

**Why change towards gender equality is glacially slow:
Unpacking how men's ambivalent manoeuvring sustains the masculine status quo**

Julia C. Nentwich & Chris Steyaert

Research Institute for Organizational Psychology

University of St. Gallen

julia.nentwich@unisg.ch

This is the author's final version of a paper accepted for publication in Human Relations.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank Penny Dick for her ongoing support as an editor, as well as the anonymous reviewers. We also greatly appreciate the continued backing of the “Leaders for Equality” team, especially Gabriele Schambach, Nilima Chowdhury, Harald Tuckermann, and Romy Guntlisbergen; all of you have contributed significantly to this research project. Special thanks are due to members of the “TransFormMen” working group for their feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript. Lastly, we wish to extend our gratitude to all the dedicated men and organisational gatekeepers who invest their time and energy in advancing gender equality within their organisations.

Funding

Swiss Federal Office for Equal Opportunities, 18-049

Abstract

This paper explores men's ambivalent relationship to gender equality within the homosocial context of management teams. Analysing ten group discussions with male managers about increasing women's representation in executive roles highlights how the male-dominated setting influences their engagement with gender equality. The study uncovers a dynamic, often conflictual, shift between subject positions across discussions and explores how speakers navigate tensions between hegemonic masculinity and gender equality. Using the concept of "discursive manoeuvring", the analysis identifies two key dynamics: first, a transition from 'hegemonic masculinity' to 'benevolent' and 'veiled hegemony', which serves to stabilise the status quo; second, ongoing efforts to challenge this stability by distancing from hegemonic positions. Because the latter dynamic also remains unstable, both dynamics tend to reinforce rather than transform the status quo. The findings highlight the importance of collective interactions within management teams to explain men's ambivalent support for gender equality. They also demonstrate, both empirically and theoretically, why progress toward gender equality remains glacially slow.

Keywords: Men, homogenous group setting, critical discourse psychology, gender equality, hegemonic masculinity, resistance, change agency, group discussions

Introduction

Drawing on a discursive psychology approach, this article offers the notion of “discursive manoeuvring” to analyse how male managers navigate between supporting or opposing gender equality. Highlighting the impact of a homogenous management team on men’s ambivalence, it provides a critical intervention in the literature on men’s relationship with gender equality. So far, the literature does not clearly answer the question of why men’s actual contributions to gender equality seem to be “inconsistent and uneven” (Baker and Rumens, 2024: 2). While men in management can be highly effective in promoting gender equality initiatives, for instance, by including women in their networks (van den Brink and Benschop, 2014), becoming mentors (Prime and Moss-Racusin, 2009), and taking active roles in hiring and promoting women (Wahl and Holgersson, 2003), they hesitate to engage with gender equality initiatives and even actively resist them (Baker and Rumens, 2024). Mobilising masculinist norms, men engage in self-promotion and displays of heroism (Kelan, 2018); tell sexist jokes (Alvesson, 1998); and exclude women when working with other men (Martin, 2001). Discussing women in leadership positions, they are reluctant to see a need for more women in management functions and argue that women do not ‘fit in’ or lack the ‘right’ attitude and expertise (Aaltio-Marjosola and Lethinen, 1998).

Hence, men struggle with conflicting norms of masculinity and gender equality; they either dominate women and other men (Connell, 2005) or engage with them on equal footing. Accordingly, the literature depicts men as *either* supporters *or* opponents of gender equality and thus assumes static positions. Furthermore, research reduces complexity by focusing on individual agency as a main explanation, arguing that men, in order to become supporters, need to reflect on their privileged masculine selves to become effective agents of change (Flood and Ertel, 2020; Hearn, 2004; Thym, 2026). We argue in this paper that such static, individualistic

perspectives limit our understanding of men's ambivalence toward gender equality by overlooking the influence of homogeneous management teams.

As masculinity is governed by collective sensemaking (Wetherell and Edley, 1999), the homosociality within male-dominated management teams reinforces bonding based on masculinity (Holgersson, 2013). Men feel pressured to conform to hegemonic masculinity norms (Berdahl et al., 2018, Moss-Racusin et al., 2010), often provoking a defensive and paranoid relationship with gender equality (Baker and Rumens, 2024). Consequently, male-dominated management teams make it especially difficult for men to fully support gender equality, severely limiting their agency to become allies or change agents. Therefore, it is important to understand not only how managers individually resolve conflicts between masculinity and gender equality, but also the social dynamics of the homogenous group setting. Accordingly, we analysed the following research question: How do men in management navigate the conflicting norms of hegemonic masculinity and gender equality in a homogenous group setting? Unpacking the dynamics of men's positioning with regard to gender equality, we conducted 10 group discussions with a total of 72 male managers across five companies in Switzerland. The companies are all in male-dominated industries, such as engineering (electrical and medical), transport, retail and insurance. By designing the discussions as homogenous all-male groups, we aimed to observe how conflicting norms were navigated in such a context.

This study adopts a critical discursive psychology perspective to investigate how male managers engage in "discursive manoeuvring". Analysing the "interpretative repertoires" (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and "subject positioning" (Wetherell, 2007) through which managers navigate contradictory positions in a team setting (Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Nentwich and Ostendorp, 2016), our approach reveals how men collectively alternate between

gender equality and hegemonic masculinity, moving dynamically between support *and* resistance (Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell and Edley, 1999).

Our findings contribute to research on men's support for and resistance to gender equality in organisations in two ways: Theoretically, this paper questions the assumption that men's support and resistance are static and individualistic and instead theorises men's positioning towards gender equality in a processual way. Specifically, through introducing the notion of discursive manoeuvring, the paper proposes that alternating between the four positionings of 'hegemonic masculinity', 'benevolent hegemony', 'veiled hegemony' and 'challenging hegemony' allows men to navigate conflicting norms and sustain an acceptable position in the homosocial group.

Empirically, our analysis of the group context shows that members' discursive manoeuvring is mediated by group dynamics. Alternating between preserving and challenging the status quo, men in these discussions are constantly shifting position. While the homosocial setting preserves the status quo, obstructing transformative challenges by constantly returning to a hegemonic masculinity positioning, it nevertheless permits experimenting with alternative positionings and attempts to challenge the status quo. This complex dynamic explains why, despite some men clearly championing women in the workplace, change in this homosocial setting remains glacially slow.

Literature review

Men's relationship to gender equality in organisational contexts is depicted as highly ambivalent. While the literature highlights that male managers are often disengaged, they neither openly resist gender equality. First, we review the literature on male managers' relationship with gender equality, highlighting that men in management are struggling with competing positions towards gender equality and hegemonic masculinity. Then, we propose the conceptual possibility of discursive manoeuvring to explain how various, seemingly contradictory, subject positions can be adopted and alternated.

Support or opposition as limiting options?

Research on “covert” (Knoppers et al., 2021) or “oblique” resistance (Smolovic Jones et al., 2021) to gender equality showcases that gender equality has become a moral obligation. It is a firmly established norm that should not be violated. This research often identifies a gap between what is said and what is done (Powell et al., 2018), a discrepancy that severely affects how gender equality is approached (Smolović Jones et al., 2021). For instance, men tend to identify gender equality as ‘women’s issues’, and don’t necessarily claim ownership of the required change (Lansu et al., 2020). Anna Wahl and Charlotte Holgersson (2003: 321) formulated this sharply: “Despite a positive attitude to gender diversity as a principle, there is often resistance when it comes to actual change of gender order.”

Such covert resistance entails countering the goals of gender equality with postfeminist arguments rooted in broader, often neoliberal discussions over differences in women's and men's natures and the apparently unshakeable norm of merit (Gill et al., 2016). In a study on the context of Swedish forestry (Johansson et al., 2019), resistance is practised by highlighting meritocracy as a gender-neutral concept. From this perspective, gender equality initiatives violate principles of meritocracy by essentialising differences that depict women as lacking the

necessary skills or interests. Attempts to foster gender equality are thus rendered unnecessary since such a position denies the existence of inequality. Denying the need for action, refusing ownership, and responding with silence and passivity are common ways of practising “covert” resistance. Consequently, patriarchal power and male privilege are maintained without openly contradicting the strong norms that promote gender equality.

On the other hand, studies on men who become supporters demonstrate that when men engage with gender equality, they struggle with hegemonic masculinity (Tienari and Taylor, 2019). Hegemonic masculinity not only naturalises but also justifies men’s domination over women, as well as superiority over marginalised and alternative masculinities (Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Connell, 2005), but its normative effect is challenged once men engage with gender equality (Hearn, 2004; Thym, 2026; Wahl, 2014). Instead of remaining complicit with hegemonic masculinity, men become critical of their privileged position and invest in alternative narratives of “the new man” (Bach, 2019; Thym, 2026) or discursively manifest themselves as “gender troublemakers” (Butler, 1990; Nentwich, 2008).

In short, men who engage in gender equality need to fight against themselves to become agents of gender change (Flood and Ertel, 2020; Thym, 2026), initiating a struggle in which most men will fail (Tienari and Taylor, 2019). Developing alternative, non-dominant forms of masculinity that are at ease with the objectives of gender equality (Bach, 2019) is particularly difficult within a homosocial and male-dominated management context (Berdahl et al., 2018; Bird, 1986; Holgersson, 2013). Because they are held accountable to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Bach, 2019; Nentwich et al., 2013; 2023), men are at risk of not being taken seriously or judged as a “softer ‘new man’” (Sang et al., 2014: 249). Men risk losing the support of their male colleagues, resulting in feelings of betrayal (Tienari and Taylor, 2019) as well as irritation and anxiety with respect to their manliness (Baker and Rumens, 2024; Berdahl et al., 2018).

Furthermore, men who provide supportive engagement with gender equality in the workplace are often perceived as counterproductive (Pecis and Priola, 2019). Paradoxically, they endure accusations of not being self-critical enough (Flood and Ertel, 2020), of watering down feminist objectives (de Vries, 2015; Kelan and Wratil, 2017) and of reinforcing patriarchal domination instead of challenging it (Pecis and Priola, 2019). For instance, some programmes have asked men in management to act as “equality champions” (de Vries, 2015; Nash et al., 2021). Expected to be “champions”, men occupy a role in which their change agency is enacted in heroic ways, thereby reproducing, rather than challenging, hegemonic masculinity (de Vries, 2015; Nash et al., 2021). Furthermore, there are only limited subject positions available for men as supporters of gender equality, as Kelan (2020) has shown with her study on middle managers in the UK. Male managers can either become “inclusive leaders” who regularly check their biases in decision making, “smart strategists” who emphasise the business case for diversity, or “forced altruists” who must comply with legal requirements. This limited range of subject positions communicates the organisational norms, specifying exactly how male managers should support gender equality initiatives and women in their careers. It is striking to see that neither do these positions address possible gains for men, nor do they hold male managers responsible for also challenging masculinity norms. Rather, they redefine gender equality as an objective that can be realised within the normative framework of the status quo.

The literature shows a need for further problematization (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011) regarding how male managers move between (ambivalent) support and (covert) resistance, which are less stable positions than described in the literature. For instance, scholars examining men’s resistance to gender equality (e.g., Johansson et al., 2019; Knoppers et al., 2021) depict a struggle with the dominant norm of gender equality, while researchers interested in understanding men’s support for gender equality emphasise the need to challenge hegemonic

masculinity (e.g. Flood and Ertel, 2020; Pecis and Priola, 2019). Hence, research so far assumes that there are stable subject positions for men engaged with gender equality, depicting them as either supporters or opponents of gender equality efforts.

In our view, this stability needs to be questioned. Juggling these often contradictory positions may require engaging with more than two options of positioning. Following Powell et al.'s (2018) insights from a process-based analysis, we therefore suggest adopting a process perspective that enables the investigation of the “complex production of gendered selves that occurs in men’s talk” (Wetherell and Edley, 1999: 347).

A conceptual approach to discursive manoeuvring

Assuming a more dynamic relationship between subjects and discourses, we draw on critical discursive psychological research on men and masculinities to develop a conceptual framework for scrutinising the “more fine-grained work” involved in collective situations (Wetherell and Edley, 1999: 337). Critical discursive psychology has offered detailed insights into the ways men engage with hegemonic as well as alternative accounts of masculinity.

Margaret Wetherell and Nigel Edley have researched how men actively navigate their relationship with hegemonic masculinity in discursive practices (Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell and Edley, 1999; 2009). For instance, they explain their analysis of young men talking about masculinity in a small group context with the idea that these men are “jockeying for position” (Edley and Wetherell, 1997). In the context of group interviews, for example, they observed that men are constantly shifting between available subject positions of the “new man” and more “traditional masculinity”. In this way, they are manoeuvring the conflicting norms relevant in the context of the discussion group (Wetherell and Edley, 2009).

“Discursive manoeuvring” is a term used to describe how speakers navigate situations with normative conflict (Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Nentwich and Ostendorp, 2016). As

achieving a credible subject position is considered an important motive (Wetherell, 2007), expressing attitudes that are “violating basic assumptions such as rationality, fairness and equal opportunities” (Nentwich and Ostendorp, 2016: 101) is considered problematic. To achieve credibility in such situations, speakers are therefore constantly shifting from one subject position to another. Shifting positions is strategic. It allows the occupation of a contested subject position at a given moment, while avoiding being held responsible by not fully adopting it (Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Nentwich et al., 2013).

Like this, speakers can become engaged with hegemonic masculinity and yet also adopt subject positions that are somewhat critical or even oppositional. Becoming invested in a position in one moment and then disengaging from it in another, men both reproduce and contest hegemonic masculinity. As a consequence, male managers can be depicted as navigating their “dual concern” of expressing sexist views and managing them “in a way that portrays the speaker as caring and egalitarian” (Speer and Potter, 2000: 546). They are engaged with gender equality and, at the same time, stabilising hegemonic masculinity.

Hence, manoeuvring practices allow speakers to navigate the conflicting norms of hegemonic masculinity and gender equality. While investing in a position that violates a norm, men cannot be held accountable for it, as they have already shifted to another one. Therefore, constantly manoeuvring from one subject position to another indicates the influence of powerful but oppositional norms. We now show how we have used the above ideas in our analysis to investigate discursive manoeuvring in group discussions.

Methodology

Given our research interest in male managers’ discursive manoeuvring in the collective setting of a homogeneous all-male group of managers, we conducted 10 group discussions involving 72 male managers deliberating on how to increase the number of women in management

positions in their company (see Table 1). The participants were selected and invited by human resources or diversity managers who acted as organisational gatekeepers for the entire “Leaders for Equality” action research project. The main selection criterion for participating managers was that they were perceived as active and engaged supporters of gender equality within the company. The five companies spread over five sectors: transport, electrical engineering, medical engineering, insurance, and retail. Inviting only men to these discussions, which were also moderated by a male researcher, enabled the managers to engage in conversations ‘among themselves’. The homosocial group setting fosters a sense of cohesion that accentuates masculinity norms. Furthermore, the company context of each discussion also evoked homogeneity and limited what could be said to each management team’s cultural context. While discussing gender equality with management colleagues at different hierarchical levels (for the distribution of levels at the five organisations, see Table 1) can, on the one hand, make participants feel more at ease, it might, on the other hand, also constrain what is acceptable to say within this normative context.

The five companies operate in male-dominated industries and can be considered traditional in terms of gender assumptions. The overall ratio of women in management teams is between 15% and 25%, decreasing to zero in the top management teams. From a survey we conducted across all companies in another part of the research project (Nentwich et al., 2026), we know that two-thirds of the male managers report being married with at least two children; only one-third of the women in these management teams reported to be mothers. Furthermore, the majority of men relayed that their part-time-employed wives cover care responsibilities at home; women’s partners, according to the survey, are, in contrast, all employed full-time. These numbers mirror Switzerland’s conservative gender regime, which sees men as breadwinners and women as primarily responsible for children and household chores, their duties firmly held in place by the limited and costly infrastructures of childcare facilities,

school schedules and the rather late introduction of minimum maternity and paternity leave entitlements (Bornatici, Gauthier and Le Goff, 2020). Consequently, 75% of mothers are employed part-time, compared with only 14.3% of fathers (Swiss Statistical Office, 2025).

All group discussions were facilitated on-site in one of the companies' meeting rooms and lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours. They included four managers in the smallest group and 13 in the largest, with an average of six managers participating in the discussions. In line with our university's ethical guidelines, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the discussion and the anonymous handling of data. All participants signed an informed consent form.

Company	Group Discussion	Participants	Lower Management	Middle Management	Top Management
Transport	1	7	5	2	
	2	6	1	5	
Retail	1	8	5	3	
Medical engineering	1	9		1	8
	2	8		4	4
Insurance	1	6	4	2	
	2	6	4	1	1
Electrical engineering	1	13	5	5	3
	2	5		4	1
	3	4	1	3	
Total		72	25	30	17

Table 1: The sample of ten group discussions

The discussions were facilitated as “self-running group discussions” (Przyborski and Riegler, 2010), i.e., the moderators intervened as little as possible throughout the discussions. All discussions were started with an invitation to elaborate on how to increase the number of women in executive positions within the company. Following this brief introduction by the moderator, each group was free to develop the topic throughout the discussion, and the

moderator intervened only if the group got stuck or was moving off-topic. This allowed participants to develop topics relevant to them and their specific organisation, hence as close to mundane conversations as possible. Fostering interaction between participants also enabled lively engagement in the discussion and thereby created moments of strong involvement.

All group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analysed with the support of the software Atlas.ti. To identify the discursive manoeuvring that creates men's ambivalent relationship with gender equality, we used two discursive psychology concepts: Interpretative repertoires and subject positioning (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Interpretative repertoires are the "recognisable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterisations of actors and situations" (Edley and Wetherell, 2001: 6). These are the "discursive resources that can be used by individuals in creative and flexible ways" (Dick, 2013: 649) and that speakers are highly familiar with. As they build on the shared, taken-for-granted knowledge of a social group, they are constantly repeated in the group's conversations. However, interpretative repertoires are also contradictory and dilemmatic (Billig et al., 1988), allowing the identification of the conflicting norms relevant to the respective conversation. Furthermore, interpretative repertoires not only convey meaning but also position the speaker. They create subject positions that speakers take up, confirm, or reject. Subject positions are identified in a conversation as the "communal methods of self-accounting, vocabularies of motive, culturally recognisable emotional performances and personal histories of sensemaking" (Wetherell, 2007: 676). However, aiming to scrutinise the discursive manoeuvring in group situations, we were interested in how subject positions emerged within these discussions, as well as how they were taken up, ignored, or rejected.

Assuming that subject positions are rarely taken up or rejected in situations of normative conflict, we focused not only on the ways subject positions are articulated in group

discussion, but also on the more subtle ways in which individuals become invested in a subject position (Hall, 1996; Wetherell, 2013; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). For instance, speakers become invested through excitement, laughter, speaking more quickly, or interrupting one another. In contrast, disengagement can be expressed through irony, shrugging, or silence. Attending to these forms of investment helps explain why speakers adopt certain subject positions in the first place; it indicates their motivation. Conversely, becoming disengaged creates distance from certain norms. Hence, we focused on the analysis of the variations of *how* gender equality was discussed in the flow of the discussions, as well as on the variations in self-accounting and self-presentation (Wetherell and Edley, 2009).

A first round of analysis was conducted within the research team¹. Initially, the first author read through the transcripts and identified the interpretative repertoires the speakers used to discuss gender equality. In a second step, the transcripts were analysed for speakers' subject positioning. Once again, the first author read through all 10 transcripts, identifying moments that heated up, where speakers interrupted each other and were energetically engaged in the discussion, in addition to the moments where they remained silent, confused, or clueless. Like this, the analysis was moved beyond superficial commentary and allowed us to engage more deeply with what cannot be said or is difficult to express (Chowdhury and Gibson, 2019).

Through these subsequent procedures of reading and re-reading the transcripts, we identified four interpretative repertoires corresponding with four subject positions respectively, as documented in the findings (see Table 2): (1) a hegemonic masculinity positioning that depicts gender equality as an annoyance; (2) a positioning of benevolent masculinity seeing gender equality as helping women; (3) a veiled hegemony positioning that highlights gender

¹ We wish to acknowledge Romy Guntlisbergen, who contributed a preliminary analysis of positioning patterns in five group discussions in her bachelor's thesis. She coined the term of «veiled hegemony».

equality as important, but nothing one can do much about; (4) a positioning that challenges hegemony and frames gender equality as forcing male managers develop a critical position.

In the final step of our analysis, we examined how the interpretative repertoires and positionings were utilised from a processual perspective. Most strikingly, managers constantly grappled with various positionings throughout all discussions. As managers shifted repertoires, we observed them, for instance, investing in an oppositional stance in one sequence and a supportive stance in another. Furthermore, in none of the 10 discussions did any positioning fully stabilise in relation to gender equality.

The 10 discussions were also rather similar in terms of the actual use of the four repertoires and positionings. Reflecting the stability of hegemonic masculinity in management positions (Connell and Wood, 2005), particularly in the traditional and male-dominated sectors of the five companies as well as from the backdrop of Switzerland's conservative gender regime (Bornatici et al., 2020), 'hegemonic masculinity' is a positioning that all discussions repeatedly return to. 'Hegemonic masculinity' is therefore considered the status quo that needs to be reframed or challenged if gender equality is to be supported. While 'hegemonic masculinity', 'benevolent hegemony' and 'veiled hegemony' are positionings frequently used in all discussions, 'challenging hegemony' is a commonly used positioning in only six group discussions, only rarely drawn upon in three discussions, and not made relevant at all in one of the discussions (see Table 2).

Scrutinising the manoeuvring and how it developed through each group discussion enabled us to identify two distinct manoeuvring dynamics: one maintains the status quo by shifting between 'hegemonic masculinity', 'benevolent hegemony' and 'veiled hegemony'; a second dynamic attempts to challenge the status quo by entering the 'challenging hegemony' positioning but then backslides to one of the other three. We further unpack these insights in the following section.

Findings

The analysis highlights how men's ambivalence is produced by two distinct manoeuvring dynamics. In the first, the status quo is stabilised by returning to hegemonic masculinity after exploring alternative hegemonic positionings; in the second, men temporarily challenge hegemonic masculinity, thereby questioning the status quo. Both dynamics are illustrated in Figure 1.

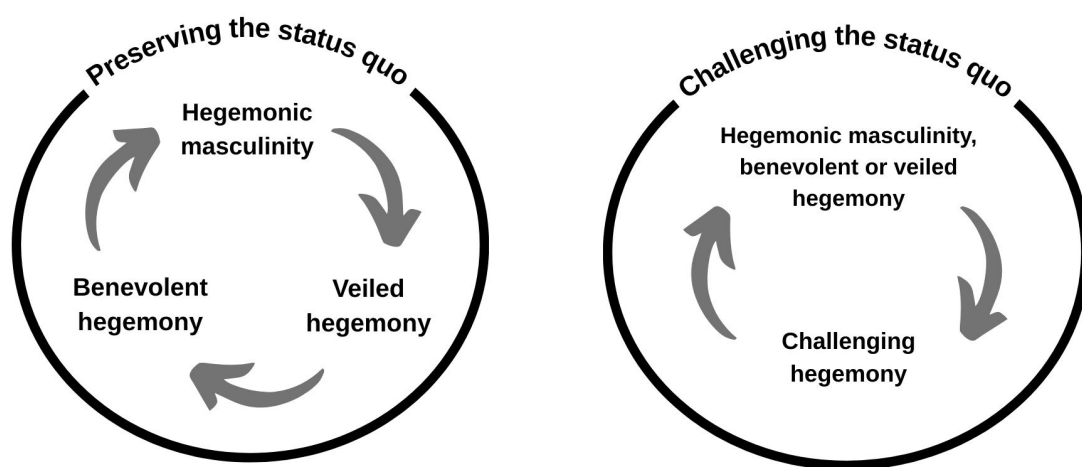


Figure 1: Two manoeuvring dynamics

Manoeuvring to stabilise the status quo

In this first dynamic, participants alternate between hegemonic masculinity and either benevolent masculinity or veiled hegemony. Since hegemonic masculinity serves as both the starting point and position to which the discussion returns, the status quo is preserved, and the dominant position of hegemonic masculinity remains unchallenged. Before documenting both movements, we will first empirically explain how the positioning of hegemonic masculinity is achieved.

The dominance of hegemonic masculinity

In all group discussions, the dominant positioning is that of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, where men resist equality initiatives. By referring to standards of masculine culture against which everything else is measured, they subordinate and marginalise women and alternative masculinities (Connell, 2005). For instance, motherhood is often discussed as something that does not fit this standard and is therefore devalued, as shown in the following extract:

Anton: You have the young women who come in and work for two years, and then they are gone. Then they come in again (...), and then comes the next child, then comes this child and that again. So even there, as a manager, you are, of course, enormously challenged! Then you have so many women; you must set the order and start counting off: “You may now. It’s not time for you yet! You must wait. You may now.” [several men are laughing] So I am now relatively

Moderator [simultaneously]: You’re not allowed to do that explicitly. You’re not allowed to do that explicitly, but exactly, YES, YES, absolutely!

(Electrical Engineering 1)

The way the speaker frames motherhood as a series of babies that he, as manager, has to ‘schedule’ depicts giving birth as something that is happening in quick succession and therefore disrupts a smooth workflow. Furthermore, by putting himself in the manager position, he establishes a hierarchy in which he is positioned as the one responsible for controlling the situation, while his pregnant team members are objectified. The repertoire that frames gender equality as ‘an annoyance’ enables male managers to create positions of power. Supported by hegemonic masculinity, they portray female colleagues who go on maternity leave or request part-time positions as merely interfering with the smooth and proper running of the business.

Male managers acknowledge a lack of women on their team or in their organisation, but they do not perceive this as a problem. Instead, they blame *women* for their low numbers by referring to work preferences as reflections of inherent gender differences, as in the following example:

Franz: And I've also had conversations with women who have simply said, "no, I don't want that at all, I don't want to take on this responsibility and go that extra mile and be in the office for so long, and I'm happy where I am today." (Retail)

Women are, apparently, not interested in "going [the] extra mile" (Retail), which would be needed to progress with their careers. Accordingly, the managers perceive women as rather invested at home and with their children, and simply not interested in working more hours—a taken-for-granted prerequisite for having a career that is unquestioned and remains unreflected:

Andreas: (Women) want to spend time with their children. There are women, who, when a child is sick, these women are drawn home and then they're closer to saying "I'm staying at home, I'm not going to work now" (...) This is simply the difference between men and women. And even if we think we must bring in more women, the question is, do they really want to? (Retail)

By naturalising gender differences, saying "this is simply the difference", men are explaining the lack of women in leadership positions in their company as self-evident and therefore nothing to be solved at the workplace. Like this, the male-dominated homosocial culture is constantly reinforced. Although present in all group discussions, this dominant positioning is not without problems. The subject position of the 'conservative opponent' is rarely claimed explicitly (see Table 2), suggesting reluctance to adopt subject positions that violate the norms of gender equality. Rather, opposition is expressed through irony. For instance, the assumption that the manager, in our first example, *could* control his team members' pregnancies is

performed ironically and confirmed by the other participants' laughter and the moderator's excitement. The ironic performance is aimed at amusing the other discussants and simultaneously establishes hegemonic masculinity as a strong norm, showing that being in control of everything is an important competence of managers. Although this norm is also problematised by the moderator's comment, positioning this kind of talk as somewhat politically incorrect – "You are not allowed to do that explicitly" – it is nevertheless confirmed as a legitimate practice by the laughter and excitement of the whole group. As a consequence, the managers avoid ownership for gender equality and instead allow for (ironic) opposition.

Although speakers in all discussions regularly adopted a 'hegemonic masculinity' positioning, it has to be noted that these discussions never settle. Instead, the conversations shift either to the positioning of 'benevolent hegemony' or, alternatively, the one of 'veiled hegemony'.

Positioning	Interpretative repertoire: Gender equality as	Subject position	Manoeuvring	Effect on support and/or resistance
Hegemonic masculinity	...an annoyance	Conservative opponent	Positioning women as different	Enabling resistance
Benevolent hegemony	...helping women	Conservative supporter	Highlighting positive, but exotic skills that position women as different	Narrowing the scope of support.
Veiled hegemony	...important, but nothing one can do something about	Modern supporter	Hiding inequality in gender neutrality and happening somewhere else	Rendering support unnecessary
Challenging hegemony	...male managers developing critical positions	Engaged critic	Critiquing heroic leadership and seeing women as partners	Enabling support

Table 2: Discursive manoeuvring and its effects on support and resistance

Manoeuvring from ‘hegemonic masculinity’ to ‘benevolent hegemony’

By manoeuvring from ‘hegemonic masculinity’ to ‘benevolent hegemony’, men become invested in helping women. Drawing on the interpretative repertoire of gender equality as ‘helping women’, women are no longer criticised but praised for being different from men. Indeed, they are recognised for their positive impact on the team and the culture and are valued for their social or emotional proficiencies. At the same time, they are seen as lacking important skills to succeed in a man’s world. Therefore men need to ‘help’ women succeed. In the following example, managers are engaged in a critical discussion of the company’s face-time culture of working long hours. We enter the discussion at a moment when Tom distances himself from the hegemonic masculine position that discredits mainly female part-time workers, by emphasising the positive skills that women bring to the team:

Tom: I have zero emotional intelligence, absolutely not. I have Monica on my team, who has lots and lots of it. I use her as my ‘chief emotional officer’. And she comes to me and says: “Hey, you need to talk to...” and I haven’t spotted anything. So, I think I have an advantage there. Some women are stronger in, and I don’t want to generalise here, picking up on things that certainly, I, as a very emotionally unintelligent man, don’t pick up on when someone is unhappy. When there’s a conflict, or perhaps something I haven’t picked up on at all. So, I think that sensitivity is definitely an advantage.

(Medical Engineering 1)

While typical male attributes in doing business, such as being loud and extroverted, are emphasised as the way things are done—an unquestioned necessity in the hegemonic masculinity position—the group’s movement to the benevolent position introduces a positive view to what is portrayed as natural gender differences. Naturalising gender differences, but framing them in a positive way, is a manoeuvre that allows the group to hold on to ideas of

gender difference firmly established by hegemonic masculinity. And indeed, although ‘female competencies’ are praised in this example, these are not necessarily ‘counted’ as important managerial competencies. As the following example illustrates, women are seen as in need of help and support:

Reto [interrupts]: Exactly, so men in general, and that’s only because of evolution, they are assertive; “Now I’m here, and I know what I am doing”! Women, that’s how I see it, they send messages. Very subtle messages. And if I am asking: “Do you want a leadership position?” Then they act a little surprised or so. But then, in the end, she would say “yes”. (...) But I have to lift them up to make them see their potential. Men are the opposite. I had men standing in my office saying, “And now!” [banging his fist on the table] “Here I am, and I’m applying. Period.” (...). Women sometimes need a little push. (Insurance 1)

‘Helping women succeed’, as revealed in the intervention provided by Reto in this example, leads to support that is benevolent, yet performed in a condescending-paternalistic way. Taking the subject position of ‘conservative supporter’, the male manager assumes he knows what (all) women need and how to help them, and, drawing from an evolutionary argument, he distinguishes himself and all other men as not needing this kind of reassurance. In this way, women are portrayed as needing ‘fixing’ to perform in a men’s world; men must teach them to become more self-confident: this becomes the role of the male colleague in support of gender equality. While offering reassurance and support is not inherently wrong, the benevolent framing in this passage softens the critiques of hegemonic masculinity the group engaged in earlier and ultimately facilitates a return to the ‘hegemonic masculine’ positioning.

Positions of ‘benevolent hegemony’ allow men to claim ownership and responsibility for supporting women in management while simultaneously narrowing the scope of support.

The interpretative repertoire of gender equality as ‘helping women’ hence merely highlights measures that address women’s unequal situation while leaving the status quo untouched. In other words, even when men depict successful women as exceptional, women still remain ‘the other’. By emphasising women’s distinct yet highly valued qualities, speakers maintain gender differences without appearing to devalue women or undermine gender equality. This allows men to avoid being perceived as sexist while presenting themselves as active, though conservative, supporters of gender equality. It is essentially a manoeuvre to disengage from challenging the male-dominated homosocial culture.

Manoeuvring from ‘hegemonic masculinity’ to ‘veiled hegemony’

A second move away from ‘hegemonic masculinity’ during the group discussions is to adopt a positioning called ‘veiled hegemony’ (see Table 2). Similar to the earlier movement to ‘benevolent hegemony’, this manoeuvre allows speakers to be perceived as supporters without necessarily giving up hegemonic masculinity.

Thomas: (...) I also have a daughter; I also want her to live or grow up in a world where she has equal opportunities and maybe also take on a [management position]. Who knows? (Medical Engineering 1)

Mobilising the interpretative repertoire of gender equality as ‘important, but nothing one can do something about’, speakers fully subscribe to what is perceived as a ‘modern’ gender equality norm. Portraying themselves as highly supportive, they adopt the subject position of the ‘modern supporter’. For instance, ‘being supportive’ towards women is narrated in stories of having successfully hired and supported women in the past, or by being a loving father of a daughter and envisioning an equal world for her to live and work in.

When it comes to gender equality, however, speakers don’t claim ownership or engage in challenging the status quo. Instead, they legitimate their inactivity, as in the following

example, when the manager positions inequality and discrimination as beyond the company's reach:

Markus: I also think that, I mean, it's basically a social issue. (...) And then one might have the suspicion that the Swiss worldview is still somehow the 3K: children, church, and kitchen² for women. (...) And of course, that can't be reversed in a short period of time. If you look at the Netherlands or Scandinavia, the situation is completely different. And I think that's not a company issue, but rather a fundamental issue in Switzerland. (Electrical Engineering 1)

By excusing inequality as a consequence of the very common conservative attitudes in Switzerland, it is immediately rendered a societal issue that managers cannot do anything about. Like this, managers can stay passive while still being seen as pro-gender equality.

Men perceive women's lack of motivation as another good reason to remain passive. In the following retail example, two managers discuss the company's leaky pipeline in the retail company's real estate department. Although they employ plenty of women in lower ranks, they lack women in executive positions. After several turns from the hegemonic masculinity position to benevolent hegemony, and back again, the managers settle the discussion by shifting into the veiled position:

Christoph: (...) And now we ourselves, in our company. It is still exciting that everything in management or construction management is 100% men!

However, for example, we have 90% of women in technical drawing (...).

Nevertheless, then, they don't go on to management.

Heinz: But why not?

² Translated from German. "Kinder, Küche und Kirche" is an expression that describes women's social role according to conservative values.

Christoph: Why not...

Heinz [overlapping]: Because they can't do it themselves. So, like I said, it is always self-motivation. Or maybe they don't have the qualities to take on more responsibility...pfff... so this doesn't have to do with gender, but ugh...

Christoph: Well, I rather had the feeling that the motivation wasn't there.

(Retail)

Thus, the scarcity of women in executive roles is attributed to individual deficiencies, namely a lack of intrinsic motivation on the women's side. However, what is interesting in this example is that Heinz uses a disclaimer, emphasising that "this doesn't have to do with gender". Obviously, explaining the absence of women in executive roles as a matter of motivation risks contradicting the image of a modern, pro-equality man. By explicitly distancing the explanation from gender, he further legitimises his statement as a sound interpretation.

Through these rhetorical moves, resistance to gender equality is facilitated implicitly (Powell et al., 2018; Smolović Jones et al., 2021). Furthermore, the frequently used openings "I've rather had the feeling", "ugh", and "I think," reveal that speakers are aware of how delicate this position might be. They seem ill at ease with the sexist views they are bringing forward to explain the lack of women in leadership positions in their company. Additionally, it is important to recognise that, despite holding management positions, they do not position themselves as responsible. The position of 'veiled hegemony' therefore highlights the ongoing struggle male managers face with the conflicting norms of gender equality and hegemonic masculinity.

Even in situations when they describe themselves as actively engaged, they are manoeuvring to avoid being depicted as active supporters of gender equality. By emphasizing

motives like “securing quality” or “hiring the better candidate”, as in the following example from retail, the managers are veiling what might be seen as support:

Caspar: So, I had the experience myself when I hired the team leader a year and a half ago, that’s easy - it wasn’t a conscious decision “I have to hire a woman now” or anything. I thought it would be nice to have a woman in this position now instead of a man because a man had done that for a long time. But in the end, the better candidate happened to be a woman, right? And that is why we hired her. And we treat her like everyone else in that role without any special treatment. And she’s doing her job well and she’s being promoted now because she’s doing her job well, isn’t she? (...) The question is always how hard we need to sell the job to the candidate. (Retail)

Here, gender equality initiatives are dismissed without positioning the speaker as opposed to them. By emphasising that no special treatment is needed to hire a woman, this manager subtly critiques such measures. Proposing that gender should not impact hiring or promotion presents gender as irrelevant; gender equality is recast in meritocratic terms. The argument assumes that a female manager needs only “do her job well”. Once again, the objective of hiring more women is not openly rejected but rather put forward as an important goal to reach, while the proposed measures to tackle inequality are critiqued.

By adopting this third positioning of the ‘modern supporter’, speakers veil hegemonic masculinity. As they show support for gender equality, they try to achieve what they perceive as a modern form of masculinity, only to later justify why equality cannot be achieved in their own organisational context. Men depict inequality as happening elsewhere in society and not within their own companies. In fact, inequality is often ‘explained away’. With these moves, speakers regularly disengage from gender equality and engage in covert resistance, while hegemonic masculinity is simultaneously confirmed and denied. Over the course of the group

discussions, male managers regularly enact postfeminist discourse on gender equality, and as a result, their efforts to maintain their privileged position produce resistance against gender equality instead of support.

To summarise the first dynamic, men manoeuvre their position between hegemonic, benevolent and veiled hegemony, moving back and forth as the situation demands. The hegemonic position allows them to make open statements of opposition, while the benevolent and veiled positions offset the problematic side of resisting gender equality. Yet, neither when aligning with hegemonic masculinity nor advocating for gender equality do they feel at ease with their positioning. Manoeuvring from one positioning to another and drawing on multiple interpretative repertoires within the very same discussion enables men to pay lip service to gender equality while concealing their opposition. In this way, gender equality is resisted. Individual men can avoid responsibility while effectively maintaining the group's status quo. They don't have to claim ownership—and they get away with it as a group.

Manoeuvring to challenge the status quo

We now turn to the second dynamic, where alternating between positionings results in temporarily challenging the status quo. This happens as a fourth positioning manifested in the discussions through which men are becoming invested in supporting gender equality. As we can observe in nine of the 10 discussions, positionings can move from either hegemonic, benevolent or veiled hegemony to a position that challenges hegemonic masculinity by developing a critical take on hegemonic masculinity. While earlier positionings mobilised arguments such as strong beliefs in meritocracy, women's lack of motivation, and gender roles in society to legitimise the status quo, managers in this fourth positioning criticise how work is organised. The following sequence from transport illustrates this shift from benevolent and veiled hegemony into challenging the status quo:

Moderator: What would it take for male executives to make it less difficult, or what could they do?

Chris: Well, we have also analysed a bit that the classic manager - or management education, that is the all-rounder, the one who is always available around the clock, um, like the marathon runner, so to speak, and who has no weaknesses and is always top fit and makes no mistakes and so on. And that is, we have actually known that for a long time, that is a totally false image, isn't it? So, I can still remember...

M [unidentifiable, interrupting]: Yes, actually, we still have a false image.

Chris: Yes, I remember well when there were the famous, um, fireside chats, where the top management, top management members came, and then you could chat a bit and so on. And, of course, they boasted that four hours of sleep is enough, that they work half the day every Saturday, that they work every Sunday and so on. And these are things like that. And what we, what we can do. I mean, we can try to correct this image and say: Hey, this is not up to date. (Transport 2)

Here, the image of “heroic leadership” (Fletcher, 2004) and its continued relevance is critiqued as old-fashioned and outdated. By this critique, Chris positions himself as an example of alternative masculinity. He rejects this type of role model for himself by stating, “this is not modern”, and he also challenges the normative claims of hegemonic masculinity. However, what is striking in this situation is that the alternative subject position remains vague: Chris neither elaborates on how to practise leadership differently nor explains why an alternative idea of leadership would be more appropriate for the modern workplace. This parallels the subsequent discussion in the retail company, where the proverb ‘going the extra mile’ is critiqued and

identified as something the speaker fears and would never communicate with his team:

Tobias: I think the extra mile, for example, still exists as far as I can see. In my eyes, this is already a huge obstacle. So 'take responsibility', 'do more', why do we say that to someone in the function who doesn't even have contact points with it? That if the hut is on fire, that you have to go tomorrow - just leave it alone! But is that really every week? You scare me when you tell me, 'Hey, you always have to go the extra mile'. A woman? Show me one who says, 'Yes'! Uh, no, sure not! I just find something wrong with the attitude. So, if I - for example, I never tell anybody they must go the extra mile. Not if it is not a division manager or in a squad function. (Retail)

Although strongly challenging heroic leadership and the hegemonic masculinity norms it entails, it is also obvious that the speakers do not move beyond mere critique in this quote. They do not refer to role models or to men in their company acting differently, nor to new ideals that male managers might aspire to. Therefore, alternative masculinity remains a vague and unexplored concept during these discussions. Nevertheless, the speakers are highly invested in their critique, and they sometimes even call for action:

Simon: When I think about it, of course, you can blame society and culture and things like that, but at the end of the day, it's actually those of us sitting around the table and our bosses who are responsible for not having more women in executive positions. (...) We can change that tomorrow. We can simply hire more women. And they don't all get pregnant right away, tomorrow, and want to reduce their working hours to 60%. (Medical Engineering 2)

In this example, Simon acknowledges a need for action within his company. With this call for action, he undermines the hegemonic position rather than bolstering it. Also in the retail group, taking action is seen as a crucial step forward:

Franz: (...) I claim you could (...) do pioneering work here, but that has to do with attitude and courage. So, you really WANT to take the step ahead and set a signal, even if it may be polarised in one direction or the other. Because otherwise, I simply believe nothing will change. And if you stay passive here now and have the feeling that you must look at everyone else first to see what works, we will probably miss the opportunity. (...) (Retail)

Franz is encouraging his colleagues to take responsibility by emphasising that engaging in gender equality is pioneering work that requires courage and action against existing norms. In these testimonials, the participants place strong emphasis on the danger of inertia. They argue that nothing will happen if they don't pressure higher management, don't become active themselves and speak up. Managers in the challenging positioning are highly invested in pushing back on hegemonic masculinity and opening a course for direct action. As a consequence, women are perceived as partners, and men in management positions see themselves as fully responsible for standing up for gender equality and claiming ownership. Although speakers inhabit the alternative masculine subject position of the 'engaged critic' (see Table 2), they are not fully 'living' and stabilising this position. For instance, they are not deliberating on creating alternative positions for themselves, such as working part-time or providing examples of supporting their male colleagues doing alike. Instead, the discussion often shifts back to one of the three hegemonic positions, initiating another round of sustaining the status quo. In brief, speakers render the challenge to hegemonic masculinity a windmill battle by falling back on arguments like emphasising the role of society or showcasing their

limited agency in changing things. Often earlier than later, the discussion's critical potential is undermined by manoeuvring back into the stability of preserving the status quo-dynamic.

To summarise the second dynamic, men are taking responsibility and calling for change. They are highly invested in critiquing hegemonic masculinity. By 'challenging hegemony', they are entering a dynamic that allows for new perspectives and alternative masculine subject positions. Nevertheless, this dynamic remains somewhat fragile, as the emerging positions are not fully claimed or stabilised. While speakers within this dynamic are invested in critiquing hegemonic masculinity and also tackle the necessary organisation changes and understand that it is up to them to take responsibility, our interpretation is that they have not yet developed alternative ways of *being* a (different) manager and man.

Discussion

This study seeks to better understand men's ambivalent relationship with gender equality. By unpacking the discursive manoeuvring that we observed in 10 group discussions, our findings offer two key insights. First, the ongoing manoeuvring shows that the subject positions do not reflect two fixed positions of either support or opposition but consist of alternating between various positionings. This creates a dynamic within the group discussions that indicates the normative pressure that participants must navigate. Second, considering the group dynamics, we found that although discussions regularly challenge the status quo, the normative structure of this dynamic also steers the conversation back to repertoires reinforcing the status quo. To better understand men's ambivalence to gender equality, it is essential to unpack the specific constraints that these homogeneous management groups face in their capacity for change.

Various positionings between support and resistance

The above analysis clearly shows that becoming either a supporter or opponent of gender equality is not simply about individuals choosing a side. The two manoeuvring dynamics identified in the discussions constantly oscillate between preserving and challenging the status quo. In all conversations, speakers change their positions, shift topics, and collectively manoeuvre from one positioning to another. The dynamics of ‘preserving the status quo’ does not imply sticking in a fixed way to the positioning of hegemonic masculinity but exploring slightly different versions in the form of a benevolent or veiled hegemony, based on reframing arguments by turning to related but slightly different repertoires. Since hegemonic masculinity is highly contested, the group’s manoeuvring into benevolent or veiled hegemony can be seen as a “remedial practice” (Gherardi, 1994), a move intended to ‘heal’ a norm breach. By shifting to ‘benevolent hegemony,’ speakers emphasise the positive value of women’s differences, while ‘veiled hegemony’ frames inequality as either illegitimate or non-existent. Navigating these different positions, men manoeuvre conflicting norms of gender equality and hegemonic masculinity. In these ways, the normative effect of hegemonic masculinity is stabilised, while simultaneously avoiding criticism or accountability.

Furthermore, although gender equality has become commonplace (Edley and Wetherell, 2001: 447), hegemonic masculinity is not a thing of the past; it remains present and influential as a powerful norm, particularly within the management context of male-dominated industries, as in our sample. While men in management still face what Edley and Wetherell described almost 30 years ago as a “delicate and sometimes dilemmatic task of juggling between two quite contradictory gender identities or masculine positions” (Edley and Wetherell, 1997: 451), our analysis highlights that the dynamics are far more complex than the binary assumption of two contradictory positions suggests. Manoeuvring with contradictory norms, the managers in the group discussions took part in a highly dynamic process of engaging

and disengaging with both gender equality and hegemonic masculinity by shifting back and forth between various discursive repertoires and subject positions.

However, navigating these conflicting norms, speakers are cautious about their subject positioning. In fact, subject positions are rarely explicitly claimed or asserted, as speakers avoid being seen as clear supporters or opponents of gender equality. More often, they become invested in a position by expressing enthusiasm or general agreement with an argument. Similarly, they do not actively assert strong views against a position but tend to become disengaged from the topic. For instance, when invested in hegemonic masculinity, the group discussions often become heated. However, speakers carefully ensure they are not perceived as fully adopting this position, as in the example of Anton (electronic engineering 1), who problematises maternity leave in a humorous way that made everybody laugh.

The same holds true for the challenging dynamic. Here, men are critical of hegemonic masculinity; however, as the results documented, they only go so far as to challenge that position and invest in its critique. Rarely do they adopt a subject position that could be identified as an alternative masculinity. These managers prefer to be recognised by their colleagues as holding current views and as disengaging from practices associated with hegemonic masculinity (such as always being available), but they fail to elaborate the position of an ‘alternative man’, by, for instance, highlighting how they themselves have reduced their employment to part-time or taken up paternity leave. Their manoeuvring reflects what Bach (2019) has highlighted regarding men engaging with alternative masculinities: they simultaneously display traditional and alternative ideas of what it means to be a man, thereby avoiding being clearly positioned. This ‘testing the waters without getting wet’ points out that deviations from the norm of hegemonic masculinity are still seen as risky (Sharma et al., 2026), indicating that alternative masculinities are scarce and marginalised, particularly in the conservative Swiss context.

These crucial findings suggest that ‘covert’ resistance — commonly identified in postfeminist discourse (Johansson et al., 2019; Knoppers et al., 2021) and widespread in homogenous management teams — is only part of a larger picture. Moving into ‘veiled hegemony’, speakers not only resist gender equality indirectly, but also compensate for their investment in strong, often openly sexist views. Within the group discussions, covert resistance thus emerges as not merely an individual strategy for passivity (Lansu et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2018), but as a collective practice that sustains hegemonic masculinity by concealing these strongly held views.

Our findings underscore the misconception that support and resistance to gender equality are “stable binaries” (Powell et al., 2018: 140). This insight aligns with Powell et al.’s critique (2018) that we cannot assume stable categories, as one then risks categorising ‘supporters’ and ‘opponents’ based on a single moment of subjectification. Such a moment might be fleeting and swiftly shift into something else as subject positionings fluctuate, responding more to the context of the conversation and the social norms of the group than reflecting individual speakers’ attitudes (Wetherell and Edley, 2009; 1999). Men are not only “jockeying for position” individually, as Edley and Wetherell (1997) call it, but their positioning unfolds through collective negotiation. Our contribution highlights that becoming invested in or disengaged from gender equality cannot be attributed solely to individual attitudes; instead, it results from collective group negotiations over the meaning of masculinity and its varying relationship to gender equality. Therefore, the significance of the homosocial group context for understanding men and their engagement with gender equality requires further exploration.

The dynamics of preserving and challenging the status quo in homogeneous groups

Strong normative constraints in discussions on gender equality make securing a position difficult and explain why neither opposition to gender equality nor critique of hegemonic masculinity can be stabilised. Especially in managerial environments, the homosocial context creates what Berdahl et al. (2018) call a masculinity contest, driven by the pressure to uphold and conform to hegemonic masculinity norms. The homogeneous group environment holds men accountable to this norm (Bird, 1986), even if individuals privately reject it (Munsch et al., 2018). Our analysis of the two discursive manoeuvring dynamics reveals the constraining effects of the homosocial group. While hegemonic masculinity is reinforced by repeated returns to this dominant positioning in both preserving and challenging dynamics, alternative masculinities are suppressed. Therefore, men's ambivalence towards gender equality arises not only from strong, conflicting norms within homogeneous management team settings, but is actively produced in the homosocial group dynamics as participants navigate this conflict. As Berdahl et al. (2018) suggested, one can expect that men feel unable to challenge the prevailing narrative of hegemonic masculinity within these groups, fearing exclusion or emasculation. This risk of being rejected from the homosocial group of men, therefore, adds another layer to the analysis of risks for men in gender equality. Men are not only individually losing their "profound fantasy" of masculinity when engaging with gender equality (Baker and Rumens, 2024: 23), but also their standing within the homosocial group of male managers. Hence, in addition to the psychic threats Baker and Rumens (2024) emphasise, we propose that future research needs to better understand how men are also facing social threats.

Nonetheless, we have identified a second dynamic in the discussions that allows for alternative positions and critique, although these positions cannot be entirely secured. When manoeuvring into the challenging positioning, speakers adopt a critical, norm-challenging stance that is regularly countered by a return to hegemonic masculinity. Hence, our findings

illustrate that questioning taken-for-granted norms is a difficult and painful process for individuals, as Hibbert and Cunliffe (2015) emphasise. Therefore, men in our discussions are less critical of how hegemonic masculinity affects their personal identities as men.

While the literature regards reflection on male privilege as an essential step toward fostering gender equality (Flood and Ertel, 2020), our analysis reveals that men in group discussions focus more on how hegemonic masculinity influences them as managers, such as by questioning heroic leadership or considering necessary changes within their work environment. For instance, managers engage with ideas for more equitable ways of working and collaborating; they also take ownership and responsibility for gender equality, such as group action and creating negotiation spaces, which Lansu et al. (2020) identified as crucial organisational prerequisites for fostering change. Similarly, male managers in our study demonstrated care for their teams, supported career development, and fostered a healthy work collaboration.

Consequently, managers involved in the group discussions are establishing new, post-heroic leadership models (Fletcher, 2004). However, engaging with this critique, they must challenge hegemonic masculinity from a position that is simultaneously constrained by these norms; they have to challenge hegemonic masculinity “from within” (Thym, 2026). Therefore, the alternative positions they create are rather fragile.

Managers in the discussions neither provide examples of actually adopting new subject positions nor discuss their personal experiences from working reduced hours or taking paternity leave. Nevertheless, their experimenting with alternative positionings allows them to experience new relationships with gender equality, as well as female and male colleagues and team members (Hearn, 2004). Like this, the discursive manoeuvring we observed in the group settings can open up opportunities for alternatives rather than suppressing them. Future studies should shed light on how men stabilise alternative masculinities and facilitate institutional

change “from below” (Power, 2021), particularly in organisational or national contexts with different, more progressive gender regimes.

Clearly, the status quo is resilient. And, while the two dynamics illustrate why change towards gender equality is glacially slow, the second dynamic also highlights attempts that can challenge hegemonic masculinity “from within” (Thym, 2026). Analysing men’s ambivalence toward gender equality—as an effect and a strategy of discursive manoeuvring—allows us to theorise both support and resistance from a dynamic perspective that challenges the static and individualistic ideas of change towards gender equality discussed so far. Furthermore, these insights highlight that interviewing alone is not enough to capture the complex dynamics that shape men’s ambivalence to gender equality. Future research should therefore engage with methodologies such as group discussions or ethnographic studies that allow for a more processual analysis.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the growing body of literature highlighting men’s ambivalence toward gender equality by shifting the dominant mode of individual interview studies to group settings, where male managers collectively make sense of their relationship to gender equality. What is often presented as an individual choice between resistance and support is shown to be a collective negotiation: even if men aim to let go of the dominant position of hegemonic masculinity, often by first moving to benevolent or veiled positions before becoming ‘engaged critics’, it is the homogeneous group setting that determines whether the discursive manoeuvring flips into support and exploration of alternative ways of organizing or returns to the dominant adherence to hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, this paper calls for further research that draws on observations of group processes and organisational contexts, as such an

approach allows for a process-based analysis of the social and discursive dynamics of sensemaking and ownership for change (Colley et al., 2021).

Also, in practical terms, this article highlights that courageous individuals who dare to speak up are as crucial for challenging the status quo as a supportive group situation for stabilising alternative positionings. Further research is needed to explore the significance of homogeneous and other group contexts not only in becoming supportive or resistant but especially in maintaining this support. For instance, it could be crucial to empirically study how specific group settings enable further stabilisation of alternative repertoires, while the power dynamics in other settings protect traditional positions. After all, if the workplace remains one of the primary locations where men attempt to secure their masculinity and dominance (Berdahl, 2018), it also serves as the main platform where alternative understandings of leadership and collaboration can be enacted, and where the possibility of gender equality can be collectively reached.

Literature

- Aaltio-Marjosola B and Lehtinen J (1998) Male managers as fathers? Contrasting management, fatherhood, and masculinity. *Human Relations* 51(2): 121–136.
- Acker J (1990) Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society* 4(2): 139–158.
- Adamson M, Muhr SL and Beauregard TA (2023) Theorising work–life balance endeavours as a gendered project of the self: The case of senior executives in Denmark. *Human Relations* 76(4): 629–654.
- Alvesson M (1998) Gender relations and identity at work: A case study of masculinities and femininities in an advertising agency. *Human Relations* 51(8): 969–1005.
- Alvesson M and Sandberg J (2011) Generating research questions through problematization. *The Academy of Management Review* 36(2): 247–271.
- Bach AS (2019) The ambiguous construction of nondominant masculinity: Configuring the “new” man through narratives of choice, involved fatherhood, and gender equality. *Men and Masculinities* 22(2): 338–359.
- Baker DT and Rumens N (2024) Men’s anxieties and defences regarding gender (in)equality in the workplace: An object-relations psychoanalysis of organisational masculinities. *Human Relations* 78(7): 905–933.
- Berdahl JL, Cooper M, Glick P, et al. (2018) Work as a masculinity contest. *Journal of Social Issues* 74(3): 422–448.
- Billig M, Condor S, Edwards D, Gane M, Middleton D, Radley A (1988) *Ideological dilemmas: A social psychology of everyday thinking*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Bird SR (1996) Welcome to the men’s club: Homosociality and the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. *Gender and Society* 10(2): 120–132.

- Bjørnholt M (2011) How men became the local agents of change towards gender equality. *Journal of Gender Studies* 20(1): 3–18.
- Bleijenbergh I (2022) How change agents mobilise masculinities to support gender equality in academia. *Organization* 31(1): 163–180.
- Bornatici C, Gauthier J-A and Le Goff J-M (2020) Changing attitudes towards gender equality in Switzerland (2000–2017): Period, cohort and life-course effects. *Swiss Journal of Sociology* 46(3): 559–585.
- Butler J (1990) *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Chowdhury N and Gibson K (2019) This is (still) a man's world: Young professional women's identity struggles in gendered workplaces. *Feminism & Psychology* 29(4): 475–493.
- Collinson D and Hearn J (1996) *Men as managers, managers as men: Critical perspectives on men, masculinities, and management*. London: Sage.
- Connell R (2005) *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- Connell RW and Wood J (2005) Globalization and business masculinities. *Men and Masculinities* 7(4): 347–364.
- de Vries JA (2015) Champions of gender equality: Female and male executives as leaders of gender change. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 34(1): 21–36.
- Dick P (2004) Resistance to diversity initiatives. In: Mills JH, Mills AJ, Thomas R (eds.) *Identity Politics at Work*. London: Routledge, pp. 67–84.
- Dick P (2013) The politics of experience: A discursive psychology approach to understanding different accounts of sexism in the workplace. *Human Relations* 66(5): 645–669.
- Edley N and Wetherell M (1997) Jockeying for position: The construction of masculine identities. *Discourse & Society* 8(2): 203–217.

- Edley N and Wetherell M (2001) Jekyll and Hyde: Men's constructions of feminism and feminists. *Feminism & Psychology* 11(4): 439–457.
- Fletcher JK (2004) The paradox of postheroic leadership: An essay on gender, power, and transformational change. *The Leadership Quarterly* 15(5): 647–661.
- Flood M and Ertel DA (2020) Concluding critical commentary: Men's experiences as agents of feminist change. In: Luyt R and Starck K (eds.) *Masculine Power and Gender Equality: Masculinities as Change Agents*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 181–199.
- Gherardi S (1994) The gender we think, the gender we do in our everyday organizational lives. *Human Relations* 47(6): 591–610.
- Gill R, K. Kelan E and M. Scharff C (2016) A postfeminist sensibility at work. *Gender, Work & Organization* 24(3): 226–244.
- Hall S (1996) Introduction: Who needs identity? In: du Gay P and Hall S (eds.) *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, pp. 1–17.
- Hearn J (2004) From hegemonic masculinity to the hegemony of men. *Feminist Theory* 5(1): 49–72.
- Hibbert P and Cunliffe A (2015) Responsible management: Engaging moral reflexive practice through threshold concepts. *Journal of Business Ethics* 127(1): 177–188.
- Holgersson C (2013) Recruiting managing directors: Doing homosociality. *Gender, Work & Organization* 20(4): 454–466.
- Humbert AL, Kelan E and van den Brink M (2019) The perils of gender beliefs for men leaders as change agents for gender equality. *European Management Review* 16(4): 1143–1157.
- Johansson K, Andersson E, Johansson M, Lidestav, G (2019) The discursive resistance of men to gender-equality interventions: Negotiating “unjustness” and “unnecessity” in Swedish forestry. *Men and Masculinities* 22(2): 177–196.

- Kelan EK (2018) Men doing and undoing gender at work: A review and research agenda. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 20(2): 544–558.
- Kelan EK (2020) The inclusive leader, the smart strategist and the forced altruist: Subject positions for men as gender equality partners. *European Management Review* 17(3): 603–613.
- Kelan EK and Wratil P (2017) Post-heroic leadership, tempered radicalism and senior leaders as change agents for gender equality. *European Management Review* 15(1): 5–18.
- Knoppers A, Spaaij R and Claringbould I (2021) Discursive resistance to gender diversity in sport governance: sport as a unique field? *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 13(3): 517–529.
- Lansu M, Bleijenbergh I and Benschop Y (2020) Just talking? Middle managers negotiating problem ownership in gender equality interventions. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 36(2).
- Lewis P, Benschop Y and Simpson R (2017) Postfeminism, gender and organization. *Gender, Work & Organization* 24(3): 213–225.
- Madsen SR, Townsend A and Scribner RT (2020) Strategies that male allies use to advance women in the workplace. *The Journal of Men's Studies* 28(3): 239–259.
- Martin PY (2001) 'Mobilizing masculinities': Women's experiences of men at work. *Organization* 8(4): 587–618.
- Moss-Racusin CA, Phelan JE and Rudman LA (2010) When men break the gender rules: Status incongruity and backlash against modest men. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 11(2): 140–151.
- Munsch CL, Weaver JR, Bosson JK, et al. (2018) Everybody but me: Pluralistic ignorance and the masculinity contest. *Journal of Social Issues* 74(3): 551–578.

- Nash M, Grant R, Moore R, Winzenberg T (2021) Male allyship in institutional STEMM gender equity initiatives. *Plos One* 16(3).
- Nentwich JC (2008) New fathers and mothers as gender troublemakers? Exploring discursive constructions of heterosexual parenthood and their subversive potential. *Feminism & Psychology* 18(2): 207–230.
- Nentwich JC and Hsu C (2023) (Un)doing masculinity? Men working in women’s occupations. In: Hearn J, Aavik K, Collinson D, et al. (eds.) *Routledge Handbook on Men, Masculinities and Organizations: Theories, Practices and Futures of Organizing*. New York: Routledge, pp. 306–319.
- Nentwich JC, Jäckel D and Schambach G (2026) The gender gap in gender-inclusive leadership practices: What men say they do and what women just don’t see. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 45(9): 121–136.
- Nentwich JC and Ostendorp A (2016) Manoeuvring acts: Inclusion and exclusion in a women’s sports club. In: Steyaert C, Nentwich JC, and Hoyer P (eds.) *A Guide to Discursive Organizational Psychology*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, pp. 98–119.
- Nentwich JC, Poppen W, Schälin S and Vogt, F (2013) The same and the other: Male childcare workers managing identity dissonance. *International Review of Sociology* 23(2): 326–345.
- Pecis L and Priola V (2019) The “new industrial man” as unhero: Doing postfeminist masculinities in an Italian pharmacological research centre. *Gender Work and Organization* 26(10): 1413–1432.
- Potter J and Wetherell M (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*. London: Sage.
- Powell S, Ah-King M and Hussénus A (2018) ‘Are we to become a gender university?’ Facets of resistance to a gender equality project. *Gender, Work & Organization* 25(2): 127–143.

- Power M (2021) Modelling the micro-foundations of the audit society: Organizations and the logic of the audit trail. *Academy of Management Review* 46(1): 6–32.
- Przyborski A and Riegler J (2010) Gruppendiskussion und Fokusgruppe. In: Mey G and Mruck K (eds.) *Handbuch Qualitative Forschung in der Psychologie*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 436–448.
- Sang KJ, Dainty AR and Ison SG (2014) Gender in the UK architectural profession: (Re)producing and challenging hegemonic masculinity. *Work, Employment and Society* 28(2): 247–264.
- Sharma PN, Sturm RE, Neely Jr BH, Tussing D, Kirkman B (2026) Too womanly or not manly enough? A review of work consequences experienced by counter-normative men. *Human Relations* 79(4): 500–529.
- Smolović Jones O, Smolović Jones S, Taylor S, Yarrow E (2021) “I wanted more women in, but ...”: oblique resistance to gender equality initiatives. *Work Employment and Society* 35(4): 640–656.
- Speer S and Potter J (2000) The management of heterosexist talk: conversational resources and prejudiced claims: *Discourse & Society* 11(4): 543–572.
- Federal Statistical Office (2025) *Teilzeiterwerbstätigkeit in der Schweiz 2024*. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/rm/home.assetdetail.36057566.html>
- Thym A (2026) *Gender and leadership in the financial sector: transformative potentials of self-critique by men in leadership positions*. London: Routledge.
- Tienari J and Taylor S (2019) Feminism and men: Ambivalent space for acting up. *Organization* 26(6): 948–960.
- Wahl A (2014) Male managers challenging and reinforcing the male norm in management. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 22(2): 131–146.

- Wahl A and Holgersson C (2003) Male managers' reactions to gender diversity activities in organizations. In: Davidson M and Fielden SL (eds.) *Individual Diversity and Psychology in Organizations*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, pp. 313–329.
- Warren MA and Warren MT (2023) The EThIC model of virtue-based allyship development: a new approach to equity and inclusion in organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics* 182(3): 783–803.
- Wetherell M (2007) A step too far: discursive psychology, linguistic ethnography and questions of identity. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11(5): 661–681.
- Wetherell M (2013) Affect and discourse – what's the problem? From affect as excess to affective/discursive practice. *Subjectivity* 6(4): 349–368.
- Wetherell M and Edley N (1999) Negotiating hegemonic masculinity: Imaginary positions and psycho-discursive practices. *Feminism & Psychology* 9(3): 335–356.
- Wetherell M and Edley N (2009) Masculinity manoeuvres: Critical discourse psychology and the analysis of identity strategies. In: Coupland N and Jaworsski A (eds.) *The New Sociolinguistics Reader*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 201–214.
- Wetherell M and Potter J (1993) *Mapping the language of racism: Discourse and the legitimization of exploitation*. New York: Columbia University Press.

AI usage declaration

The authors acknowledge that they have followed Human Relations' AI policy. Accordingly, AI was used only for copy editing or proofing the manuscript.

Biographies

Julia C. Nentwich is an Associate Professor at the University of Sankt Gallen, Switzerland. In her research, she explores social and discursive practices of (un)doing gender, change agency and resistance and men and masculinities. Drawing on critical discourse psychology, she is interested in the possibilities of allyship and in furthering an understanding of the transformation towards gender equality as a silent conflict. She has published articles in journals such as *Feminism and Psychology*, *Gender, Work and Organisation*, *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, *Culture and Organisation*, and *the Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*. [Email: julia.nentwich@bfh.ch]

Chris Steyaert is a Professor of Organizational Psychology at the University of Sankt Gallen, Switzerland. His research is interested in the interplay between creativity, multiplicity (diversity), and reflexivity to study such themes as organizational creation and ecological change, multilingualism and cosmopolitanism, and inclusion and democracy. Drawing upon processual, practice-based, and queer-theoretical approaches, he has published articles in journals such as the *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization Studies*, *Organization*, and *International Journal of Business Studies*. [Email: chris.steyaert@unisg.ch]