**Leading for Inclusion? Men Supporting and Resisting Gender Equality in Organisations**

**ABSTRACT**

*Purpose* While much research focuses on how women are excluded, this article explores how men can use their positional power to create gender inclusion. *Design/methodology/approach* The article draws on job shadowing and discourse analysis. *Findings* The article highlights four areas in which men can include women. Men’s attempts to include women through bonding fail because men draw on sexualised notions to describe women. Men are able to include women by engaging in practices that disrupt the homogenous reproduction in organisations. If men engage in gender equality efforts, they are often met by simultaneous ridicule and praise. Men also often enjoy career benefits from engaging in gender equality efforts. *Research limitations/implications* The article suggests that without recognising their own power and privilege, it is difficult for men to challenge existing gender relations rather than reproducing them. *Originality/value of the paper* The article contributes an understanding to scholarship around the complexities in analysing and conceptualising how men engage in gender inclusion.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender, Leadership, Men, Middle Managers, Inclusion, Ethnography

**INTRODUCTION**

Scholars in the field of gendered organisations have developed a sophisticated understanding of how mechanisms of exclusion operate in organisational settings (Acker, 1990, 1992, 2006; Bendl, 2008; Britton, 1997; Fletcher, 1999). The organisational response to women’s exclusion is often to encourage women to work onto the self to develop through self-improving techniques into ideal workers (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). This however ignores that organisations are gendered and changing this is more likely to succeed through systematic approaches (Acker, 1990; Britton, 2000; Fletcher, 2004). One way to bring about change in gendered organisations is to reflect on men’s involvement as change agents for gender equality. With gender often being understood to equate to women, which equates to a problem (Calás & Smircich, 1991, 1992), it is unsurprising that many change initiatives around gender equality focus on women. However some organisations are recognising that men are potential change agents for gender equality, too (Prime & Moss-Racusin, 2009). The Male Champions of Change initiatives in Australia (Change, 2017; Metz, 2016), the #HeForShe campaign by United Nations Women (United Nations, 2016) and articles or special issues men’s or business magazines (Davis, 2014; Esquire, 2016; Harrison, 2015) show this increased recognition that men have an important role to play in gender equality efforts.

However, so far academic research has largely focused on how power and privilege work in favour of most men and research that explores men as change agents from an academic perspective is fairly recent (de Vries, 2015; Wahl, 2014) (author citation). If organisations are gendered, men hold power through the interlocking systems of gender and organisations. The gender system is stacked in favour of men as the masculine is preferred to the feminine in much of the Western world (Acker, 1990; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Leidner, 1991; Schippers, 2007). Similarly, organisations tend to be dominated by men in senior and middle management positions (International Labour Organization, 2015). This dual lock on power not only cements the majority of men’s position in organisations but might equally be conceptualised as a potential avenue for changing gendered organisations.

The aim of the article is to explore how men can use their positional power in organisations to create gender inclusion. The article thereby contributes to the growing literature of how men can be conceptualised in gender change processes in organisations. It also contributes to a refinement of gender inclusion approaches in organisations. The article proceeds as follows. First, it is suggested that instead of solely looking at how women are excluded in organisations, it should be explored how gender inclusion can be created and which role men can play in these processes due to their positional power. Second, it is explained how job shadowing and interviews were used to explore how men can generate gender inclusion. In the empirical section, four practices of gender inclusion and exclusion respectively are discussed. Finally, the findings are discussed in the context of the existing literature before a conclusion is offered. The article thereby highlights how men can use their positional power to create gender inclusion in organisations.

**EXCLUDING AND INCLUDING WOMEN IN ORGANIZATIONS**

The literature on gendered organisations has offered a multi-facetted account of how women are excluded from organisations (e.g. Acker, 1990; Merilainen, Tienari, & Valtonen, 2015; Piderit & Ashford, 2003; van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). Much research that explores women’s exclusion has also highlighted the processes through which women develop themselves to be included (Adamson, 2017; Schnurr, 2008). While research has explored men’s identities in the work context and how they enjoy unearned privilege and power (Collinson & Hearn, 2005; Kerfoot & Knights, 1993), scholarship that explores how men can use their power to include women as change agents for gender equality is more recent. Such a perspective is required because it allows highlighting the mechanisms through which gender inclusion can be created.

Research has often pointed to the lack of women in leadership positions (Alvesson & Billing, 2002; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). Existent research has regularly focused on the experiences of exclusion that women encounter on their path to leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Merilainen et al., 2015). While the metaphor of the glass ceiling has regularly been mobilised to describe the invisible yet impenetrable barrier for women to achieve leadership positions (Bendl & Schmidt, 2010; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010; Ng & Sears, 2017), more recently it has also been shown how women often cling to a glass cliff because they are more likely to end up in precarious high-risk leadership positions (Main & Gregory-Smith, 2017; Ryan et al., 2016; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Research has documented the multitude of barriers that women encounter on their path to leadership ranging from double binds (Denissen, 2010; Gherardi & Poggio, 2001) over work-life balance (Seierstad & Kirton, 2015) to media representations (Mavin, Bryans, & Cunningham, 2013). Such research has been valuable in making the barriers for women to enter leadership positions visible.

Many of the suggested pathways to overcome women’s exclusion from leadership roles focuses on what women can do themselves to be perceived as leaders. Specialist interventions such as women-only leadership training have been shown to be beneficial (Ely et al., 2011; Roomi & Harrison, 2010; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003) and women are often encouraged to change themselves and develop agency in order to become better leaders (Adamson, 2017; Ely et al., 2011). One key arena is confidence which women are presumed to be lacking. In their original analysis of gender and the cult of confidence, Gill and Orgad (2016) show confidence can be employed to suggest that women can advance in organisations by simply working on themselves. This contributes to an individualised perspective of how change in organisations can happen (Gill, Kelan, & Scharff, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2016; Scharff, 2012) (author citation). It also contributes to a reaffirming rather than challenging of gender difference-based approaches where women are constructed as different *qua* socialisation or biology (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Moore, 1994; Oakley, 1972). Putting the onus of change in organisations onto women thus runs the risk of individualising gendered experiences and to reify gendered stereotypes.

Prior research has largely explored how men exclude women in the workplace. Research has also explored how men act in concert to systematically exclude women through a range of practices that are often subconscious (Martin, 2001). For instance through bonding with other men, men implicitly or explicitly exclude women. This can happen through sexual objectification of women (Hawkins, 2013) such as through comments and looks (Cockburn, 1991). By objectifying women as the other, men as a group are bonding. It has also been shown that men engage in opportunistic practices that ensure that they endear themselves to other men. These can include sucking up such as by listening to a ‘boring’ man to gain support from that man (Martin, 2001) or men visiting other men at work to engage them on non-work topics for access and opportunities (Martin, 2001). Men also feel more comfortable with people like themselves; it has for instance been shown that men search for candidates in their own networks and prefer to work with other men who might even remind them of themselves when they were younger (van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). Relatedly, selection committees often select people who look like the incumbent thereby reproducing a proven success model (van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). Men have also been shown to hinder women by undermining women-only events (Cockburn, 1991) or men being absent at and not engaging with women’s events (de Vries, 2015). Such research has shown succinctly how men often attempt to exclude women.

While it has been explored how men are excluding women, men’s identities in organisations have also been studied in their own right to show the privilege and power that men profit from. Being closely related to the study of men and masculinities in general (Connell, 1985, 1995; Connell & Wood, 2005; Kimmel, 1993, 2013, Messner, 1990a, 1990b), scholars have started to make the implicit masculine and male norm in organisations visible (Collinson, 1992; Collinson & Hearn, 1996, 2000, Hearn, 1996, 2014; Hearn & Morgan, 1990). Such work critically engaged with how men can enjoy unearned privileges due to their status of being men. Connell (1995) has referred to this as the ‘patriarchal dividend’. Consequently, much academic and practice-based work on men has focused on discussing how men are subjected to a gender system, which restricts them in similar ways to women, although men are able to enjoy invisible privilege by their status as men alone (Flood & Pease, 2005; McAndrew, 1989; O’Neill, 2015; Phipps & Young, 2014). It has long been suggested by scholars of gendered organisations that organisations are designed and set up with men in mind (Acker, 1990; Cockburn, 1991). Within organisations men as the unmarked category has been studied to ensure that men become a discussable group in organisational settings (Collinson & Hearn, 1994, 2000; Puwar, 2004; Salzinger, 2004). Research has also shown sports functions as a way to express masculinity at work (Ryan & Dickson, 2016) or how transmen are making gender visible in the work context (Schilt, 2006). Further it has been stressed that men often hold power in organisations. They hold power due to their status as men within an asymmetrical gendered system and within organisations, where they dominate the higher level of positions which are imbued with more power (International Labour Organization, 2015). While much of this research draws on male-dominated organisations, it has also been shown that in female-dominated professions men enjoy special privileges such as advancing faster due to their position as unusual and the gender hierarchy valuing the masculine over the feminine (Cross & Bagilhole, 2002; Leidner, 1991; Nentwich, Poppen, Schälin, & Vogt, 2013; Simpson, 2004). This shows how the double lock of gender and hierarchy works in favour of men in a variety of contexts.

How men can use their power in organisations due to the gender systems and hierarchical position in organisations, is a fairly recent addition to the literature on gender and organisations. Research in this vein would explore how men can act as change agents for gender equality, which is also a topic of much practitioner interest (Prime & Moss-Racusin, 2009). While there is some research on change agency in organisations (Creed, 2003; Kirton, Greene, & Dean, 2007; Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007), there is comparatively little academic research indicating how men can act as change agents. Research that explores men as change agents for gender equality is indicating it is often men who are in powerful positions in organisations and it thus often them who have the power to include others. In her analysis of male (as well as female) champions of change for gender equality, de Vries (2015) shows how very often the business case for gender equality is foregrounded ignoring the intricacies of gendered leadership. De Vries (2015) also questions in how far focusing men as ‘heroes’ for gender equality is ultimately not strengthening the status quo. Wahl (2014) has explored how male executives challenge the norms around gender in organisations as their awareness of gender increases. However very often the attempts of male managers to construct women in management in a positive light backfires because it leaves the male norm of management intact by presenting women as the exception from the rule. Other research has explored the undoing gender practices that men can use to support gender equality efforts as CEOs and middle managers (author citation). Others have argued that we need to problematize the role of men in gender equality efforts because the bar for what men are required to do is set too low and does not foster systematic change in gender relations (Flood, 2017). While men can play an important role for challenging gender relations in organisations due to their potentially more powerful positions, there is so far extremely limited research that engaged with how men can be involved in creating gender equality in organisations.

While there is a good understanding through existing research of how women are excluded in organisations, how women can be included in organisations - beyond appealing to women to self-improve - is a neglected area of research. Prior research on men and masculinities highlighted how men often enjoy unearned privilege and power but it has not been studied in the same depth how men can use their positional power that is imbued on them through the gender system and organisational structures to include women. In how far this power and privilege can be used to make changes to gender power relations is thus worthy of further exploration. The aim of the article is therefore to explore how men can use their positional power to create gender inclusion.

**METHODOLOGY**

In order to explore how men can use their positional power to create gender inclusion in organisations, I used techniques of job shadowing (Czarniawska, 2008, 2014; Noordegraaf, 2014). The practice of job shadowing entails that researchers are with the researched for longer period of time, for instance an entire work day, while observing what happens and maybe asking questions for clarification (McDonald, 2005). Job shadowing is a rather invasive research strategy and access negotiations are therefore often difficult (McDonald, 2005). I job shadowed three middle managers for a week to explore how these managers created gender inclusion. Middle managers are regularly seen as linchpins connecting the strategic direction of senior leadership to lower levels of hierarchy but who often have a significant role not only in translating but also in shaping strategy (Harding, Lee, & Ford, 2014; Linstead & Thomas, 2002; Rouleau, 2005a, 2005b; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Thomas & Linstead, 2002). The reason to focus on middle managers was that I wanted to understand how espoused values around gender equality are lived in a daily basis through the practices of middle managers. As I was keen to sample middle managers, who are exemplary in their inclusion of women, I approached organisations that had engaged in gender equality efforts for a longer period of time. After lengthy access negotiation processes, three organisations not only agreed to participate in the study but also found middle managers who were willing to be shadowed. The research covers three field sites and three shadowees. One organization, *Accounting*, is a professional services firm in the space of accounting and finance. The second organization, *Broadcasting*, is producing media content. The final organization, *Chemicals*, produces and markets chemicals. Two organizations are privately held while one is publicly held. The organizations were based in Austria, Germany and the United Kingdom. The middle managers did not work in comparable functions, which was not a basis of their selection. The men, who were job shadowed, were selected because their organisations suggested that they had a good awareness of gender issues in the workplace and that their co-workers saw them as particularly inclusive of women. I confirmed this through my initial interviews with them. The definition of middle managers is explicitly wide including everyone who is not in the executive of the organisation and have some individuals reporting to them. Most of the individuals shadowed managed small teams of less than a dozen people. The positions of the middle managers were significantly different ranging from working in communications, over training and development to serving clients. The managers were all white, able-bodied, heterosexual and middle class background and thus belonged to a majority men background. I observed over 130 hours of workplace interactions across the three sites. I observed most of the working days such as working group meetings, casual lunches, networking events etc. There were only a few events such as performance evaluation meetings with staff. During the fieldwork, I noted observations in a hardback book and I wrote detailed notes on my computer at night, transferring, condensing and summarizing some of the days observations (McDonald, 2005). Rather than presuming that the researcher is invisible, I used an approach called ‘spect-acting’ in which the observer is also an actor influencing the process (Gill, 2011). This approach is different from participant observation in that it does not presume an impartial observer but instead conceptualises the researcher as part of the fieldwork. It also showcases that many of the interactions I observed might be orientated toward me as a researcher, at least partly. The researcher clearly has an impact in how practices are displayed and rather than seeing that as a contamination, it is more useful to conceptualise this interaction that the spectator is also an actor (Gill, 2011) calling for further reflexivity in analysing the material.

To supplement the job shadowing part of the study, I conducted 23 individual interviews with the middle managers and their co-workers. Seven in *Accounting*, nine in *Broadcasting* and seven in *Chemicals*. 11 interviewees were men and 12 were women. The interviews were conducted in a discourse analytic tradition (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The average length of the interviews was 47 minutes, which excluded the initial discussion and very often conversations after the taping equipment had been switched off. The interviews were recorded and transcribed fully using transcription services using a version of the Jefferson system[[1]](#endnote-1). The interview transcripts were proofread for accuracy. The interviews were then coded in the software Dedoose by a research assistant fluent in German and English and by myself. The first round of coding followed the interview questions and a largely thematic analysis. The second round of coding focused more closely on practices that had been identified in the literature (author citation, Table 2) and those that emerged from the material which led to the introduction of new codes. In this article the main codes used include: bonding through sexual objectification of women, identifying with the similar, visibility and presence at women’s events, showing openness to failure (admitting mistakes) and displaying emotional intelligence. The final round of coding focused on interpretative repertoires, which are units of sense making and central to discourse analysis (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Those interpretative repertoires were particularly useful when analysing the sense making of practices that I observed or discussed with the participants in interviews. The interpretative repertoires represent the different sections of the empirical analysis. While the focus of the research was originally intended to be on the three managers, very often the observations also yielded wider observations which showed the opposite effect, i.e. men excluding women. Interviews in two of the field sites were conducted in German and interview extracts for this article were translated by me from German into English. I am fluent in both languages. The empirical section discusses four areas where men tried to include women in the work setting. Some of those attempts were more successful than others.

**BEING INCLUSIVE**

The analysis of the material covers four main areas, which structure the sense making around how men can use their positional power to create gender equality. First, it is shown how an attempt to bond failed and how this was called out for being not an inclusive practice for women. Second, it is discussed how men disrupt the tendency to identify with people similar to themselves. Third, it is explored how men often use gender equality in opportunistic ways to advance their own careers. Finally, it is shown how men can support gender equality by supporting specific initiatives that are designed to create gender equality.

*Bonding.* It has been mentioned before that men often bond with other men by sexualising women (Cockburn, 1991; Hawkins, 2013). In the research a similar situation took place where a man did sexualise a woman but it was unclear with whom he was bonding. During an evening event, the moderator, called Bernd, introduced two younger women who were participating in the event. He says the following:

Bernd: I will start with two young women who do not sit up here on the podium. This is Bernadette and [name of another woman]. Could you maybe stand up and show yourself in order for everyone to know whom I am talking about? Bernadette, I want to add, just finished her journalistic training (…) She is a freelance journalist and if anybody could use her, she would be available, as I hear, [slight laughs in audience] (.) only strictly professionally of course.

Apart from the slight laughs in the audience, the statement was not questioned until towards the end of event when Bernadette was invited to reflect on the event, she states the following:

Bernadette: What I missed a bit and which I only noticed when you introduced me,

[Bernd] where you said that I am available for a job, only professionally, that was a dig, probably intended as a funny remark, but that really bothers me a lot at work, that I am constantly reminded of the fact that for men I am a young woman at work and you can take some digs at her in passing. I don’t want to attack your personally (.hee) but that is what I noticed. ((audience is clapping)) (…) I also think that men today are appreciating women and also know that something has to be done, that equality is a good thing (…) And if that works, I think, that the small things in everyday life, such as sexism in the workplace, will disappear relatively fast.

What Bernadette is doing here is to call out the awkward way in which she was introduced and states that such digs undermine her professionally even though they might be well intentioned. It is notable that the emotional labour to state that something was not appropriate is left to a woman, as it is often the case. However Bernadette’s statement is ambivalent in her effort to tell Bernd about her discomfort while also talking about women being appreciated. In a sense Bernd’s introduction reflected appreciation for Bernadette, as a woman who is attractive. Bernadette possibly felt flattered by this statement, which is designed to appreciate at first. This is, in a sense, not surprising because women, too, are caught in the same gender system. However she also realised that is undermines her professionally which his why she spoke up. Bernadette chose to speak about gendered appreciation which is exactly what Bernd was offering. However she then realises that she probably has to speak about equality as well and adds that in the next statement. This might have been her attempt to be inclusive of Bernd and not to offend him.

It is unclear what Bernd attempted to achieve with this sexualised remark. It did not seem to be a conscious decision but it rather felt like something that he had done several times in different settings where it passed without raising any eyebrows. It might even be possible that it created the bonding effect that men often try to achieve by sexualising women and was thus applauded by audience. However in this case, with an audience largely of women, it did not go down too well.

Bernd tries to justify himself by saying:

Bernd: Okay. ((audience is still clapping after Bernadette’s comment)) Yes, if I insulted you, then, I would like to apologise, of course. I simply meant that you are looking for a job and if somebody knows somebody, but if that was uncomfortable then I will learn something from it.

Bernd justifies his remarks by saying that he only had her best intentions at heart and he was not aware of the fact that she might feel insulted. However his apology appears mechanic and he actually apologies for offending her but not the actual remark.

I met Bernd several times during my visit in the organisation and he talked about the incident unprompted but in a joking manner as if he wanted to brush it aside. However he also insisted that this provided a good learning opportunity for him. Comments about his learning were possibly orientated towards me as a researcher studying gender in the workplace. He might have wanted to ensure that I captured that he has learned from it to potentially avoid that it comes back to him. If he has ever changed his behaviour is however not known.

Benjamin also reflected on the incident in the interview and I asked him what he would do:

Benjamin: The first reflex would be to apologise. (.) Well, that that was a, eh, eh, eh a

stupid slip and – I think the most sensible thing is to make a clear break (.hhh), eh, eh to apologise and to say ‘okay, let’s start from the very beginning, that (.) was bullocks’. Trying to fudge it will not work (.) because it is already an issue. Eh, and the less-, or more I try to cover it up (.hhh) the more I confirm that, eh, cannot handle it adequately, and I think, if a, a blunder happens (.hhh) it is the most sensible thing to simply admit it, afterwards it is off the table.

Benjamin here suggests that it is best in such a situation to address the comment straightaway by saying that is was a mistake because at this point in time everyone has noticed it already making it difficult to ignore it. Benjamin therefore suggests addressing it straightaway to deal with the issue rather than letting it sit too long.

This could be seen as an example of benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). However it led to Bernadette’s professional skills being discursively diminished. For Bernd the remarks were well intentioned but the only linguistic repertoire he seemed to have access to in this situation is one that can be read as a dubious advertisement. However what Bernd was doing could be seen as a failed attempt to bond with either a woman and an audience mainly consisting of women. While sexual remarks about women would work well to bond with other men, they did not work well if one attempts to bond with women. It is also interesting to note that Bernadette felt comfortable enough to call out this behaviour as inappropriate, which provided the potential opportunity to avoid such situations in the future.

*Dis-identify with the Similar.* Men also made efforts to ensure that they were not simply developing others who were similar to themselves. This often meant that they were nourishing women to develop their skillset.

I observed for instance how Christoph tries to convince a woman to be an expert on a panel.

*Christoph is organising an event and needs to convene a panel of speakers. He calls a female colleague to ask her if she would be willing to contribute, to be a speaker. I hear the response of the woman because she is on loudspeaker. She is very hesitant about participating in the event. She claims that this would be too political for her and that she might have to engage in topics that are outside of her area of expertise. Christoph tries to assure her that this is not a political event but an event that is designed for mutual learning and as such she would only be talking about her subject matter expertise. She remains hesitant. Christoph makes another attempt to convince her to be a speaker and she says that she would like to think about it. […] [The next day] Christoph receives an email from the woman he invited to be a speaker. She has agreed to participate in the event. Christoph appears happy about it. His strategy to convince her has paid off. I ask him why he wanted the woman on the panel. He responds that she is a great expert on that topic and there are few experts and even fewer female experts who can talk about that area.*

This situation illustrates how Christoph tries to ensure that women are represented at a specific event. It is obviously difficult to tell if a man would have reacted in the same way if he would have been approached as an expert but Christoph was very tenacious to ensure that he convinced her to be on the panel.

A very similar situation occurred in other field setting:

*Junior staff in the organisation had a weekly call to catch up on new developments in the field. Andrew finds out that the call has not happened for a few weeks and tries to explore why. Through a junior member of his he finds out that that this is because the person who used to lead the call has been promoted and reassigned and none has taken on that role. He then walks over to Amelia. I hear how he suggests to Amelia to take on the leadership of the call. Amelia is hesitant. She is not sure that she can do it and that she really wants to do it. Andrew suggests that this would be the kind of activity that would look good if she wants to go for promotion soon. Amelia then agrees to take on the role.*

Similarly to the first example, Amelia needed a bit of convincing to take on the role and only after the career benefits had been spelled out she actually took it on. This required Andrew not only to think of Amelia for this role but also to be tenacious to convince her that this would be a good way to build her profile.

The idea that one has to convince women to take a role also transpired in some of the interviews:

Bastian: [Yes, well, in reality, in reality] women have to be persuaded three times to take over a role.

Bastian here uses an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) to support his claim that women need to be convinced multiple times to take on more responsibility.

Such behaviour has often presented as a gender difference that men have to be aware of. Gender difference is established as a fact, which requires the inclusive manager to take some specific actions.

This was also often been expressed in relation to seeing the world from somebody else’s perspective:

Alexander: So, I think there is a business piece, but then there is a professional piece, so if I look at somebody that I’ve coached in [business area], it’s a really nice guy who just does not have the language or the life experience to know how to interact with people that are very different from them. You know his life experience of women is his second wife who’s not his intellectual equal, is his female PA and it’s not really an equal female professional. So, it’s basically trying to reconfigure for him HE (.) that (.) women as equal as professionals can add to his professional experience by bringing a different thought process to the table and by challenging his thought process and so forth, can help him interact with different clients through appealing to different clients and having different conversations. In other words, how can actually (.) he try and see the world from someone else’s perspective that is not what he thought he knew.

In this quote Alexander describes how through coaching he can open up a new perspective in the people he coaches. Without analysing this specific construction of women that emerges from this construction further which again seems to recur rather stereotypical perceptions of gender, it is used here to make the point that the executive misses something and needs to put himself into a position where can change his worldview.

The thinking around gender seems to be routed in an understanding of difference and if this difference is understood by a manager, the manager can take appropriate action to disrupt processes of similarity attraction; men are less likely to recruit and develop people who are like themselves.

One of my interviewees also made the link between diversity and inclusion and reproducing oneself:

Carl: This is exactly what one learns if one has undergone diversity and inclusion training, namely that one likes to reproduce oneself.

Through the diversity and inclusion training that Carl has received he appears aware that people like to work with others who are like themselves or at least he seems aware that this is a good idea to reproduce in a research interview.

One way in which men can support gender equality is thereby to disrupt the mechanisms of homosocial reproduction (Kanter, 1977) by developing individuals, in this case women, who are different to norm. Those behaviours are encouraged by organisations in the spirit of diversity and inclusion and as a consequence enacting those behaviours might also be beneficial for developing one’s career. This instrumental use for opportunistic reasons is discussed next.

*Opportunism.* Another way in which men were talked about in relation to being opportunistic in terms of their engagement with gender equality. Men are opportunistic in that they support gender equality to advance their own ambitions.

Alexander provides an example:

Alexander: I think there is definitely some cynicism about this, but, you know say for example, when we have (…) promotions (…), it’s amazing

how many white men come to see me to learn about diversity and

inclusion and to convince me that they are committed. HEHE That is

definitely something that you observed I think very well. I don’t think

it’s widespread, actually question mark, I would like it to be more

widespread (.) because again people come at this for different reasons

(…) but for a lot of people who have never considered this before they

need different reasons to get involved and I’ve got a couple of cases

of men who have got involved for cynical reasons, they think it’s a

good strategic career enhancer, even at the very top of the

organisation they think this is good, but then actually through

engagement, they have learnt more and they have thought more, I

think they have developed into more of a genuine interest in it rather

than just a strategic interest.

With diversity and inclusion being part of the evaluation in this organisation, Alexander suggests that men get involved in gender equality work not because they believe in gender equality but rather because senior leaders want to achieve gender equality in the organisation and if men further down the chain of command display it, this allows them to advance their own careers. What is interesting here is that Alexander does not necessarily see that as negative because in his view, it is then possible for these white men to learn about diversity and inclusion and move from being cynical to being genuinely interested.

Another similar example of an opportunistic engagement with gender equality is recounted by Bianca:

Bianca: He [a colleague] (.) wanted to make a woman a departmental management (.) but she was still (.) on parental leave. (.) And that [being in an executive role part-time] was not possible back then. Well, executives have to (.) be available 100%, and back then it is not possible that (.) executives work part-time and then he, because he valued the woman, turned to the women’s network for support and together with him we have pushed it through. He (inaud 08:57) did not necessarily support women but wanted this female colleague in that position (…) That is why I say it wasn’t (.) necessarily an issue of promoting women but he was at least clever enough that he (.) also (.) that he pointed to the gender equality dimension and made it a gender issue.

In this example Bianca recounts how she helped a colleague to employ a woman in a leadership role in spite of the fact that she was only working part-time. In this organisation a leadership role could only be taken on if the person works full-time. He ‘played the gender card’ by making it an issue about women. Bianca seems not convinced that he was genuinely committed to gender equality but she suggests that the manager used gender equality as a strategic tool to ensure that he was able to employ the woman in the role that he wanted.

The cynical, strategic or opportunistic use of gender equality to advance the own career or indeed one’s own ambitions suggests that gender equality is being used by men to advance their own career. While earlier research has shown that men engage in opportunistic ways to advance their career, such as listening to a ‘boring’ man, now gender equality has become a adornment can be used to advance one’s own career.

*Supporting Women-Focused Initiatives.* Men were also regularly involved in initiatives designed to support gender equality such as women’s networking events.

*We sit in Benjamin’s office. As usual the door to the neighbouring office where his team sits is open. Birte in the office next door notices (potentially through seeing an email or spotting it on the website) that there is a girls’ day planned in the organisation and complains that this is discriminatory for ‘boys’. Her sons are unable to attend. Benjamin gets up and walks over to explain that the boys can come to visit the organisation whenever they want through regularly open days. He explains that this is a special day for girls to develop their interest in technical areas. Birte says ‘As long as my boys can visit, I am happy’.*

In this situation it would have been easy for Benjamin to ignore the criticism Birte offers in regard to the girls’ day and it would appear as though that the girls’ day means that boys are discriminated against. The comments were not targeted at Benjamin but presumably at the two other women she shares an office with. However, Benjamin overhears the remarks and feels the need to go over to explain the thinking behind the girls’ day. This ensures that the initiative is fully understood by his team but also that the idea of boys being discriminated is refuted.

However engaging on gender equality initiatives or even showing an interest in it often means that men are put in a minority position.

Benjamin talks about a seminar on gendered language:

Benjamin: It was very difficult, I think, for a (.hhh) man, in such (.), well, we had this seminar, eh, its name was ‘the language of men, the language of women,’ well, originally it was intended for women only but then we said ‘well, actually it would make sense if men could attend, too’. (.hhh). We then, extended it to men and as a consequence there were ten women and one or two men in the seminar. Eh, these two men were the minority and experienced what many women experience in male dominated groups. (.hhh) They even made fun of the quota man, eh, eh and appreciate him (.hhh) but it is a strange atmosphere. (.hhh) Or even giving excessive praise ‘I see, how nice that you are interested in the topic’ again creates (.hhh) an imbalance. The necessity of emphasis alone creates, eh, an imbalance that (.hhh), eh , eh, I think, is more prevailing at the beginning – one will get used to it, but this requires a certain (.) maturity and strength that has to be handled constructive and thoughtful.

What Benjamin describes here is that men who are interested in learning more about gender not only experience being in a minority position, they also experience that they are ridiculed for being there. While men were ridiculed, they also enjoyed a special status: they were commended on being there. Men thereby occupy a dual position of being an object of ridicule but also being praised for their presence.

*Christoph has agreed to lead an important work package on gender in the organisation which was motivated by his personal interest in the topic but also the ability to lead an important change project in the organisation which can build his profile. I ask him how this is received that he has taken this on in addition to his other duties. He recounts that some of the men reacted rather surprised and presumed that he had been asked to take this on but surely could not have volunteered for it. The other men seemed to presume that he had been given this additional task for doing something wrong. I ask him how he reacted to that. He said he just explained that he is fully committed to the gender agenda and sees that as an important strategic goal for the organisation. He suggests that after having done this role for a while, it is no longer seen as unusual.*

Showing an interest in gender equality is often seen as something that is unusual for men and the comments that Christoph received indicate that men are given this task rather than voluntarily engaging in it. Christoph seems to have responded by explaining his commitment but it would well be imagined that other men find Christoph’s involvement in the gender equality initiative dubious.

This indicates that for men to show an involvement in gender equality is considered unusual. It disrupts the gender order where gender issues are firmly associated with women. Women attending such an event is seen as normal and expected rather than as something that has to be commented on. Men showing an interest in gender equality raises eyebrows and this behaviour is questioned by other men as well as women. This means that men who engage in gender equality challenge the gender order and are punished with ridicule and surprise. At the same time, they might also experience praise for showing an interest in the subject and their involvement might even be seen as giving gender equality special importance which is similar to what men in female dominated occupations experience (Cross & Bagilhole, 2002; Nentwich et al., 2013; Simpson, 2004; Williams, 1995). It is also seen as unusual for men to be interested in something that is perceived to not affect them.

**DISCUSSION**

The previous sections have discussed four areas that men use to include women in organisations. The first area centred on how a man used a register that he probably regularly used in male-dominated groups to bond (Cockburn, 1991; Hawkins, 2013) to address women. His remarks were constructing a woman in a sexualised way, which was perceived as taking away her professionalism. In this situation the woman called out this behaviour as inappropriate. One could read this as an attempt of a man to be inclusive of women but using a rather awkward approach to achieve this. A second way in which men tried to be inclusive of women was through ensuring that they were counteracting the tendency to socialise with people similar to themselves. The literature has identified this is a way to encourage the inclusion of women (van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). While I observed a few situations where this was clearly attempted, it was not evident if these processes were conscious or subconscious. While diversity and inclusion training had brought the tendency to identify with the similar to a conscious level for at least one of the research participants, others seem to have embedded a mindset of inclusion in their daily practices and seemed to have developed or could draw on pre-existing empathetic skills.

While men were trying to include women, they often seem to base their efforts on stereotypical assumptions of what women are like. One of such areas centres on confidence and that women lack the confidence to put themselves forward and take on challenging assignments or roles. In line with cult of confidence that Gill and Orgad (2016) discuss the presumption that women lack confidence to apply for positions and need extra support, can construct women as lacking. While this often feeds into a ‘fix yourself’ discourse for women themselves, it also places the onus of change in regard to gender relations onto women. Furthermore it leaves men in the position of saviours who help and support women. This is presumably what Bernd was attempting but which backfired. This indicates that more critical engagement with how gender dynamics work and which different forms they can take might be useful to avoid recurring to essentialist or stereotyped notions of gender. However it has to be acknowledged that the premise of the article, exploring how men can use their positional power to create gender inclusion, does rely on some of the same binary understanding of heteronormative gender.

The research has shown that mechanisms not akin to men in women’s professions are at play when men engage in gender equality work (Cross & Bagilhole, 2002; Nentwich et al., 2013; Simpson, 2004; Williams, 1995). If men become active on initiatives that are designed to be more inclusive to women, they are often met with a mix of ridicule and praise. What this indicates is that men being interested in gender equality are unusual. It reflects the fact that most organisational initiatives around gender equality are framed to benefit women. Although the gender equality initiatives in the three organisations were framed differently (author citation), it appeared to me that a key outcome of gender equality would be to increase the number of women who stay with the organisation and who ideally advance into a leadership role. There was less emphasis on men as an underrepresented group in certain professional groups (albeit there was one programme that focused on fathers). It was unusual for men to be involved in gender equality efforts because this was seen as a way through which they could undermine their own career prospects. If the focus is on advancing women this could mean that men’s changes of progressing are reduced. However the men who engaged in gender equality were often constructed as doing so because they were interested in showing a behaviour, in this case gender inclusion, that was seen as conducive to advancing their own career because it was constructed within the organisation as something that could be used to show that one fulfils a requirement used for performance evaluation. Men engaging in gender equality was in this case serving men’s self-interest and supported their position of power and privilege. Rather than disrupting privilege this opportunism supported existing power relations.

If men aim to include women in organisations, they do this from a position of power because they do hold the power to include others qua their gender and hierarchical status. As de Vries (2015) and others (author citation) have stated, this often leads to the impression that it is heroic men who need to rescue women. Including women then becomes an act of chivalry without acknowledging that this dynamic is a deeply gendered one. Thereby men’s own positions are left unexamined similar to what authors on men in organisations have stressed (Collinson, 1992; Collinson & Hearn, 1994, 2005; Salzinger, 2004). There is no examination of the powerful positions that men as a group inhabit. Similarly, the privilege that men can enjoy is left unexamined. Men still do not know what it feels like to be excluded through a system which is built around an ideal worker who is significantly different to you (Acker, 1990, 2006). If men are able to realise their own position of power and privilege, they might be in a better position to include those who are different.

It has therefore been shown how complex actions and conceptualisations of gender inclusion by men are. Many of the actions discussed support traditional conceptions of gender rather than challenging them. The gender binary is left intact and the number of women in senior roles is increased. However in how far women in senior roles will significantly change the gender culture of the organisation or cultivate more inclusive practices is left unexamined. Men often support the inclusion of women on the basis that they act from a position of power and privilege, which often goes unnoticed. Without acknowledging this power and privilege endowed on men as a group, it is challenging to escape the perception that men act out of kindness in a chivalrous or heroic way.

**CONCLUSION**

With much research on gender and organisations focusing on women, this article has contributed to the scholarship that tries to understand men’s involvement in gender equality within organisations. The aim of the article was to explore how men can use their positional power to create gender inclusion. Four practices through which men can create gender inclusion were discussed. First, it was explored in how far men’s attempts to bond through praising remarks that stressed sexuality over professionalism failed. Second, it was highlighted how dis-identifying with the similar can be employed to attempt to break mechanisms of homogeneous reproduction. However in doing so, often stereotypical assumptions about gender were drawn on. Third, the article pointed to how men’s engagement in gender equality is often due to opportunistic reasons. Rather than undermining career advancement because now women are the new ideal worker, men who are attempting to include women can occupy the position of the new ideal and thus accelerate their career. Finally, it was discussed how men are uniquely positioned in gender equality efforts being ridiculed and praised at the same time. This pointed to the fact that gender equality is still seen as something about and for women and men even when involved in gender equality efforts appear not to be directly affected by it.

The article thereby contributes an understanding of how complex it is to analyse and conceptualise men’s power to create gender inclusion. While it appears central to move beyond women’s exclusion in organisations, reflecting on how men can be involved in gender equality remains a multifaceted and in fact thorny issue. Conceptualising men’s involvement in gender equality should not rely on the assumptions of a heroic leader who rescues women from gender inequality (de Vries, 2015) (author citation). Equally, it is problematic to assume that just because men are involved in gender equality, this will in fact disrupt gendered power relations. As long as the masculine is hierarchically valued over and above the feminine and as long as men engaged in gender equality efforts remain the exception rather than the rule, it will be difficult to conceptualise how men’s involvement in gender equality dismantles gendered power relations.

The article has pointed to a number of areas, which might be useful to explore in further research. First, it would be interesting to explore in how far men are including women through a conscious or subconscious effort and if how far that makes a difference in terms of effectiveness. Second, there seems to be the assumption that creating a more gender-inclusive culture will also increase the number of women across the organisation but particularly in senior positions. This assumption has to be problematized and both phenomena need to be linked in a causal relationship to substantiate such claims. It has been suggested in this article that men need to realise their own privilege to be successful change agents for gender equality and further research should explore the dynamics through which this can happen. It would also be elucidating to explore in how far women are colluding in the production of gender inequality due to their investment into the existing gender system by either finding sexist comments funny or flattering or by excluding other women. Furthermore it would be useful to explore how different groups of men are engaging on gender equality. While this study focused on largely majority men who were white, heterosexual, able-bodied and middle class, men who do not share this background are likely to experience change agency on gender equality differently. Finally, it would be useful to consider in how far the binary constructions around men and women could be broken down in thinking around men and women as change agents for gender equality. There might be room to explore gender change agency beyond such fixed binary heteronormative identities. It is evident that emerging scholarship on men and gender equality has to be careful in analysing and conceptualising this dynamic to avoid reproducing gendered hierarchies and power relations. It has been suggested in this article that without acknowledging their own privilege it is unlikely that men are able to challenge existing gender relations. Only when men being inclusive of women becomes the norm, the dynamics of gender in organisations are likely to be transformed.

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1. The transcription system is an adapted and simplified version of the Jefferson system (.) is a short notable pause, (0.9) an exactly timed longer pause (more than 5 seconds, here 9 seconds), (inaud) inaudible, (text) transcriber clarification on unclear parts of tape, ((text)) annotation of non-verbal activity or supplemental information, (...) material deliberately omitted, ‘...’ direct speech reported by interviewee, wor- sharp cut off, abrupt halt or interruption of utterance, wo:rd extreme stretching of preceding sound, prolongation of a sound, HAHA loud laughter, HEHE laughter, TEXT strong emphasis or loud volume of speech, ^Text^quieter than usual, [...] start and end point of overlapping talk, = break and subsequent continuation of a single utterance, <text> indicates that the speech was delivered much slower than usual for the speaker, >text< indicates that the speech was delivered much faster than usual for the speaker, (hhh) audible exhalation, (.hhh) audible inhalation. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)