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Schwiter, Karin ; Nentwich, Julia ; Keller, Marisol

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# Male privilege revisited: How men in female-dominated occupations notice and actively reframe privilege

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## Abstract

Our article aims at refocusing the debate in privilege studies from tackling the invisibility to challenging justifications of gender privilege. Focusing on instances in which men acknowledge that they receive preferential treatment, this study sheds light on how privilege is perceived and talked about in interviews with men in female-dominated occupations. In contrast to existing literature on the invisibility of privilege to the privileged, our analysis shows that the privileging of men is indeed known to them. However, our interviewees then employ specific discursive strategies to actively reframe and thereby silence privilege. They either justify privilege as an individual achievement or as a natural advantage of male bodies. In our discussion, we show how these discursive reframings build on existing discourses on gendered bodies and neoliberal subjectivity. Based on our key argument that gendered privilege is not invisible, but it is acknowledged and then actively reframed and thereby silenced, we argue for expanding the focus of privilege studies: Instead of primarily investing in making privilege visible to those who have it, we need to challenge the discourses that allow for reframing and silencing it.

## KEYWORDS

discourse analysis, masculinity, occupation, privilege, Switzerland

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

When we asked Ronny, a young male childcare worker, about how he got his job in a day-care facility, he said: “you’re a man, you definitely have better chances.” Taking this outright acknowledgment of privilege as a starting point, this paper investigates how men in gender-untypical occupations such as nursing and child-care talk about being privileged.

The call to bring more attention to privilege is not new. It has roots in several academic fields. In anthropology, Laura Nader argued for “studying up” already in the 1960s. Rather than focusing exclusively on the marginalized by “studying down”, she suggested that anthropologists gain knowledge about the lives of the elites (Nader, 1974[original: 1969], cited in Gusterson, 1997, p. 114). In critical race studies, activists and researchers challenged the problematic fact that most anti-racist research kept focusing on the lives of people of color, while white people remained invisible and “unmarked” (Collins, 1990). Also white researchers started reflecting on how they themselves might attempt to do anti-racist work, but would still profit from the structural privileges of whiteness while doing so (Berg, 2012; Kimmel, 2003; McIntosh, 1995; Smith, 2013). They asked, why is it that “we always think about inequality from the perspective of the one who is hurt by the inequality, not the one who is helped” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 7)? In gender studies, it was Raewyn Connell’s concept of the “patriarchal dividend” that contributed to shifting the focus from the mechanisms of discrimination of women to the privileging of men (Connell, 1995). A better understanding of privilege has been emphasized as an important starting point for contesting discrimination (McIntosh, 2012, p. 195).

With this article, we want to contribute to this endeavor by calling for a conceptual shift within studies on gender privilege. So far, a large number of studies have focused on finding evidence of gendered privileging and measuring its effects (Case et al., 2012; Mooney et al., 2017; Wingfield & Myles, 2014). Furthermore, privilege studies have centered on the problematic that gender privilege often remains invisible to those affected (Kimmel, 2018). Both strands have thus worked on making gender privilege visible—the former by collecting evidence of its extent and effects and the latter by sensitizing the privileged to see the preferential treatment they benefit from. These studies have greatly contributed to our understanding of gender privilege. In order to push the debate further, we argue in this paper that we need to pay more attention to what happens in the instances when men acknowledge that they receive preferential treatment. How do they talk about gender privilege, when it is apparent to them?

For our theoretical approach, we take Raewyn Connell’s foundational work on the ‘patriarchal dividend’ (Connell, 1995) as our starting point to conceptualize gender privilege. Bringing her approach in dialogue with critical discourse psychology allows us to investigate how gender privilege is produced in speech. In this perspective, privilege is actively produced in talk and by speakers’ accounting work (Wetherell and Edley, 2009; 2014). We thus understand gender as a “doing”, an active performance that manifests among other things in speech.

We explore gender privilege by engaging with men in female-dominated occupations. Based on an analysis of interviews with men in Switzerland who work as nurses in hospitals or as early childcare workers in nurseries we first show that they indeed notice their gender privilege. However, we also find our male interviewees reject being positioned as somebody “privileged”. In order to do this, they engage in two distinctive justifying strategies that either emphasize the advantages of male bodies or individual competence and merit. Based on our empirical results, we argue that privilege is, although known to them, actively silenced. The two discursive strategies result in a silencing of critique and thereby stabilize male privilege. Concluding, we argue for a shift in attention in privilege studies from making gender privilege visible to how the privileged legitimate it when they notice that they receive preferential treatment. This allows us to deconstruct the discourses used for justification and strengthen strategies of contesting and refuting privilege.

## 2 | RE-CONCEPTUALIZING GENDER PRIVILEGE: SHIFTING THE FOCUS FROM VISIBILITY TO JUSTIFICATION STRATEGIES

### 2.1 | Privilege and the “patriarchal dividend” for men in female-dominated occupations

Privilege has been defined as “automatic unearned benefits bestowed upon perceived members of dominant groups based in social identity” (Case et al., 2014, p. 723). Privilege explains the advantages that members of dominant groups have only by group membership. This might include better chances of getting a job, seeing one’s own group represented on the news or feeling safe in public places (Schacht, 2003, cited in Flood & Pease, 2005, p. 4). In gender studies, it was Raewyn Connell’s concept of the “patriarchal dividend” that contributed to shifting the focus from the mechanisms of discrimination of women to the privileging of men (Connell, 1995). She conceptualizes privilege in her theory of hegemonic masculinity. Connell identifies those masculinities as hegemonic that are performing what is regarded by society as the aspired form of masculinity, for instance being competitive and risk-taking (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is performed in everyday practices and also at the workplace. The performance of hegemonic masculinity is “mobilized” (Martin, 2001) for instance by exclusively socializing with men, peacocking or competing with other men as well as displaying heroic forms of masculinity (Kelan, 2018). Engaging in what is seen as hegemonic masculinity, men are constituting a hierarchical relation between different masculinities as well as with regards to femininities. How performances of masculinity are judged depends on class and other markers of social differentiation. Some groups of men have more leeway in differing from and challenging hegemonic masculinity than others (Lund et al., 2019).

While hegemonic masculinity is a norm rarely met by men, privilege is granted not only on the grounds of representing the norm of hegemonic masculinity, but also on the grounds of buying into and supporting it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018). Connell argues that even men who perform masculinity in alternative ways are benefiting from hegemonic masculinity as they do not actively challenge it (Connell, 1995, p. 79; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836; Wetherell & Edley, 1999, p. 337). Connell uses the term “complicit masculinity” for this group and coins the term “patriarchal dividend” to describe a general privileging effect that is bestowed on men, just because they are men.

As existing research shows, this “patriarchal dividend” also pays out for men in female-dominated occupations. They seem to enjoy hidden advantages also when in a token position. This is in contrast to the negative token effect that puts women in male-dominated occupations under additional pressure to perform and to conform to gender norms (Kanter, 1977). While women face a “glass ceiling” (i.e., their careers do not progress beyond certain levels in their companies’ hierarchies), men ride the “glass escalator” (i.e., their careers progress exceptionally fast, cf. Williams, 1992). Apparently, being in the highly visible token position and hence depicted as “the other” at work, has different effects for women and men. While token women are subjected to a “male gaze” (Simpson, 2010, p. 221) and would rather aim for invisibility by keeping a low profile, men in this highly visible position are benefiting from it. For example, men earn higher wages compared to women, both in male and in female-dominated occupations. They benefit from privilege granted by gender in society in general (Budig, 2002). In sum, there is ample evidence from existing research that “qualities associated with men and masculinity were more highly regarded and rewarded than qualities associated with women and femininity, even in predominately female professions.” (Williams, 2015, p. 390).

### 2.2 | Privilege as contextualized and dynamic: A discourse psychological perspective

As research from an intersectional perspective shows, however, the privilege resulting from the “patriarchal dividend” is not only about masculinity, but it intersects with race, class, sexualities and other markers of social differentiation. For instance, male black nurses are not mistakenly identified as the doctors as is the case with their white colleagues (Wingfield, 2009, p. 11). In the case of Norway, for instance, employment patterns of male

immigrant nurses are more similar to native-born women than to native-born men (Karlsen, 2012). Depending on the social categorizations attributed to them, people will experience privilege or marginalization to different extents. For instance, gay, disabled, and working class men might be unable to access some of the privileges attributed to their gender, due to their marginalized status with regards to other social categorizations (Slutskaya et al., 2016; Wingfield & Myles, 2014, p. 121). Furthermore, privilege also depends on context. While some men in particular female-dominated occupations are privileged and are hence riding the “glass escalator”, this might not be the case in other contexts (Wingfield & Myles, 2014). Hence, privilege is “unevenly distributed” and “not monolithic” (Coston & Kimmel, 2012, p. 97) but rather contextual and dynamic (Atewologun & Sealy, 2014, p. 424; Gaibrois & Nentwich, 2020) and particularly situated in local social relationships (Korvajärvi, 1998). In sum, there is an ample body of research showing how patterns of privilege become more complex when intersectionality and context are taken into account (Lund et al., 2019; Mooney et al., 2017; Sang & Calvard, 2019).

Research in critical discourse psychology on the construction of masculinity has provided in-depth insights into this contextual and dynamic nature of privilege. With regard to men in female-dominated occupations, studies have pointed to an identity dissonance these men are confronted with. They might experience their masculine identity as at odds with the association of their occupation with femininity. This can result in identity struggles (Nentwich et al., 2013) or role strain (Simpson, 2005). In this regard, Gherardi (1994) has described the necessity of “remedial work” as soon as the gender order is disrupted (cf. also Korvajärvi, 1998). For instance, Hrženjak’s (2013) study shows for men in nursing what (Tennhoff et al., 2015) have also described for men in child care: the men in these occupations constantly navigate between hegemonic and alternative norms of masculinity. This means that men in nursing do not always emphasize their being different from their female colleagues. They might at times also activate a feminine “nursing identity” when they talk about their work as nurses (McDowell, 2015) or “appropriate femininity” (Pullen and Simpson, 2009). They thereby situatively associate with various norms of hegemonic and alternative masculinities.

However, as Connell’s work emphasizes, adopting alternative masculinities does not necessarily challenge privilege. Men may nevertheless be complicit in sustaining patriarchal hierarchies and benefit from a patriarchal dividend. Adopting the perspective of critical discourse psychology allows us to better understand why this is the case. While Connel conceptualizes positions in the hierarchy of masculinities as rather fixed, critical discourse psychology emphasizes the contextual and dynamic nature of this positioning. Based on their research on the construction of masculinity, Edley and Wetherell (1997) call this a “jockeying for position”. Men affirm hegemonic masculinity and thereby a position of privilege in one situation, but counter or resist that position in another situation (Wetherell & Edley, 2014). This situative performance of alternative masculinities might challenge the hegemonic position. However, it does not cancel the patriarchal dividend men receive simply based on their gender. In this regard, they remain complicit with the hegemonic order.

From this, Wetherell and Edley (2014, p. 212) conclude that in order to tackle privilege, we need to analyze the specific discursive strategies they employ and the discourses these refer to. This perspective acknowledges that men are highly ambivalent and engage in various discursive practices in order to justify their status. They might position themselves as part of a hegemonic group of men, but at the same time be highly invested in gender equality and fairness. This self-positioning remains variable and highly situative—depending on the respective context and the norms available. Hence, hegemonic masculinity might be performed and challenged in the very same sentence. This understanding of gendered subjects as constituted of multiple and often also highly conflicting norms allows us to explore how privilege can be acknowledged but also silenced.

### 2.3 | Tackling the invisibility of privilege

Existing research on gender privilege emphasizes that privilege often remains invisible to the privileged themselves. Thus, making it visible is pursued as the major strategy for critique and change (Kimmel, 2018; McIntosh, 2012,

p. 196; Winddance Twine & Gardener, 2013). However, as we show in the following paragraphs, there is also some evidence that privilege does not necessarily go unnoticed by the privileged. It is also acknowledged, mitigated, and contested.

The major reason discussed why privilege is often invisible to the people affected is that they see it as legitimate entitlement. Flood and Pease (2005, p. 5) for example argue that "... many men occupying positions of privilege and power do not question the gender status quo, take as given their right to be in such positions, and do not recognize the gendered processes that privilege men." One reason for the invisibility of privilege is that the characteristics of the dominant group—for instance white, male, young, and heterosexual—are depicted as normal. While the privileged group is depicted as normal, it is the non-privileged groups' status that is marked. Hence, gender is perceived as being about women, race is perceived as being about people of color (Flood & Pease, 2005, p. 6). This "unmarked status" (Rosenblum & Travis, 1996, p. 142, cited in Flood & Pease, 2005, p. 5) of the privileged results in neglecting that others are denied the very same opportunities. Privilege hence both denies and camouflages the unequal access to opportunities.

Additionally, Korvajärvi (1998) has shown that men and women both might acknowledge the existence of gender privilege, but they perceive it as a phenomenon relevant out there in society and not at their own workplaces. Holgersson (2013) found similar evidence in her study of male managers who positioned themselves as pro-equality, but continued to hire only men. Thus, privilege also remains invisible because is perceived as an abstract societal problem located elsewhere but not in one's own experiences at work.

However, there is also some research suggesting that male privilege does not necessarily pass unnoticed by the privileged. Simpson (2004) has provided evidence that at least in contexts in which they adopt a minority position, men are very well aware of the privilege they are granted. With her interviews with men in female-dominated occupations, she demonstrates that they all feel very comfortable about working in female-dominated fields and describe working with women as something very positive. They also explain to be "fast tracked" in their careers and receiving special consideration. For instance, they report getting away with more mistakes compared to women. Furthermore, they recall being granted more authority only due to their gender, which might also lead to an over-estimation of their expertise. While these effects are not necessarily perceived as positive and men also describe negative effects, Simpson's study suggests that people in privileged position can indeed notice the privilege they are granted by others.

Furthermore, existing studies show that privilege is also contested or mitigated. With regard to gender, Peretz (2020, p. 2) has analyzed how men engaging in gender justice projects actively contest what they describe as the "pedestal effect" they perceive themselves as benefiting from. Only by being men, their work is rewarded with "gratuitous acclaim, heightened attention, unearned credibility, career mobility and romantic attraction" (Peretz, 2020). These men acknowledge what they describe as the "pedestal effect" and they try to negotiate this conflict between their egalitarian ideals and the assigned privileged position by critiquing or undermining it. They also engage in what Scully et al. (2018) have called "privilege work": activities aiming at countering the privileging effect. Similar activities have been reported with regards to privilege received on the grounds of language proficiency. Native speakers are said to regularly engage in practices that moderate the privileging effect of speaking fluently (Gaibrois & Nentwich, 2020). Additionally, a very recent study by Niemistö et al., (2020) illustrates how privilege is mitigated. In their interviews with men and women managers privilege was silenced by referencing individual competence, choice and merit. Similarly, Vogt et al. (2015) have shown that men in early childhood education draw on notions of professionalism to legitimate their positions as men in a female-dominated occupation.

By means of such "privilege work" privilege is actively managed. It entails discursive maneuvering that allows speakers take a legitimate position and hence become an intelligible subject. For this, they refer to existing discourses that form the "background structures of intelligibility" (Wetherell & Edley, 2014, p. 211). These are often rather conflictual and contested (Billig et al., 1988). Applying a discourse psychological perspective enables us to

zoom in on exactly these moments when privilege is acknowledged by our interview partners and analyze the discourses they employ to legitimate it.

### 3 | RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

The data for our empirical analysis stems from three research projects with a focus on men and women in female-dominated occupations in Switzerland. Switzerland has long been known as a latecomer with regard to gender equality. Among other things, the country granted women the right to vote only in 1971, adhered to its patriarchal marriage law until 1988 and was the last European country to introduce a paid maternity leave in 2005 (Belsler, 2017; Sutter, 2009). While there are still some policy fields in which the country lags behind (e.g., child care provision), it has caught up in others. The most recent OECD gender equality index even ranked Switzerland first among all analyzed OECD countries (OECD, 2019). A trend towards gender equality has also been documented on the level of attitudes. Within the last two decades, both women and men have developed more egalitarian views on gender roles—especially with regards to the employment of women with children (Bornatici et al., 2020). Furthermore, men have adopted notions of involved fatherhood and become more supportive of part-time work, even though they still feel responsible as main providers of the family (Baumgarten et al., 2016).

For the purpose of this paper, Switzerland makes as a good case study because Swiss men's gender egalitarianism ranks about average among the OECD countries (Cha & Thébaud, 2009) and its occupational gender segregation is comparable to other OECD countries, too (Charles & Bradley, 2009). This is also the case for nursing and childcare, the two occupations represented in the empirical material analyzed for this paper. The Swiss Federal Statistical Office reports that 85.6% of qualified nurses, and 97.4% of child care workers in Switzerland are female (Duc-Quang, 2018). In Germany, Austria, the UK, Norway and Turkey, for instance, the proportion of men in early childcare also ranges between 2% and 9% (Rohrmann, 2020). While men are entering these occupations in increasing numbers (Savoir Social, 2020), they are still a visible minority. Thus, both occupations are ideal for our focus on men in female-dominated employment fields.

For the analysis presented in this paper, we combined empirical material from two sub-projects of the Swiss National Research Programme 60 on "Gender Equality" and one master thesis. The three projects were each carried out by one of us authors. In the first project Karin Schwiter and her colleagues analyzed the gendered pathways of young adults through education and into the labor market. The project included 32 biographical interviews with young adults in their mid-twenties, half of which with men and women in gender untypical occupations (Schwiter et al., 2014). In the second project, Julia Nentwich and her colleagues investigated (un)doing gender in nurseries and looked into the biographical narratives and accounting for specific everyday working practices in 18 in-depth interviews with male and female childcare workers (Nentwich et al., 2013; Vogt et al., 2015). In the third project, a master thesis, Marisol Keller explored how men in female-dominated occupations are doing masculinity when talking about their biographies and work. The project consisted of 12 in-depth interviews with male nurses and childcare workers (Keller, 2017).

Three original research projects are similar not only in their shared research interest in men in female-dominated occupations but also in their research design. All interviews were conducted as problem-centered interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) and mainly used open questions that encouraged the interviewees to talk about their work biographies and career decisions as well as their experiences at work. Even though the projects had slightly different foci and were conducted independently, the interview guides had a lot of overlap. For example, they all started with the opening question: "Can you tell me the story of how you came to work in this profession?" and also stimulated reflection on masculinity at work: "In what ways is being male an issue for you at work?". In all three projects, the interviewers were women with a background in gender research. In our interactions with our interviewees, we explicitly positioned ourselves as researchers interested in gender as an analytical category. This

means, we explicitly encouraged our interviewees to recall particular work experiences where they felt that gender had become relevant in their everyday working lives.

Although not all parts of the interview transcripts from the three projects did include material relevant for this secondary analysis, the substantive communalities of the projects allowed us to combine and reanalyze the data from all our interviews with men in gender-untypical occupations for this paper. This amounted to a total of 16 interviews with male child care workers and 10 interviews with male nurses in which our interviewees talked about their experiences at work. We did a systematic secondary analysis of these interviews to identify and analyze all the instances in which being privileged appeared in the material. Re-using qualitative data has experienced considerable growth and as well acceptance recently (Bishop & Kuula-Luumi, 2017). With this analysis, we want to make a case for re-analyzing the rich source of already generated research material (cf. Witzel et al., 2008, p. 12). Secondary analyses allow for identifying aspects in the existing data that previous analyses did not find or did not focus on (ibid., p. 13). All three of us had previously discovered men's awareness of being privileged as a recurrent theme in our material that seemed to merit more attention. The re-analysis we carried out for this paper offered us the opportunity to do a thorough exploration of this theme in our data. Furthermore, the combination of data from our three projects and our collaboration in analyzing and writing this paper facilitated a valuable transdisciplinary discussion in which we combined the knowledge from our respective backgrounds in psychology, sociology and geography.

In order to do this, we applied a critical discourse psychological lens (Steyaert et al., 2016; Wetherell, 2015). In a first step, we combed through the 26 interview transcripts with men in nursing and childcare to identify all instances in which the interviewees talked about being privileged. For instance, we identified accounts in which men talked about being treated differently in a positive way, received special treatment or were allowed to do more rewarding tasks compared to their female colleagues. Further analyzing these instances of privilege in our material, we explored the accounting work (Wetherell & Edley, 2014) that is taking place when talking about privilege; how it is explained and justified. Thus, our analysis focuses on the discursive level, that is we ask how people make sense of what they do. With this analysis, we were able to identify two major patterns of accounting for what was first acknowledged as privilege with more legitimate reasons for being treated differently: the male body and individual achievement.

#### 4 | FINDINGS: MEN ACKNOWLEDGING, JUSTIFYING AND SILENCING PRIVILEGE

Within the 26 interviews with male nurses and childcare workers we encountered a broad range of instances of "privilege being acknowledged". They describe experiences in a variety of contexts, covering interactions with teachers and peers in vocational college as well as with colleagues, patients, children and their parents at work. For example, when we asked Christoph<sup>1</sup> – one of only two men in his nursing class – about how his teachers in vocational college treated him, he says:

"Bluntly said, I have a bit of an advantage as people tend to listen more when I raise my hand and give an input. But it's only a tendency. It's not extreme. However, I think that I do get a bit of a privileged role." (Christoph, nurse)

Ivan, a childcare worker who also attended a class with only two men, recalls his new teachers always exclaiming: "*ah, wonderful, two men!*" Answering the same question, Andreas – who is the only man his nursing class – mentions how he finds it peculiar that one of his teachers always uses a more formal way of addressing him compared to the more informal tone he uses with his female colleagues:

"One of my teachers always calls me 'Mister Steiner'<sup>1</sup> and with all others he uses first names. But with me it's always 'Mister' and 'Steiner'. I don't know whether he just likes my name, but I have noticed it." (Andreas, nurse)

In a similar vein, Emil states: *"I have a couple of advantages. Everyone knows my name for sure. (...) I am frequently invited to share my opinion."* (Emil, childcare worker). Apart from vocational school, men acknowledge their privileged position also in other situations. For instance, our male interviewees describe their colleagues in the hospitals or nurseries as being very positive about the fact that a man is joining their team. Having a male colleague in the team is framed as something worthwhile to achieve:

"Wherever you turn up, as a male nurse you always receive a cordial welcome. Everyone is happy to finally get a man. You can go wherever you want, each and every team welcomes you with open arms. [...] At the beginning, I sure woke their maternal instincts [laughter]. I was being treasured and pampered." (Armin, nurse)

Furthermore, some of our male nurses reported that their supervisors soon allowed them to take responsibility for more challenging tasks:

"I was the only man in the ward and for some reason I was given more responsibility than others, they put me in a hierarchically higher position with regards to other nurses [...] Technically, I'd be at the bottom of the hierarchy. But somehow – maybe because I'm so tall, I don't know – I have slid upward quite a bit." (Dimitri, nurse)

Our male nurses report being perceived as competent and reliable and given more responsibility than their female colleagues. Furthermore, they also recall patients addressing them as superiors rather than as assistants and report regularly being mistaken for the doctor:

"It has happened often that I entered a room, said my name and people assumed that I am the doctor on his round. I always had to clarify, 'no, I'm the nurse'." (Julian, nurse)

In sum, in all these instances our male interviewees talk about moments in which they noticed that they were receiving some kind of preferential treatment. Furthermore, the attention they received is generally positive. In accordance with previous studies (Budig, 2002; Williams, 1992, 2015), our data thus shows that men seem to benefit from their token position. They report receiving a "patriarchal dividend" in the form of an especially warm welcome, above average attention and faster upward movement at work.

In contrast to the existing literature that foregrounds the invisibility of privilege (Kimmel, 2018; McIntosh, 2012), however, our findings align with Simpson (2004) and Peretz (2020), who also demonstrate that men show awareness of being privileged. In the context of their female-dominated occupations, the different treatment is perceived very clearly by the men we interviewed. Interestingly, privilege was neither challenged nor refused in these instances as described by Peretz (2020). On the contrary, we find that our interviewees engage in accounting work that serves to justify privilege. Throughout our material they draw on two distinctive discursive strategies to justify and thereby silence privilege, as we will now show in greater detail.

#### 4.1 | Men justifying privilege with bodily advantages

Analyzing the accounting work, we find that the interviewed men nearly always offer some form of justification. One account used very frequently is to refer to what they perceive as positive aspects of their male bodies to justify the privileges they receive. For instance, Ivan emphasizes this aspect when he talks about his work in an early childcare center:

«I often notice that the children cherish my behavior as a man, simply because of the body. They would go 'oh, a beard' and the voice is different. [...] It's not even how I behave, whether I behave like a man or like a woman, but just how I look and how I sound." (Ivan, childcare worker)

He emphasizes that the presence of his beard and the sound of his male voice are especially valuable for the children. He argues that children already spend a lot of time with women and are used to the attributes of female bodies, but lack opportunities to interact with male bodies. Again, his "otherness" as a man is framed in a very positive, benefiting way. By creating a clear demarcation between male and female bodies, physical differences are naturalized and serve as a justification strategy for explaining the perceived differences in reactions or treatments. This allows for reframing privilege as a legitimate difference. Henry also mentions that his beard and his voice are making him special:

"I'm somehow special and all the children have always loved me, because they see something different in me [...]. When I tell a story, the children come and start scratching my beard, because they don't have this with the women, and it sounds more interesting." (Henry, childcare worker)

Christoph's account contains an equivalent argument for male nurses in a psychiatric hospital ward:

"It's a place in which I'd say men are appreciated a lot, just because of their body size, because of their strength. It is mean to say this but – the presence of a man I'd say intimidates our clients much more and creates a higher psychological barrier compared to a woman's presence." (Christoph, nurse)

Christoph refers to body size as an asset. His statement is reflected in one of the quotes already shown above where Dimitri legitimized his fast promotions as a nurse: "*maybe because I'm so tall, I don't know—I have slid upward quite a bit*".

In sum, this strategy of justifying male privilege refers to the male body as an asset that is presented as especially valuable in a feminized work context. In early child-care institutions, the interviewees argue that it provides children with novel and otherwise lacking experiences and in hospital wards it is sought after for managing unruly patients. In the accounts of our interviewees, this framing of the male body as a valuable asset in female-dominated occupations is used to justify the preferential treatment they receive.

## 4.2 | Men justifying privilege with individual performance

Apart from emphasizing the features of the male body, interviewees also highlight what they perceive as their above average performances and hence individual competences to legitimate their preferential treatment. For example, Ivan comments on his reputation in vocational school:

"Teachers do treat me differently. But I have to say, I have always been interested and because I'm very interested I have always contributed to class." (Ivan, childcare worker)

Similarly, Markus, refers to what he sees as an excellent performance when he talks about his high standing within his team in the hospital:

"I'm very well accepted. Well, people have noticed that I have worked well, I was really a good apprentice." (Markus, nurse)

To his above-mentioned explanation why he got his job in the nursery, Henry adds:

“they did say that – among other things – it is always good to have a man in the team. But, basically, I think it was because of my performance.” (Henry, childcare worker)

Dimitri mentions the allocation of tasks in his hospital team. He is proud of being trusted with more blood samples compared to his peers:

“it's possible that I am given more blood samples than others. It's because I have a high accuracy.” (Dimitri, nurse)

In addition to attributing privilege to individual performance, the interviewees refer to their personality traits as desired in their jobs. For example, Julian reflects:

“My colleagues say it's good to have men working in the team. This can be on the grounds of us being men, but it can also be on the grounds of my personality—my person” and explains: “I know that I am a very calm person—especially at the workplace—and I tend to be the one who keeps the overview” He later concludes: “And with regards to my personality, I think it's really more about my person rather than what my colleagues generally think about men.” (Julian, nurse)

Besides emphasizing what they perceive as a well-fitting personality, referring to themselves as showing professional behavior also appears regularly in the material:

“Maybe, my presence is a bit [laughs] stronger and more professional, I'd say.” (Lukas, nurse)

«I have often made an effort to appear professional and to bring in knowledge I learned at school.” (Nico, childcare worker)

Emphasizing a specific personality trait or being professional are discursive strategies that men apply for justifying their privileged positions. As all these examples illustrate, there is a common pattern to many of the accounts on preferential treatment: First, the interviewees acknowledge that they are in some way privileged. However, analyzing their accounting work we find that they seem uncomfortable with the idea that this might be due to them being men. Being privileged by masculinity does not come through as something they should accept. That is why they then immediately provide other justifications. Drawing on accounts of individual merit, competence and professionalism, they successfully portray their performance as above average and thereby justify the preferential treatment they receive and are very well aware of. As the following example of Christoph shows, this alternative explanation is important for refuting the suspicion of being granted a privilege only for being a man as this would be perceived as an unfair or an unearned benefit. His quote shows very explicitly that he would not see this as legitimate:

“all of a sudden it's twenty women and I am the only man. I do become the focus of attention to some extent. But in the end, I would argue that it depends on the personality. [...] I don't think I have a huge advantage as a man.” (Christoph, nurse)

Summing up, our male interviewees in female-dominated occupations are very much aware of the privilege they are receiving. However, gaining advantage only by being men makes them uncomfortable and enforces justification strategies. By declaring their individual performance, competences and professionalism as above

average they rather call upon individual merit as a justification strategy for receiving a preferential treatment. Hence, privilege is justified with claims to individual performance here.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

Our re-analysis of interviews with men and women working in male and female-dominated occupations offers several insights relevant to current debates on gender privilege: First, our interviews confirm earlier findings (Budig, 2002; Williams, 1992) that being in a token position has different consequences for women and men. While women describe their token position as an uphill battle (Schwiter et al., 2011), our analysis shows that men describe being perceived as different in female-dominated occupations as a positive asset. In Connell (1995) terms, we could argue that this is hegemonic masculinity at work here—a relation of power that produces different hierarchical positions for men and women.

Second, we have shown that men working in female-dominated occupations indeed acknowledge being privileged. They recall receiving especially warm welcomes by their colleagues, more attention at school, more interesting tasks, higher social standing and faster promotions than their female peers. Our data thus challenges the common assumption that privilege is invisible to the privileged. Instead, it confirms the findings of Simpson (2004) that women and men—at least in contexts in which men adopt a minority position—are well aware of the privileges granted to men.

Pushing the debate on the visibility of privilege one step further, our key argument in this paper is that instead of just trying to make privilege visible, we need to focus on the accounting work our interviewees engage in to justify and silence privilege. Our discourse psychological approach allows us to illustrate how men do not just state their gender privileges as a given but immediately give an explanation as to why they received this preferential treatment—other than their gender. By this, privilege is acknowledged and at the same time silenced. Based on this insight, our key claim is that we need to understand this silencing of privilege as something actively produced by those in a privileged position.

Importantly, our analysis thus demonstrates that acknowledging privilege does not necessarily lead to refusing this position. On the contrary, unlike the findings of Peretz (2020) we find that privilege is rarely contested in our data. Instead, the men in our study adopt what Connell (1995) termed *complicit masculinity*. They actively reframe privilege by providing some other justification for the beneficial treatment they are receiving. From this, we can draw the conclusion that being privileged is no longer deemed acceptable if it is simply based on gender. It would be perceived as an “unearned status gain” (Neeley & Dumas, 2016) and hence illegitimate. However, actively reframing the interpretation of their preferential treatment allows our interviewees to silence privilege and still keep their patriarchal dividend.

The accounts we analyzed hold two major justification strategies. First, the interviewees refer to the male body as an asset. Their height, their body size, their strength, their deep voices and even their beards are brought forward to justify privilege. This discursive strategy relies on the unequal valuation of gendered bodies: When male and female bodies are constructed according to a binary difference, the former are valued higher compared to the latter (Frost, 2001; Longhurst, 2005). By emphasizing the differences of their male bodies compared to the bodies of their female colleagues, our interviewees employ a gender essentialist discourse. From this perspective, the existence of two distinct body types is taken as an ahistorical truth that remains unquestioned. Furthermore, it implies that having a male body is nothing anyone can do anything about. It is discursively constructed as a ‘feature’ that one is born with not something one can actually choose or change (compare Moskos, 2020). Hence, by referring to bodily difference the interviewees implicitly suggest that what they experience is not actually an unearned gender privilege but a differential treatment justified by their having a body type which is more useful for their work in nursing or childcare. In consequence, privilege is reframed as being about something else and hence

silenced. In this process, they again naturalize bodily difference and contribute to reproducing and reinforcing corporeal gender stereotypes.

In order to counter this reframing of gender privilege, it does not suffice to call for a valorization of female bodies. Butler (1990) famously argued already in 1990 that as long as we do not deconstruct sex—that is the differentiation of male and female bodies—sex will always serve to legitimize gender inequalities. In the 30 years since, an extensive body of feminist research has deconstructed binary understandings of female and male bodies (see e.g., Longhurst, 2005). However, our analysis shows that the dichotomy is still employed today for justifying male privilege. It is readily available as a discursive resource that enables men to reframe unearned gender privilege into a legitimate effect of what is perceived as “more useful” bodies. In Connell's terms we could say that merely having a body that is identified as male results in a “patriarchal dividend” and is hence beneficial for men.

In the second justification strategy, our male interviewees refer to individual performance. They emphasise their above average interest, engagement, cleverness, presence and their personality to explain why they receive preferential treatment. This logic ties in with current discourses of neoliberalism (Springer et al., 2016). Neoliberal thought builds on the basic principle of meritocracy, that is the assumption that each individual is rewarded according to their individual performance. Hence, responsibility for success is always attributed to the individual. Subjects are constructed as entrepreneurs of themselves who are required to continuously work on themselves to improve (Scharff, 2016). Above average performance, this logic suggests, will lead to above average promotions. This neoliberal subjectivity (Schwiter, 2016) contributes to camouflaging privilege as it shifts the focus to individual performance and merit and thereby discredits structural differences that lead to discrimination and privilege. This active silencing of the privileged position can be understood as “remedial work—practices that try to cure the damaging effects visibility of privilege has on the gender order (Gherardi, 1994).

Our findings thus align with Niemistö et al. (2020) who show that silencing privilege is closely connected to the recent rise of neoliberal ideologies and the increased dominance of the meritocratic principle (cf. Berg, 2012; Solomona et al., 2005). To an increasing extent, autonomy and being responsible for forging one's own destiny have developed as important objectives for becoming a subject (Kelly, 2006). Thus, people believe they rise based on their individual efforts. “There is this continued belief that we all have the same opportunities, or at the very least, access to the opportunities. The failure or success of a particular individual or group is inexorably linked to individual effort and agency.” (Solomona et al., 2005, p. 160) In contrast to the medieval era, for instance, when hereditary status privileges of lords over peasants were openly demonstrated, the “good enlightenment liberal individual” (Wetherell & Edley, 1999) understands his or her achievements as the result of his or her own hard work (Kimmel, 2018).

Feminist scholars have shown in many contexts how the neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility for success serves as a powerful means to mask (gender) inequalities (cf. e.g., Scharff, 2016; Schwiter, 2013). It disregards that societal norms lead to people being treated differently according to their gender, race, class and other categorizations of social difference. Furthermore, the principle of meritocracy in itself is gendered. Its attributes such as high-performance, capability and efficiency are associated with masculinity rather than femininity. This makes it much easier for men to draw on it and position themselves as meriting. Thus, it is the pervasiveness of neoliberal thought in our society and the gendered construction of meritocracy that allow our interviewees to reframe privilege as their individual merit and thereby camouflage the “patriarchal dividend”.

In sum, the privileging effects of the “patriarchal dividend” that are visible in the narratives of men working in female-dominated occupations are not contested, but immediately reframed as what our interviewees perceive as legitimate differences in treatment based on bodily characteristics and individual performances. Hegemonic masculinity is thereby firmly kept in place, and its potential critique is silenced. Most importantly, this accounting strategy requires an active “doing” on the part of the privileged. It allows for protecting privilege from being put up for debate and critique and is thus silencing privilege.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Research so far has emphasized the importance of making privilege visible to the privileged. In contrast to this, our findings show that privilege does not necessarily go unnoticed by the people affected. Men in female-dominated occupations notice their preferential treatment. However, this visibility does not necessarily lead to contesting privilege. As our findings demonstrate, privilege is acknowledged but then reframed as a legitimate achievement. Our interviewees thus employ an active discursive manoeuvre to silence privilege. In consequence, the “patriarchal dividend” remains uncontested.

Based on these insights, our key argument in this paper is that we need to place closer attention to these manoeuvres, that is to the discourses mobilized for reframing and thereby silencing gender privilege once it has become visible to the privileged. In this paper, we have identified two key accounts that men in female-dominated occupation apply to justify privilege: bodily advantage and individual achievement. It is the underlying discourses of gender essentialism and of neoliberalism that provide the basis for justifying preferential treatment and that must be challenged to dismantle gender privilege. As long as these discourses are dominant narratives in our societies, they are readily available for men to justify their preferential treatment. It is their perceived validity that enables our interviewees to draw on them.

Furthermore, our research points to a blind spot in the current debate. In our study, we could not find any strategies of contesting and refuting privilege. From this, we conclude that we need to extend our knowledge in privilege studies on everyday strategies of refuting privilege. For men in female-dominated occupations such strategies could involve to deliberately not raise their hands in classrooms in which they are given above average attention. They could include pointing out to their supervisors that their female colleagues should be granted the same responsibilities than themselves or refusing to accept promotions if it is not their turn (cf. Peretz, 2020). Developing and putting such strategies up for debate might contribute to unsettling the hegemonic masculinity—the unequal relation of power that fuels and sustains gendered privilege.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We declare that we have read GWO's conflict of interest statement. Author Julia Nentwich has served as Associate Editor of GWO. Apart from this, we have no conflicts of interest to declare.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data cannot be shared.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms. All quotes have been translated from German by the authors.

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