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'The most important decisions are made in the sauna': the role of social capital in creating intersectional privilege in the career narratives of Estonian male managers

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This article contributes to discussions on social capital in relation to masculinities, as it explores how talking about relying on social capital legitimates and normalises the hegemonic status of intersectionally privileged unmarked groups. This is examined through narratives of ethnic Estonian male managers. The narratives suggest that while these managers make use of social capital as a resource available to them in securing work-related success, they underestimate, take for granted and do not challenge the prominent role of social ties in this process, discursively obscuring ways how social capital works in hiring and promotion. These discursive practices enable intersectionally privileged men not only to maintain successful careers, but also to reproduce their hegemonic status in the society more generally, as well as help to display complicity with hegemonic masculinity and participate in the construction of this ideal in the context of managerial work. Privileged groups who are able to pass as unmarked – such as elite ethnic majority men – have the power to legitimate in the context of work certain norms, values, rules and practices which do not stand out as unusual when practiced by these groups themselves, similarly to how whiteness constructs itself as normative.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity; social capital; intersectionality; unmarked groups; privilege; management

Introduction

This article contributes to discussions on social capital in relation to masculinities. More specifically, this study adds to the understanding of privileged men’s use of social capital in the context of work, and ways in which existing power relations and hegemonic norms are (re)established through this. It explores how talking about relying on social ties legitimates and normalises the hegemonic status of intersectionally privileged unmarked groups in the labour market, which I examine through narratives of ethnic Estonian male managers. More broadly, this article contributes to what Brekhus (1998) terms as the ‘sociology of the unmarked’ and adds to previous work on how privileged groups reproduce their dominance (Pease, 2010).

Often, qualitative research deals with the marked poles of social categories (Brekhus, 1998, p. 39), for example, intersectional research highlighting ways in which the unique experiences of women of colour have been neglected from existing knowledge (see for example Collins, 1990, 1993; Crenshaw, 1994). However, the tendency to set

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disadvantaged groups at the centre of research aiming to expose and understand inequalities allows privileged groups to remain ‘unmarked’ (Brekhus, 1998; Choo & Ferree, 2010) and thereby evade scrutiny, as their normative status and complicity in upholding hegemonic norms and power structures remain unquestioned (Pease, 2010, p. 7), and the invisibility of their privilege is reinforced (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Pease, 2010, p. 6; Walby, Armstrong, & Strid, 2012).

Yet, the role of privileged groups, such as ethnically/racially unmarked men working in top management positions in sustaining and reproducing (as well as challenging) gender and other inequalities, is of great relevance (Aavik, in press; Collinson & Hearn, 1994). In the context of paid work, members of groups located at privileged intersections of gender, ethnicity, class and other categories are better able to correspond to the image of the ideal worker (Acker, 1990) due to the invisibility and normalisation of their intersectional privilege. Building on previous work on privilege (Bailey, 1998; Pease, 2010), and male privilege (Pease, 2014) and white privilege (Frankenberg, 1993, 1997; Twine & Warren, 2000) in particular, I understand as intersectional privilege the opportunities and advantages that are systematically available to individuals or groups in particular social contexts and situations due to their privileged position on the axis of gender, age, ethnicity, race and other relevant social categories simultaneously. Such structural advantage is unearned and involves a sense of entitlement and lack of awareness of being in possession of it (Bailey, 1998, p. 108, 113; Pease, 2014, p. 21). The particular positioning of the interviewed Estonian male managers in relation to other groups in the Estonian labour market leaves them unmarked in most situations in terms of multiple categories simultaneously, which constitutes a source of their intersectional privilege.

Even if privileged men are not personally or intentionally exploiting less-privileged individuals or if they are involved in anti-patriarchal initiatives, they will still benefit from unearned patriarchal privilege (Flood, 2014, p. 48; Pease 2014, pp. 20–21). Through intersectional privilege, which remains mostly invisible, unmarked groups are able to maintain and reproduce the image of the manager as implicitly male, middle-class, ethnic majority and heterosexual. This allows gender, ethnic and other inequalities in the labour market to continue.

It follows thus, that in order to understand social inequality more comprehensively, the gaze should be diverted from those who ‘deviate’ to those who are unmarked and thus able to remain normative (Brekhus, 1998): focusing on ways how unmarked privileged groups, such as ethnic majority men holding positions of political and/or economic power, are able to establish and frame their own specific practices and ideals as universal invisible normative standards (for example, in the context of work), which other groups have to position themselves in relation to, if they want to succeed in these social arenas.

This article deals with an important means through which unmarked privileged groups are able to retain their privileged position, which in turn contributes to maintaining vertical gender segregation of the labour market: the use of social capital as a resource which helps to achieve and maintain management positions and successful careers. Drawing on interviews with ethnic Estonian male managers, my aim is not to map or measure their ‘actual’ social networks. Instead, I focus on their ways of narrating the use of social capital as a resource at their disposal and meanings they attribute to this. More particularly, I explore the following two related questions. How does narrating the usage of social capital help them to position themselves in relation to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity and how do they help to recreate this ideal through their practices,
thereby contributing to (re)establishing masculine norms in management? How does talking about reliance on social ties in career advancement help them to hold on to a sense of entitlement and retain intersectional privilege in the Estonian labour market and society at large?

Theoretical framework

Studying intersectional privilege in the labour market: hegemonic masculinity, intersectionality and perspectives from critical whiteness studies

Scholars working in the field of critical studies of men and masculinities view the categories of ‘men’ and ‘masculinities’ as socially constructed and problematise gendered power relations, which uphold men’s hegemonic power. Multiple masculinities exist within the gender system and hegemonic masculinity, an ideal associated with authority and social power, subordinating other masculinities, is located at the top of the hierarchy (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinities are ‘actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given social setting’ (Connell, 2003, p. 16). The content of hegemonic masculinity or how ‘hegemonic principles’ (Howson, 2006) are configured varies in different social and cultural contexts. This means that men in different local settings align themselves to ‘what they perceive as the legitimate masculine norm’ (Howson, 2013).

While the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been extensively used, it has received critical feedback (see for example Beasley, 2008; Hearn, 2004; Howson, 2013; Moller, 2007). Following insights from this critical work, I understand hegemonic masculinity as a discursive ideal in relation to which men position themselves through their material and discursive practices, not as a characteristic that can be directly attributed to certain individual men or groups of men or something that they possess. To link this with the concept of social capital, I am interested in how my interviewees, who in their narratives are explicitly and implicitly extensively referring to the usage of social capital, are thereby able to produce hegemonic masculine norms in the context of (managerial) work. This is possible due to their unacknowledged and unchallenged privileged position in the social hierarchy compared to other groups.

The multiplicity of masculinities and a hierarchy between them relate well to debates on intersectionality in feminist research, as they emphasise power differences between different groups of men and conceptualise masculinity as multiple and a contextually changing category (Lykke, 2010, p. 62). With the help of intersectionality, it is possible to disassemble masculinities, analysing how masculinities are constructed though other social relations and divisions, such as class, ethnicity, race, age and sexual orientation (Bilge, 2009, p. 2). However, focus should not only be on identity categories, but also on social structures, economic relations and other systems of power as interacting with these. Collinson and Hearn (2005, p. 302) emphasise that male managers’ power should not only be understood in terms of gender and masculinity, but also in terms of other social inequalities, as well as hierarchies, bureaucracy, etc., which reinforce each other. In other words, it should be approached intersectionally.

Hegemonic masculinity is often enacted in seemingly gender-neutral ways, similarly to how whiteness is constructed as an invisible norm, for example, in many Western organisations (Hearn 1996, p. 614). In order to deconstruct this apparent gender neutrality, men must be (re)gendered and displaced from being seen as generic human beings (Collinson & Hearn, 1994). The status of an intersectionally ‘unmarked group’ is
conceptually similar to the phenomenon that critical whiteness studies scholars have observed: whiteness is constructed as a ‘racially neutral site’ (Twine, 1997, p. 228), or a ‘natural state of being’ (Frankenberg, 1997, pp. 15–16). Critical whiteness studies aim to expose whiteness as a privileged category, displacing it from an unmarked status (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 6; Twine & Warren, 2000, p. 20). In order to displace power relations, white normativity should be critically explored (Lykke, 2010, p. 204). To understand how relations of dominance emerge and are reproduced materially, institutionally and discursively, the position of the dominant or majoritised and ‘the intersections on which it is built’ must be critically analysed (Lykke, 2010, p. 56; Pease, 2010).

In the context of work and organisations, Hearn (1996, p. 614) suggests that in order to deconstruct the dominant, the social constructedness of the categories ‘men’, ‘whiteness’, etc., which are often perceived as uncontested norm, must be made explicit. Thus, ‘the dominant, the One’ has to be made ‘into the Other’ (Hearn, 1996, p. 615). I do this by exploring how my interviewees in talking about social capital set their own practices and values as universal norms in the context of managerial work, which are difficult for other, differently positioned groups to attain, because they are marked in terms of gender, ethnicity and other categories.

**Social capital, gender and power**

Broadly, social capital refers to social relations which individuals or groups are able to utilise in certain contexts to generate benefits for themselves (Burt, 1998, p. 7; 2001, p. 31).

Many scholars studying social capital, i.e. Lin (2001, 2002), Burt (1998, 2001) and Coleman (1988), are interested in measuring and mapping actual social network structures and ties, and have devised specific methods to do so. However, these approaches do not enable an understanding of meanings that individuals attribute or interpretations they offer to the use of social capital, or wider implications of relying on social ties, including the question of how talking about networks act as normalisation strategies. Social capital has often been conceptualised as a gender-neutral resource, theorising people in social networks as genderless individuals and in other ways unmarked, and assuming that everyone has equal access to power within these networks. However, for groups who already have considerable material and discursive power resources at their disposal, relying on social capital is likely to further contribute to these resources.

When studying social capital at the disposal of powerful groups, it is important to pay attention to how they exclude other, non-privileged groups. Often, elite social networks exclude other groups not only on the basis of gender, but other categories as well, such as ethnicity and class or social status (Friedman & Krackhardt, 1997, p. 316).

Bourdieu’s (1986) approach to social capital, originating from his interest in explaining class inequalities, comes closest to being concerned with power relations and ways how hegemonic groups are able to retain their position, and can thus be applied to studying gendered power relations. Bourdieu speaks of symbolic uses of power in the form of ‘capital of recognition’ that serves the interests of privileged groups by making power structures appear as ‘objective’ or taken for granted, and representing particular values as universal (Siisiäinen, 2003).
Social capital should not only be seen as producing immediate profit for the actors relying on it, but the ways in which it generates wider advantages or disadvantages for different groups, should also be considered. Lin (2002) recognises the dimension of reinforcement, which refers to outcomes that using social capital is likely to produce. These might include ways in which social capital works as a source of (re)generating sense of self-worth and entitlement for dominant groups. For example, in the case of intersectionally privileged groups, the yield that relying on these social ties produces, must not only be thought in terms of successful labour market outcomes, such as hiring, promotion, etc. It is also important to explore how, through normalising the use of social capital discursively, intersectionally privileged men are able to retain their privileged position, and make certain ways of relying on social capital that are available primarily to this dominant group seem normal, ordinary and invisible – similar to the functioning of whiteness. The implications of social capital should thus be seen as more wide-ranging.

Previous studies have not focused on meanings attributed to the use of social capital and the implications of this to the reproduction of intersectional privilege for some groups. This is a gap I intend to address in this article. I explore ways in how my interviewees narrate using social networks in their career advancement, how they name these processes and what aspects they omit when talking about social ties, paying attention to how these individuals talk about using ‘embedded resources’ to ‘achieve instrumental goals’ (Lin, Fu, & Hsung, 2001, p. 60). I am interested in how relying on social capital by intersectionally privileged men enables them to (re)assure their sense of self-worth, entitlement and success in the labour market.

Contextual background: inequality, masculinities and social capital in the Estonian labour market

The Estonian labour market features some of the largest gender disparities in the EU, most notably the gender pay gap of 30% (Eurostat, 2012) and the highest gender segregation (Bettio & Verashchagina, 2009, p. 32), with simultaneous ethnic inequalities (Hansson & Aavik, 2012).

Out of four groups at the intersection of gender and ethnicity in the Estonian labour market, Russian-speaking women have become the most disadvantaged group, in terms of average net monthly wages, job security and job satisfaction, whereas ethnic Estonian men have emerged as the most successful group in these terms (Hansson & Aavik, 2012).

In order to understand how men position themselves in relation to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity through their practices in the Estonian labour market, the construction of masculinities should be understood as located in a post-socialist space and influenced by a socialist legacy. According to Pajumets (2012, pp. 53–54), referring to Inglehart, material values cherished in contemporary post-socialist societies stem from poverty and insecurity experienced by people in the socialist era. This might partly explain the importance placed on career, work and material well-being in the construction of Estonian masculinities today. Following Connell (1998), who associates hegemonic masculinity on the global level with ‘transnational business masculinity’, Pilvre (2011, p. 64) has characterised hegemonic masculinity in post-soviet Estonia as a hybrid form combining American-style corporate masculinity with nationalist ideologies. These could be thought of as important hegemonic principles (Howson, 2006) in the Estonian context, which men then fill with content in their own specific ways. Nationalism as a hegemonic principle suggests the importance placed on ethnicity-based boundaries in the Estonian
society, implying that it is more difficult for men marked as belonging to ethnic minorities to position themselves in relation to this ideal in the Estonian context, as it favours ethnic majority men.

Acquiring jobs via informal ways appears to be rather frequent in Estonia, as 70% of employees have acquired their jobs through informal channels (Kazjulja & Roosalu, 2011). Reasons for this might include the smallness of the Estonian society where networks are often intertwined. One could also think of the Soviet legacy, where information and goods were often distributed via informal networks. Also, it has been found that men are more likely than women to find jobs via social networks in Estonia (Jeenas, 2011; Kazjulja & Roosalu, 2011).

In the Estonian context, the majority ethnic group – Estonians – are not racially distinguished from the largest ethnic minorities – Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians – collectively referred to as Russian-speakers. Although the largest ethnic groups are not racially differentiated, othering and exclusion takes place through emphasising ethnic and linguistic difference. I therefore suggest that privilege based on ethnicity works through similar mechanisms as the construction of whiteness as an invisible normative category. Being constructed as belonging to the majority ethnic group (especially when intersected with identification with the category ‘men’) provides advantages to those positioned as such. Ways on how this occurs in specific social contexts, such as work and organisations, largely remain unnoticed and unchallenged.

In this article, I explore upholding and reproducing intersectional privilege by dominant groups drawing on discursive practices of Estonian male managers. Studying ways how intersectionally privileged men in Estonia explain the use of social capital contributes to understanding ways how inequalities are reinforced and perpetuated in the post-Soviet context. In addition to the more direct gains (i.e. in hiring and promotion) that the usage of social capital enables to these men, I argue that by discursively normalising the use of social capital (in achieving work-related success, as a resource available particularly to this privileged group, in the context of (managerial) work, these men are able to construct their own practices as an invisible norm in the context of managerial work, as well as beyond. It is the ways of constructing this norm that I am aiming to unpack.

Sample and method
I draw on 15 semi-structured interviews, conducted from December 2012 to 2013 with ethnic Estonian male top and middle managers from the public and private sector, aged 27–74 (average age 42). Interviewees were found through snowball sampling. Most of them had completed higher education or vocational higher education, with some continuing to pursue university degrees alongside work. Interestingly, most of those who had obtained tertiary education had degrees or diplomas in social sciences or humanities, which are typically considered ‘feminine fields’ in the Estonian labour market. Due to this particular educational and professional background, their experiences and interpretations might differ from male managers working in other sectors.

Although often seen just as managers or male managers, it is important to note that they are able-bodied presumably heterosexual (at least not explicitly challenging heteronormativity) ethnic majority men of high socio-economic status, and should be explicitly named as such, which helps to unmask their privilege (Pease, 2010, p. 15).
I used a narrative approach as a method of data collection and analysis (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 2008). Encouraging the narration of detailed stories about extended life episodes enables to trace the more implicit elements in the people’s experiences and their representations, including ways in which they are positioned in the social hierarchy vis-à-vis other groups and the meanings they attribute to this. This is especially important in the case of unmarked groups because intersectional privilege, just as whiteness, appears invisible and normal, including importantly in discursive representations. As such, it tends to remain more elusive and difficult to capture by methods, which encourage more structured responses from research participants.

In order to encourage the emergence of narratives, I asked my interviewees to narrate the story of their careers starting from their educational paths. I then asked clarifying questions and inquired about additional aspects regarding their work and careers, including ways how they describe their experiences with recruitment and promotion, how they describe themselves as managers, and their participation in further training. While my interviewees (nor myself) never used the concept of social capital in the course of the interviews, the narratives contain plenty of implicit as well as explicit suggestions to ways how social capital plays an important role in contributing to the work-related success of the interviewed managers in different stages of their careers, most importantly in recruitment and upward mobility.

While the narrative approach encouraged the telling of stories by research participants, with varying degrees of intervention by the interviewer, I consider all narratives, which emerged, to be co-constructed, as the researcher’s role and presence in the narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) cannot be separated from the narratives produced. Differences and similarities in the positioning of my interviewees in relation to me in terms of intersecting social categories and power relations have important consequences on what was being narrated and how, and this positioning constitutes an important element of the narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). However, it is impossible to discern all influences this has on the narratives produced. It is likely, however, that our similar positioning as ethnic Estonians, but different in terms of power relations, such as gender, social status, and location in the work hierarchy, and in some cases age, enabled the possibility to silence the category of ethnicity in the narratives, while providing more opportunities for doing (privileged) masculinity.

**Analysis and results**

*Ways of narrating upward mobility and the role of social capital in this process*

This section focuses on ways how the interviewed managers refer to social capital in their narratives and what importance they place on its role in their own recruitment and upward mobility. Demonstrating ways how relying on social capital is expressed and what kinds of narrative strategies are used to explain career advancement helps to illuminate how the interviewees understand their own current (privileged) status as managers and ways of achieving this status.

The importance of relying on social capital becomes evident as the interviewed Estonian male managers narrate the progress of their career tracks, where jobs were overwhelmingly acquired in ways other than running for them. The following excerpt illustrates well both the content and manner of presentation of social ties in recruitment and promotion, suggesting the narrator’s hesitancy and unwillingness to talk about this matter:
Jaan (34), manager, private sector: Well, so it happens to people sometimes that somehow … well … I haven’t needed to run for office much, but I have been invited or somehow.

This extract refers to social capital that has been used to attain work-related success. However, referring to social capital does not mean that its importance was acknowledged. Rather, social capital as a resource at the male managers’ disposal and the privileges that accrue from it were taken for granted, unacknowledged, underestimated or at least not explicitly problematised. In addition, as the quote demonstrates, social relations and specific individuals who helped the interviewees to advance in their careers were obscured by using impersonal voice. The hesitant manner with which the use of social ties in getting access to jobs was presented, suggests some uncertainty felt by the interviewee to articulate this and/or his attempts to carefully choose how to express this, so as not to give away too much, at the same time admitting having relied on social capital.

In the following section, I identify three main ways that were used to describe attaining the current management position: logical continuation to the career; by chance, combined with own aspirations; initiated by others. Sometimes, elements of all these discourses were present within the same narrative, and I have separated these for analytical purposes.

(1) Becoming top manager as a ‘logical continuation’ to the ongoing career:

Siim (36), top manager, public sector: … at this moment there was a situation in X institution where there was so-called in-house movement … logical movement. The chancellor became minister, the vice-chancellor [of area X] moved to the position of chancellor and I moved then to the position of the head of [area X]. And so it lasted until 2007. In 2007 then … it was the logical continuation of my career that I became the vice-chancellor [of area X].

Retrospectively speaking of his rise to a top managerial position in an Estonian state institution, the interviewee constructs his career path as one with a clear direction – that of upward mobility presented as a smooth upward movement with no contradictions. Having reached a top position, he views it as something that was bound to happen in his career. Implicit references to the use of social capital are present in the description of upward mobility, more specifically elite social networks and mutual trust, intersected with belonging to the ‘right’ political party. However, the narrative is presented in a way, which leaves this unsaid, but rather to be assumed. No references are made to running for office, suggesting that these top management positions were not available for open competition. Moreover, the selection of new top managers from among already high-ranking officials working in the institution is rather neutrally or euphemistically labelled as ‘in-house movement’, suggesting the swiftness, naturalness and incontestability of this process and its perception of it as such by the interviewee.

(2) Reaching top management happened by chance, but was combined with willingness to engage in certain practices, often associated with masculinity:

Tõnis, top manager, public sector (60): All this work-related moving forward has been … not at all a very conscious choice, but more of coinciding situations and in these moments sometimes choices have been made at the spur of a moment, based totally on some inner feeling. So, in my life, there has been no long-term career planning […] Those, who were more willing to plunge into the unknown, became school principals … and you learned how to head a school only at the job.
Contrary to the previous discourse of reaching top management as a ‘logical continuation’ to the ongoing career, this way of presenting emphasises the role of chance and favourable circumstances in ending up in top management, with no actual career planning, but rather, spontaneous decisions or events which have led to current success. However, as this discourse suggests, it is not enough only to be in the right place at the right time, but it is equally important to be oriented towards leadership and risk-taking, practices commonly associated with masculinities and often expected from and approved in men, and as such not available to all groups equally. Tõnis does not have a problem admitting that when employed as a school principal, he lacked actual experience in this particular field of work. He suggests that previous experience and skills did not matter (these could be acquired later, in the course of work), as much as willingness to take risks, which he represents as ordinary and universal dispositions. Moreover, emphasis on chance combined with disposition towards certain practices, presented as universal, suggests the interviewee’s implicit assumption that these randomly occurring events leading to success might occur to everyone, regardless of how they are positioned. This is a narrative strategy more available to intersectionally privileged groups, who often do not perceive their own privilege.

(3) Acquiring top positions as a result of decisions or initiative by others:

Ivar (36), top manager, public sector: As I was the head of the parish council and then ... well, the parish council elects the mayor. It was so that when the previous parish mayor resigned, then the parish council began to elect a new one. And my candidacy was put forward, it found support ... and so the parish council elected me.

Interviewer: Why do you think that you were promoted?
Alo (45), top manager, public sector: I don’t know, I have never really been commented on regarding these choices. I mean, I have been there for a while ... and it works something like this that the head of the organisation comes and says, so, hey, this is the offer, here you go man! These choices are made behind the back and I am not being explained about these. Which is normal actually.

In this way of presenting upward mobility, interviewees referred to someone else’s choices regarding their own promotion. Typically, these individuals or institutional bodies who are being referred to are left unspecified, but the presentation suggests that they are the ones holding decision-making power. At the same time, this way of narrating downplays or obscures the men’s own agency, ambitions, wishes, initiative, efforts and choices in becoming promoted implying that they only ‘ended up’ in management positions as a result of others’ decisions. Yet, in order to be able to be promoted like this, these men must belong to these organisational elites, and have close ties with other members who are part of it. This way of promotion is implicitly as well as explicitly approved and normalised by the interviewees.

* * *

In all three ways of presenting upward mobility, social networks with intimate ties to power resources and mutual trust are implicitly present and play an important role in attaining top positions. However, what characterises these presentations is the fact that none of the more specific details how these processes work, are revealed, a point I will elaborate on in the next section. In all three ways of presenting upward mobility, the linguistic device of impersonal voice is used to speak of their promotion process (‘my
candidacy was put forward’, ‘I have never really been commented on regarding these choices’), which serves to obscure the ones making these decisions.

Very little explicit emphasis was placed on own agency in reaching managerial positions or achieving work-related success, rather chance or others decisions were referred to as contributing to their upward mobility. This is a narrative strategy available particularly to privileged groups, who might not feel the need to emphasise their own individual achievement, due to feeling secure in their social position. Also, this way of presenting might be simultaneously explained by culture-specific expectations to refrain from (excessive) self-praise.

‘I was a common salesman … and well, I ended up as board member’: narrative strategies to obscure the functioning of social capital in recruitment and upward mobility

While the career narratives feature plenty of references to social capital and to institutional factors specific to certain sectors and organisations which facilitate making use of social capital for upward mobility and favour certain kinds of social ties, the interviewees, despite my clarifying questions regarding the specifics of the social relations and functioning of the networks in their career advancement, preferred not to elaborate on this topic. It is important to look at these discursive strategies more closely, as the privileged position of these men depends largely on being able to make some specific ways, which contribute to their privilege, and their specific, gendered practices invisible, normal and therefore difficult to challenge.

One of the central questions I asked my interviewees was the following: ‘please tell me more exactly, how did you get this job?’ The interviewees often chose to answer this question only briefly, without elaborating further, even after I had rephrased the question. The most common replies, typically formulated in impersonal voice, included ‘I was offered this job’, ‘it was thought that I am suitable for this job’, etc.

The following excerpt from a co-constructed narrative with Mati (50), a board member and sales director in the public sector, illustrates this well:

Interviewer: You were saying [in your story] that you got these jobs, but I am interested how did you get them more exactly?
Mati: Well, let’s say … the first job I got so that I was appointed to this job by the school … Well, when I had been there for half a year, I called regarding two job offers, they took me … the specialty was quite similar. And let’s say that I ran for the job in this company, but I haven’t run for any other jobs.
Interviewer: How does it happen more exactly?
Mati: Well, in that company, I was a common salesman in the beginning and … well, ended up as a board member.
Interviewer: But how does this function more exactly that you move upward or reached a higher position?
Mati: [talks about the history and reorganisation of the company] … And then … I kind of became the sales director and finally the owner, in the end I really didn’t feel like working.

In addition to asking the interviewees to elaborate on how they got their jobs, I also asked them, in narrating their careers to specify which factors (including people) they think have contributed to their upward mobility and work-related success. However, the interviewees did not pay attention to this aspect in their narratives either.
Such a way of narrating recruitment and upward mobility obscures the details of the process and the role and functioning of social capital in it, which is however implicitly strongly present in these descriptions. There are likely to be multiple, interrelated and partly contradictory reasons for such obscurisation or non-disclosure, at least some of which can be valid simultaneously and reinforce each other. First, even though the interviewees are not explicitly presenting their work-related success as a personal achievement, they might implicitly consider it as such. In contemporary neoliberal Estonia, the discourse according to which success depends on one’s personal efforts, not structural conditions, is prevalent. Moreover, several of the interviewees are members of political parties whose ideology this perspective represents. A second, related reason, why the details of promotion were not disclosed might be that this process is not perceived as something extraordinary, but rather ‘natural’ or as presented in an earlier quote, ‘a logical continuation’ to the career. Thus, if something is assumed as natural and legitimate, there is no need to make it explicit by elaborating on the details. Since top management positions both in the public and private sector of Estonia are overwhelmingly occupied by ethnic Estonian men, the fact that these interviewees, as ethnic majority men, occupied these positions, might not be considered as something extraordinary for them, but rather taken for granted. Unlike other groups, such as ethnic minority women, these Estonian male managers probably need not explain or give reasons why they occupy these top positions, as their presence in these positions is assumed and uncontested and therefore it might be unexpected for and of them to have to justify it. Thus, one reason why these men are not problematising the usage of social networks and are rather openly admitting having acquired jobs via social ties, might be that they are assured that in their case, their competence for these positions, is not questioned, even if they overwhelmingly have not run for these positions, but acquired them in other ways. This particular discursive position or narrative strategy is not as easily available to groups marked by gender, ethnicity or other categories. This sense of entitlement is in turn related to organisational and human resource management (HRM) practices, which have been found to be implicitly gendered (Dickens, 1998; Hearn, Metcalfe, & Piekkari, 2006). Relying on social ties might be embedded in these practices, and this could be taken for granted and therefore left unarticulated by the interviewed managers. In this case, individual silences are linked to organisational silences. Third, they might want to withhold these explanations to secure the non-transparency of those involved in the networks, considering the smallness of the Estonian society. Fourth, withholding these details might also serve as a way to actively defend their privilege (Donaldson, 1998). Fifth, in contradiction to the previous points, (at least some) of the managers might implicitly perceive relying on social capital in achieving success and the institutional practices that enable that, as somehow unfair or unethical, and hence may want to refrain from elaborating on this process. Finally, an important reason might have to do with particular ways of doing masculinity in the Estonian context through discursive practices – briefness and concreteness are valued modes of self-expression for men, especially in business communication, rather than elaborate accounts. In particular, disclosing information seen as relating to personal matters is likely to be seen as irrelevant to work and careers, and therefore remains unspoken.

Social capital as exclusionary

The narratives were constructed using no explicit references to the gender or ethnicity of the narrator (or other categories), suggesting the intersectionally privileged position these
men are able to speak from. Also, there were very few references to categories of difference in references to social capital, particularly social networks. The fact that there is no grammatical gender in the Estonian language helps in this context to discursively obscure the gendered aspects of the networks even further. However, the few explicit references point to the gendered nature of the elite social networks that these men make use of in their particular fields:

Interviewer: In these social events that you have, do you feel that there is a hierarchy or maybe they [subordinates] are afraid to say some things?
Alo (45): I think so. I have sometimes felt that I have let some man too close, but it’s a matter of perception. I prefer if they talk more to remaining distant.

*Mihkel (35): Generally, our work is quite intelligent, it’s not like digging a ditch, you have to know what you are doing, so these people are smart blokes.*

This discursive marking of gender and at the same time exclusion, suggests the presence of homosocial networks and indicates that the people who are relevant for the interviewees in the context of their work, are predominantly male. This way of presenting at the same time naturalises these social relations in the context of work. As such, it can be viewed as part of ‘inequality regimes’ (Acker, 2006) that function within organisations as well as beyond.

A good example of implicit exclusion is provided in the following excerpt, where the interviewee, a top manager in the public sector, explains the importance of joint events with colleagues:

Ivar (36): And such joint events are very important, so that people could communicate in a more unrestricted environment and feel good about themselves … and apparently … well, here, like in business I guess, the biggest and most important decisions are made in the sauna.

While Ivar first talks gender-neutrally about colleagues spending good time together, he then continues to make a widely recognised culturally specific reference to informal decision-making among well-connected privileged groups in a private environment. The reference to the sauna, as an important cultural element in the Nordic and Baltic region, at the same time implicitly suggests a gender-segregated space, and as such it points to exclusion based on gender.

Discussion and conclusions
This article has focused on ethnic Estonian male managers’ ways of narrating the use of social capital and the meanings they attribute to this in a neoliberal post-socialist context. The discursive practices I discussed, enable these intersectionally privileged men to gain work-related success, display complicity with hegemonic masculinity and participate in the construction of this ideal, and thereby reproduce their hegemonic status in the society.

The narratives suggest that while the interviewed managers make use of social capital as a resource available to them in securing prestigious jobs, advancing in their career tracks and sustaining top management positions, they underestimate, take for granted and do not challenge the prominent role of social ties in maintaining work-related success. The interviewees use narrative strategies, which work to discursively obscure the specific
details and functioning of social networks and other relations that they make use of in getting hired and promoted.

These narrative strategies and discursive positions are interwoven with, and reinforced by the prevalent neoliberal ideology present in the Estonia political and public sphere. In a neoliberal post-Soviet context, where trade unions are still weak and individual salary negotiation at hiring and promotion is a prevalent practice especially in the private sector, the use of social ties is facilitated and becomes normalised for these men, and is perceived as occurring on the individual level, disconnected from social structure. The neoliberal ideology privileges individual achievement while dismissing structural conditions which enable or prevent certain groups from achieving success. The naturalisation of privilege for dominant groups through individual practices works by obscuring the fact that the abstract individual who is supposed to succeed, is implicitly gendered and ethnicised. This is supported by implicitly gendered HRM practices, which help to perpetuate intersectional privilege in organisations, and which the interviewed managers discursively normalise. While Estonian organisations are legally obliged to promote equal treatment, existing HRM practices do not support this aim.

My first particular point of interest in this article involves ways of how narrating the use of social capital relates to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity and (re)establishing masculine norms in management. I argue that normalising the usage of social capital functions for these men positioned as intersectionally privileged as a way of performing masculinity in the context of paid work. This doing of masculinity occurs in the public arena, as they inhabit public spaces where power resources are concentrated, and where the use of social ties yields more than just immediate outcomes in terms of work-related success. In addition to the production of individual gains and affirmation of individual self-worth, that are enabled by social capital, normalising the usage of social capital also becomes a source of reassuring their self-worth and sense of entitlement as men, and thus contributes to building male solidarity and male norms in management. The functioning of social ties is enabled by the similarity that they perceive to share on the grounds of being associated with the category of (ethnic majority) men. Relying on social capital is not constructed as something extraordinary, but precisely viewed as ordinary in this context, just as whiteness establishes itself in relation to those considered non-white. They are thus able to re-establish certain norms in the labour market, or at least in management, and to (re)confirm the image of the ideal worker as unmarked.

Talking about social capital in these particular ways and normalising its usage, is simultaneously a way for these men to help define and uphold a particular ideal of hegemonic masculinity in the context of managerial work, an ideal which they themselves are better positioned to align themselves with and fill with content, compared to other groups of men, as well as women. Ways on how these men help to construct and support hegemonic masculinity through their discursive practices are organised around whiteness as a hegemonic principle (Howson, 2013). This is done by presenting particular practices and ways of managing available primarily to intersectionally privileged men as ordinary, thus masking ways on how they are simultaneously gendered and ethnicised (and supporting heteronormativity).

These insights relate to my second research question on how relying on social capital enables these men to claim a sense of entitlement and intersectional privilege in management and in a broader social context. In their self-presentations, my interviewees do not construct themselves as gendered or ethnicised, classed, etc. and therefore do not perceive themselves as speaking and acting from a privileged position based on the
intersections of these categories in particular work-related contexts. This unacknowledge-
ment of privilege helps to (re)naturalise and legitimise their power differentials in relation
to other groups. The intersectionally privileged position, from which these men are able to
conduct their discursive and material practices, is represented as an ordinary position.
Privileged groups who are able to pass as unmarked – such as these elite ethnic Estonian
men – have the power to legitimate in the context of work certain norms, values, rules and
practices which do not stand out as unusual when practiced by these groups themselves.
These norms and values are also understood as ordinary by other, less-privileged groups,
who are required, in order to succeed, aspire to these same hegemonic norms.

Discursively normalising and legitimating the use of social capital has important
implications on the reproduction of intersectional privilege and inequalities in the labour
market. By not contesting, but instead perpetuating and legitimising the use of social
capital, these Estonian male managers help to structure the labour market space, where they
are located, to function in specific ways that is advantageous to them. If other groups, such
as ethnic majority women or ethnic minority men and women want to access these
privileged spaces, they have to play by the same rules set by the privileged Estonian men
who occupy these spaces now. However, the reason why these particular exclusionary
(discursive) practices work for privileged groups and how they are able to retain their
intersectional privilege is because of their ability to pass as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ or
‘unmarked’, in ways how white practices have been normalised and result in symbolic
capital that unmarked groups are able to use better than other groups. For other groups it is
difficult to challenge something, which has been rendered normal and thereby invisible.
Thus, in the context of the labour market, the success of intersectionally privileged groups
depends in important ways on being able to assert themselves as normal and unmarked.

This article has contributed to discussions on how talking about social ties relates to
doing masculinity and upholding intersectional privilege in the context of managerial
work, based on the example of privileged men in post-socialist Estonia. In doing so, it has
illuminated ways on how men reassure their self-worth as men, as well as build on male
solidarity and male norms in management, building on and adding to previous work on
masculinities in the context of managerial work (Collinson & Hearn, 1994, 2005; Hearn,
1996, etc.). It has also shed light on ways in which the inequality of social capital works
through discursive means. More widely, by studying the use of social capital as a practice
of a particular privileged group, it has helped make this privilege visible (Pease, 2010),
and contributed to the understanding of how intersectional privilege works in a post-
socialist neoliberal context.

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