it is framed makes it sound genders outside of the binary are non-normative. Which is what the material is supposed to contradict in accordance with their norm-critical perspective. It is thus constituted by the heteronormativity (Butler et al., 2005, Butler, 2007) that prevails in society. But since heteronormativity suggest that gender is socially created it also means that there is a way to make resistance of this making of gender by acting in a non-normative way. That is something that the texts might do if the structure of the current gender-neutral language changes a bit towards a more inclusive one.

To sum it up, the material might be constructed the way it is, with the usage of neutral- and gendered terms and exclusion of differences, because the writers behind the texts are humans which live in the social context where intersectionality (Dahl, 2005; Lykke, 2005; de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2010), the relation between genders and heteronormativity, still builds on a perspective where individuals outside the norm are undermined those within it. In other words, it plays on the “we” and “them” perspective even though it might be unconsciously. If this perspective were to change, the structure of the language could also have the opportunity to change, since intersectionality is based on the superiority and subordination within different social positions. Hence, that the social structures behind the categorization changes. (Molina Vega et al., 2003; de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2010). It is thus about the biopower (Foucault, 2002) related to the norms humans and groups built where, for example, one talk about genders

in different ways and how one relates to the norm. For the language to be able to transform into a more inclusive and neutral this biopower also needs to be reconstructed, which is done by people. The structure of a gender-neutral language can thus be thought to be complicated and is affected by whether people react to it or not, if they recreate it or not. But both biopower and intersectionality suggest that social structures can change (ibid.; de los Reyes et al., 2005), as more and more people become open for inclusiveness of other genders and thereafter, pronouns. By looking at the results of the thesis one can say that this might be done slowly but surely since there is a start in what a gender-neutral language can look like. This gender-neutral language, that 1177 Vårdguiden and UMO.se uses, reaches many people who might embrace these gender-neutral terms of the language for further usage and acceptance outside the healthcare sites. Which, depending on the reaction of the language, in turn might result in a slow change of social structures.

Gender-neutral language and its use is relatively new if one looks at the limited studies on the topic, which means that its structure and impact can be further developed and explored. Even though this paper examines what an existing gender-neutral language looks like, there are still improvements to be done with the structure for the language to become even better, this in combination with more studies on it. For example, based on the research findings from this thesis, a suggestion is that the authors of the medical texts, or similar texts, should rephrase sentences so that a definition of what boy/man or girl/woman are, is solely based on the anatomy. This should also be done in the texts by referring to a kind of anatomy instead of writing female/male body. For the language to further become more neutral and inclusive something needs to change on a structural social level, but considering that it is relatively new the way it is are a good start.

The way the gender-neutral language are constructed in the Swedish medical and healthcare context, its lack of inclusiveness and so on, are also relevant findings for the EU. If Sweden, which is supposed to be one of the most gender advanced countries as mentioned before, still has a lot of development ahead of it before they are considered to have a “perfect” gender-neutral and inclusive language, then what about the rest of Europe? Even though the European Commission launched “The LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025” (COM(2020)698) in 2020, where the usage of a gender-inclusive language are mentioned, there is clearly still, in relation

to this thesis research findings in the Swedish context, a lot of work to be done in regard to the usage and structure. This does not mean that the rest of EU cannot lean on the findings from the Swedish context, since their current language can be used as a starting point to develop a general gender-neutral language from. Although for the EU and its member states to be able to develop the language further both Sweden and the EU must change and develop more in terms of social structures and acceptance of differences. The question is thus what can further be done by the EU to change the current social situations in the member states? This is something that needs to be explored and discussed both in research and within the EU.

Furthermore, since this thesis is focused on a Swedish delimitation with a medical and healthcare view point, it would be legitimate in future research to explore other EU members states as well. This to see if they have similar structures, or even has a gender-neutral language. Merely because the Swedish material uses a somewhat gender-neutral language does not mean that other countries use one or it might not have the same structure. It all depends on what different language glossary's looks like in terms of gender and the social context that the language exists in. Research should also focus on exploring how individuals perceives the gender-neutral language and the effects of it, both for the binary and non-binary gender identities. Perhaps through field studies over a certain period of time, which maybe focuses on following non-binary individuals in their everyday life to see how they are approached by others and how they perceive it.

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