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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pajumets, M., & Hearn, J. (2012). Post-Socialist Fathers 'At Home' and 'Away from Home' in 'Old Europe': Facing the Challenge through Masculine Identity Talk. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 4(1), 31-47. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-362833>

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## Post-Socialist Fathers ‘At Home’ and ‘Away from Home’ in ‘Old Europe’: Facing the Challenge through Masculine Identity Talk

Marion Pajumets\* & Jeff Hearn

### Abstract

This article focuses on those Estonian male migrants to ‘Old Europe’<sup>1</sup> who spend most of their time in the domestic realm as caring fathers and supportive spouses to their wives, who are meanwhile advancing their transnational careers. In this context, masculine identity talk can be understood in terms of strategies employed in response to the challenge to the men’s masculinity that this atypical life choice is likely to entail. Identity is viewed in this article as a *processual* phenomenon that is relentlessly, although not always deliberately, (re)formulated in discourse, rather than determined by the assigned social roles.

Analysis of in-depth interviews reveals that there are varied discourses in use that efficiently reconstruct the interviewees’ sense of personal significance. Interestingly, men predominantly combine ‘alternative’ discourses (‘caring father’, ‘supportive spouse’, ‘civilised adult’), which potentially undermine Estonian idealised masculinity, with the ‘conservative’ discourses (‘professional man’, ‘well-off’), that reinforce the Estonian male norm. Men draw on a range of potentially oppositional and conflicting resources for constructing masculinity, without much reflexive selection from their part. Hence, the discourses men engage in position the men as much as the men appear to consciously position themselves in the discourses. This poststructuralist account of identity is located within a more structural historical context of transition and change in contemporary Europe.

**Keywords:** masculinities, migration, discourse, identity talk, intersectionality, Estonia.

This paper analyses ‘masculine identity talk’ as a strategy of male secondary migrants for creating respectable selves. We aim to identify the discursive strategies Estonian fathers living abroad use to construct a personal sense of being an ‘adequate man’, while living under circumstances that might challenge it. The men in this study have migrated to follow their women partners who are building professional careers outside Estonia. Rather typically for ‘secondary migrants’, the study participants’ connection to occupational life has been severely reduced, if not totally suspended. While men and masculinity are culturally very much equated with activities and powers in the public sphere, the men in this study are for the most part leading their lives in the private domestic realm, focussing on being ‘good’ spouses and parents. It is unnecessary to emphasise that those private domain activities are culturally highly feminised, and most probably somewhat feminising to the men practising them.

By arranging their lives the way they have, the participants may (un)intentionally undermine some societal expectations of men (as well as of women). Therefore, it is expected that they are likely to engage in reformulating what being an adequate, non-problematic representative of the male gender entails. ‘Masculine identity talk’ – a form of routine verbal identity work – is an individual response to the challenges outlined, as well as the topic of this analysis. We choose not to conceptualise individual

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1 By ‘Old Europe’ we refer to those European countries that had parliamentary democratic systems and market economies prior to 1989. Most but not all, such as Norway and Switzerland, belonged to the European Union before the 2004 enlargement. In this paper ‘New Europe’ refers to those Central and Eastern European countries that had socialist regimes prior to 1989. Many, but not all, have joined the EU since.

responses to these challenges merely in terms of 'identity talk' since what is at stake here is not simply a sense of personal significance and dignity, but also a masculinity that is rather unthinkable, at least for someone with an Estonian background, without a status grounded in the powers of the world of paid work.

This analysis is situated within a broad historical frame, but it also uses poststructuralist approaches, suggesting that language is a central means of creating meanings in this world, including what is meant by 'personal significance' and 'masculinity'. As an analytic framework, the notion of 'positioning in discourse' (Davies & Harré 1990) is applied. The concept of positioning "works at both the individual and the structural level, offering a way of acknowledging both the power of societal discourses to construct persons and the capacity of persons to construct themselves and others." (Burr 2003: 190-191). Hence, this is an analysis of the discursive strategies that men, who in some respects transgress, apply in order to cope with their situation. In order to set this macro-historical scene, we begin by considering the broad gendered global and migratory context of our study, and then proceed to discuss the specific national Estonian gender order from which the men have moved, and the situation regarding recent Estonian migration, before describing methods and analysis. We seek to place the poststructuralist readings of the interview accounts within a more structural historical context of transition and change within Europe.

## Gendering the global and migratory context

The current study needs to be placed in a broad context of contemporary gendered global change, migration, and citizenship. From 1960 to 2006, international migration in the world increased from 75 million persons to 191 million (United Nations 2006). Almost one in every ten persons living in more developed regions is a migrant (ibid). The impact of migration is, therefore, probably one of increasing importance. Recent cross-border labour migration is an intrinsic part of globalisation, alongside the movement of capital, commodities and popular culture.

The broad field of migration studies typically addresses macro-scale issues such as: the economic effects of foreign labour on the labour market and macro-economic performance of the receiving country, push and pull factors of moving to work in another country, and various brain drains. In recent years, however, there has been significant growth of focus on the connections between migration, gender relations and global power relations. An important contribution is Arlie Hochschild's (2003/2000) work on the 'global nanny chain', the process where childcare is skimmed off from the global poor, such as women from the Philippines, for the benefit of the global rich, such as women in California (see also Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Salazar Parreñas 2000). Other studies on migrant women and their adaptations and difficulties have addressed migrant workers in the sex industry and 'mail order brides'; many such women come from backgrounds marked by grinding poverty, unemployment, and political turmoil (Narayan 1995).

Compared with work on women, research focus has rather rarely been on how the experience of migration is affected by the migrants' 'maleness', and how masculinities are reformulated in the context of different forms of migration within changing global relations. Having said that, one arena of gendered, indeed sexual, research on migrant men that has become relatively well established is that on the movement of gay and bisexual men into urban centres, such as London, New York or San Francisco (D'Emilio 1983). Lionel Cantú, for example, has analysed how US immigration policies restrict the migration of gay and bisexual Latino men, therefore, reinforcing dominant heterosexual and white masculinities (Cantú 2009; see also Vasquez del Aguila 2011)

A rather different set of trajectories is emphasised by Mike Donaldson and colleagues (2009) in their examination of the renegotiations of the masculinity of men who have moved to Australia from diverse regional and cultural origins and backgrounds. The contributors to the volume

emphasised that migrant men generally consider their authority and power, both 'at home' and 'overseas' to be based upon work they are paid to do. Work is a 'key element' in their manhood. Men feel reduced, used and taken-for-granted when performing work beneath their skill levels, not to mention the disempowerment and emasculation that unemployment brings. Male migrants' conceptions of themselves were also affected by women's greater opportunities in Australia to work and be economically and socially independent of men. Migration to Australia changed the household divisions of labour and subverted the type of masculinity based on being a head of the family and the breadwinner of the house (Donaldson & Howson 2009).

A third example concerns men, masculinities and migration in relation to fatherhood. Contemporary changes in 'local global constructions of fatherhood' have been identified in terms of the realms of the economic, the political, the geographical, and personal experience (Hearn 2002). More specifically, Hearn and Niemistö (2012) have analysed the relationship of fathering and the practices of male managers of Finnish transnational corporations. They point to the strengthening of the ideology of separate spheres due to men working abroad. "The more time the father managers had spent in expatriate work, the greater the probability that their women partners stayed as housewives. Some women had dropped out from their education to take care of the family. Some men emphasised that their wives 'volunteered' themselves to give up their careers." (also see Hearn et al. 2009: 57-59).

As already noted, some labour migrations can be understood as part of globalising transnational business and governmental activity. Given the barriers that women face in striving for international career opportunities, the typical primary high-skilled and well-paid labour migrant still tends to be male. Not surprisingly, the importance attached to the support of the spouse and the family in various phases of the expatriate assignment often rests on the assumption that the spouse is female and will not work abroad in a career-related position (Schuler et al. 2004). The assumption of the male expatriate is, however, challenged in this study on men who are both male partners of female highly skilled migrants and typically stay-at-home fathers. So the men who are the focus of this study are an unusual group as partners of women whose careers have led to migration as a consequence of their employment by transnational organisations.

To conclude, Pyle and Ward (2003) state that as economic activities become more global, some countries and groups benefit, but the hardships of many others increase. As discussed, this applies to women in several circumstances, but it also applies to certain men, as globalisation creates potential for extensions of power for some men and loss of power for other men (Hearn 2009). As for our study participants, they obviously enjoy many gendered, sexual, national and ethnic privileges: they are not sent back from the Schengen border, as gay Mexican men would most likely be; nor do they suffer from degrading sexualisation that young women from the 'New Europe' are still likely to confront in 'Old Europe'; nor are they living on social welfare. Yet those husbands have to deal with considerable challenges to their gender identity in order to really benefit from their migration to the most prosperous and democratic regions of contemporary world. Also, as discussed in the next section, the gender aspects of their culture of origin do not facilitate this task for them.

## The historical structural context

In order to contextualise the identity talk of men migrating from Estonia, the current analysis, though poststructuralist in orientation, needs to be placed within a broader historical structural context of transition. This involves not only referring to both the Estonian gender order and emigration patterns from Estonia, but also the more general question of changes in relation to the European Union and the possibilities for migration, citizenship and identity talk that thereby open up.

## The Estonian gender order

Although the participants of this study reside mostly in 'Old Europe' – Belgium, Luxemburg, Switzerland, Germany and Finland – Estonia and its (neo-conservative) gender order most probably remain an important frame of reference to them. As such, the bulk of Estonians share rather clear views on 'normal' masculinity and femininity. Those are vividly expressed in the division of labour between men and women. To begin with, as legacies of Soviet occupation, women are almost as active in the labour market as men. Yet women and men generally occupy different parts of the labour market. Women are over-represented in the education, health and social care sectors, while they are rather marginal in the managerial and high official ranks (Masso 2010).

The Estonian political elite is a vivid symbol of the professional segregation by gender. After the recent elections in Spring 2011, women's representation fell in the Estonian Parliament, as well as in government. There is now only one female minister, and out of the 101 parliamentarians only 20 are women. As a consequence of the combined horizontal and vertical gender segregation, the country's average hourly gender pay gap is 30%, making it the largest among the European Union member states (Eurostat 2010).

As for the division of labour at home, women are generally naturalised as care givers for young children (Pajumets 2010). They typically perform daily, time consuming chores, such as cooking, cleaning rooms, taking care of laundry and clothes, washing dishes, shopping for food, while the majority of men are responsible for only two types of domestic tasks – construction work around the house and keeping the car roadworthy. Compared to 'women's responsibilities' the latter normally do not demand continuous effort, and these days those kinds of tasks are often paid for as services from the labour market (Vainu et al. 2010). As for the general values of the Estonian population, Inglehart and Welzel (2005) positioned Estonia in their 'world values map' as a typical ex-communist country that has not yet gone through a culture shift from materialist to post-materialist values. Compared to Protestant Europe and English speaking countries, Estonians tend to prioritise working, earning and spending money over self-expression through participation in community life, civil society or organised culture. Kalmus (2010) states that the value sets of Estonian men and women differ considerably – while men value more success and technological power, women attribute more importance to spiritual harmony, social and environmental well-being. It is partially from this cultural backcloth that participants in this study may reconstruct their gender identities.

## Estonian emigration patterns

A large part of the challenge the research participants have to react to has to do with their migration from Estonia. Hence, this provides an occasion to put their experience in the wider context of Estonians' work-related cross-border emigration. To begin with, in the Soviet era Estonia labour was rather immobile; the vast majority could only work within the borders of USSR. Estonians started to work abroad after regaining independence in 1991 and more substantially since 2004, when the country became a member of the EU.

Tammur and Rannala (2010) argue that until now there is no reliable statistical data on the number of Estonian external migrants and work migrants since many people have no motivation to inform the Population Register of their departure. Another problem is that the term 'emigrant' has not been developed consistently. It sometimes includes cross-border commuters in addition to 'permanent' transfers. It is estimated that the number of Estonians working abroad might be around 15,000 people (Krusell 2009: 66). However, it has been suggested that the number of external migrants from Estonia might be as much as 107,000 people (Kõre 2011). This is a considerable amount, since the Estonian total population is only about 1.3 million people. The largest numbers of persons who have emigrated

worked or are working in Finland, Sweden, Norway and the UK (Krusell 2009: 68), that is, in relatively well-off countries in 'Old Europe'. A higher salary has been the most important reason why Estonians seek work abroad (Krusell 2009: 67). For two decades, the issue of 'brain drain' has been hotly debated in the Estonian media. The country has been losing its skilled labour force, especially nurses and physicians, to the richer neighbouring countries such as Finland and Norway. This has created bitterness because there is no surplus labour in the Estonian medical sector.

## Transformations of European citizenship

Transnational employment, migration and, in this study, atypical gendered patterns of family life often have implications for questions of citizenship across and between nation-states. Movement and migration between countries can pose specific citizenship opportunities and challenges for individuals and contribute to the emergence of new social and cultural spaces, in which intersectional gendered social practices, for example, organising care of children, are often relatively uncharted. Interestingly, in this study, these new social and cultural spaces and practices are constructed by the post-socialist transformations, and especially the entry of Estonia into the European Union, and 'European' or EU citizenship, albeit with its limitations and fragmentations (Wiener 1997, 1998). None of the interviewees spoke of problems with their Estonian citizenship, something unthinkable a generation earlier. Indeed the connection between Estonia and the EU is concretised with the employment of the men's female partners in transnational organisations in 'Old Europe', including the European Commission itself. These reformulations of citizenships are both sites of progressivist gender changes and possible new inequalities (Oleksy et al. 2011). These changing forms of citizenship concern both formal citizenship rights and 'intimate citizenship' (Oleksy 2009) around issues of family, care and personal and emotional life.

Together, these three questions of the Estonian gender order, Estonian emigration patterns, and changing citizenships within the EU provide key historical, structural contextualisations of the current study, making possible specific discourses, subject positions and forms of gender identity work.

## Research methods

This analysis is a part of a larger project on varied gendered aspects of the migration of women diplomats and women doctors and their families. The data set involves ten couples, altogether nineteen interviewees<sup>2</sup>; women were physicians or worked for different EU institutions such as the European Commission. Generally, the men were also highly educated. Before migrating they had worked as: owners or managers of different companies, teachers, as an IT specialist, a journalist, a researcher, an engineer, and a military officer. This analysis only tackles the identity work of men.

The first author of this paper conducted all the interviews with the men. The open interview design facilitated talking about topics that participants themselves spontaneously raised. The venue of the conversation was decided by the participants and was perhaps somewhat restricted since they resided in different regions of Europe. Half of the conversations were conducted via Skype, which participants had on their home computers. The plan was to interview men and women partners separately, yet at the same time and by different interviewers. However, with seven couples this arrangement did not work out. This was due to practical reasons, such as childcare. In those cases, men were interviewed before their partners. So as much as possible was done in order to assure that men's accounts have been only minimally influenced by their partners' opinions. Prior to the interview, all the participants were introduced to an information sheet with the topics of primary interest to the research group,

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2 One woman exercised her freedom to withdraw from the project after initial agreement to participate.

the practical proceedings of the project, and, last but not least, the ethical principles of the team's<sup>3</sup> work. The average length of the interview was around two hours, though some interviews were twice as long. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Some basic information should also be given about the changes in family finances due to the migration of the couples. As a rule, migrating to locations with some of the highest costs of living in the contemporary world increased the incomes of the families. As for the power relations between the partners, women gained considerably due to working abroad; men generally on the contrary lost a large part of their previous and what they perceived as their 'normal' income and, therefore, their financial independence. Men's connectedness to paid work and income generating opportunities varied considerably. Three men kept their jobs in Estonia with diminished workloads and commuted between two countries on a weekly or monthly base. Two stayed in their country of destination while continuing remote work on some minor projects in Estonia. Four married partners of Estonian female diplomats received a rather moderate subsidy from the Estonian state provided that they did not work. Some owned real estate back in their homeland that gave them some income. At the time of the interviews no men worked for a company registered in their country of destination; hence, if they did have income it was an Estonian-scale income, which was rather moderate for someone living in locations as expensive as Finland, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland and Luxemburg. The interview extracts presented in the analysis section represent patterns of identity talk that frequently occur in the interview material. They were selected from many similar extracts on the basis of their clarity and conciseness. The research material was analysed with the principles of 'subject positioning in discourse' (Davies & Harré 1990), which is outlined in the second part of the next subsection. NVivo8 was used in this analysis.

## 'Identity talk', 'agency', and 'subject positioning in discourse'

### Identity talk

Interviews with men suggest that there is likely to be a challenge if not a problem of identity among the male secondary migrants. So what is identity, and how can it be enhanced or challenged? The literature on identity is very wide-ranging. The concept is rather elastic and may cover everything from birth certificates to very intimate views on how people see themselves, and what makes them different from others. However, identity is often disaggregated into two dimensions: 'social identity' and 'personal identity' (Howard 2000). The former includes identities attributed to others in an attempt to situate them as social objects. They are assigned primarily on the basis of information derived from looking at someone's clothing, behaviour and the place and time of his or her action (Snow & Anderson 1987).

Personal identities, on the other hand, refer to the meanings attributed to the self by the actors themselves; they are self-designations or self-attributions constructed in the course of interaction. Snow and Anderson suggest that "While structurally based roles and role relationships function as an important springboard for personal identities, they are neither automatic indicators nor determinants of the latter" (1987: 1366-1367). Such an account provides some grounds for a degree of flexibility in the identities and identity work of the men of this study. While they might not perform the role of a professional, a main breadwinner, perhaps a taxpayer – all of which are culturally considered normative for the male gender – they still have some efficient means to achieve a positive view of the self. This work suggests the rejection of the claim that identity is given or stable. On the contrary, in this paper a *processual* perspective on identity construction is adopted. According to Jay Rounds (2006:

3 The research team includes one doctoral student, the first author of this paper, and two master students – Kaisa Kaha and Lee Maripuu – as well as their supervisors. All are from Tallinn University, except for the second author of this paper.

135), rather than being a concrete and stable 'thing' that can be defined, identity is more realistically understood as a process unfolding in time. Hence, our focus should perhaps not be on who someone is, but instead on what is someone *doing* about identity. Such doings or actions related to identity can be conceptualised as identity work: "the process through which we construct, maintain, and adapt our sense of personal identity, and persuade other people to believe in that identity." (Rounds 2006: 133). Moreover, 'identity talk', the focus of this analysis, is an important variety of identity work. It is also rather accessible to all groups of society since 'talk is cheap' and easier compared to alternative domains of identity work, such as buying and wearing expensive clothes. People actively produce identity as they talk even if they do not perceive their involvement in identity construction (see Pajumets & Hearn under review).

Building an analysis on the concept of identity talk puts language centre stage in constructing identity. This paper assumes that very little in the social world has any essential, independent existence outside language, in the sense that language enables us to think, speak, give meaning to the world, and take action based on those meanings. Discourses also define gender identities among other aspects of selves; they allow our sense of self to take shape (Burr 2003). Hence, this paper defines discourses in line with Foucault as "practices that systematically form the subjects of which they speak" (1972: 49).

## Agency

The question of human agency is central to all scholars studying identity work. Agency divides the scholarly community into two main camps: a social theory strand and a poststructuralist cultural theory strand (Roseneil & Seymour, 1999). Anthony Giddens is probably the most prominent contemporary sociologist who theorises the intentional actions of the person. He states that the self is "a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible", and "we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves" (1991: 75).

While a Giddensian social theoretical approach highlights the active, creative, conscious practices, a poststructuralist view of agency could be said to be more pessimistic in some respects. It emphasises the processes of *subjectification*, in which human beings have little agency against the power of ideology that interpellates them through social institutions such as family or school (Althusser 1971). Chris Weedon argues that the subjectivity that people take for their own is most obviously the site of the consensual regulation of individuals. This occurs through the individual identifying with particular subject positions within discourses (1987: 112). Agency can, therefore, easily get lost as people swim in the sea of language and other signs, a sea that is typically invisible because it is the very medium of existence as social beings (Burr 2003: 109). In most poststructuralist approaches, subjects have relatively few resources to resist or transform dominant discourses and, therefore, to produce new identities.

The exercise versus the loss of agency in identity construction is, however, not just a theoretical matter, but also deeply political. Studies show that many social groups such as homeless street people (Snow & Anderson 1987), older homosexual people (Rosenfeld 1999) or victims of workplace bullying (Ludgen-Sandvik 2008) work on their identities rather purposefully to fight the social stigma. To an extent, the men participating in this study also have to mitigate their stigma when faced with Estonian social norms for men and masculinity. Hence, a more agentic view of identity leaves individuals more resources to position themselves in social hierarchies, while subjectification by language gives them little space for personal gender dignity and upward mobility.

To sum up, participant men migrants could appear to demonstrate a form of agency by drawing on 'alternative' sources of masculinity. Such identity talk would undermine Estonian normative expectations on men, and indeed gender relations more generally, thereby highlighting a stronger form of agency on the part of the participants. Correspondingly, their identification with work and pay could be interpreted as their weak compliance with Estonia's normative gender ideology, and



their lack of reflection and resources to resist it. To complicate the matter further, in some sense participants could also be considered agentic even if they do affirm a conservative masculinity in their identity talk. Some men might rationally choose this strategy as an antidote to potential negative social attention on their rather transgressive lifestyles. Thus, we necessarily take a rather hesitant stance regarding the participants' personal agency or the lack of it at any given moment.

### Subject positionings in discourse

In light of the structure/agency debate outlined above, we have chosen to analyse the interview material with the 'subject positioning in discourse' approach that Davies and Harré introduced in their landmark *Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves* (1990). We consider it a middle ground account in the conflict between *reflexive* self-identity and *subjectification* by discourse. This kind of 'in-between' account fits well with Foucault's (1998/1976) view that where there is power there is also resistance, and that the two tend to operate together and in relation to each other.

Positioning theory functions here as a starting point for studying identity construction through language and conversations. "Conversations have storylines and the positions people take in a conversation will be linked to these storylines" (van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 17). This implies that possible historical subject positions pre-exist individuals, their sense of 'self' and range of experience are circumscribed by culturally available discourses (Willig 1999). Taking up a subject position in discourse means committing to a particular, limited set of concepts, images, metaphors, ways of speaking, self-narratives and so on that the person takes on as his/her own and that (s)he gets emotionally tied to (Burr 2003: 199). After accepting or being unable to resist a subject position, a person is locked into a system of rights, speaking rights and obligations that the particular position brings (Burr 2003: 111). Importantly, such positionings are relational; in taking up a subject position, we assign positions to others through the part we give them in our account (Burr 2003: 113). Conversations may deliberately or unintentionally result in different amounts of power and resources between the performers of different subject positions. Turning now to the agentic and reflexive side of positioning, it can be posited that people might accept the position offered to them by a storyline or, alternatively, try to resist it by changing the discourse. "(P)ositions can and do change. Fluid positionings, not fixed roles, are used by people to cope with the situation they usually find themselves in" (van Langenhove and Harré 1999: 17). Everyday conversations, according to Burr and we would argue sociological interviews as well, are far from trivial and represent an important arena where identities are fashioned and power relations played out. The present analysis is attentive to both goal-directed positioning by research participants, as well as situations where discourses and subject positions they entail take over and define the person who remains rather unaware of the on-going processes.

### Men's identity talk

Post-socialist men who followed their professional women partners to 'Old Europe' use 'identity talk' to reconstruct their sense of personal significance and masculinity, the latter being impossible without the former. Masculinity is challenged by men's atypical life choices that entail a reduction of paid work, modest incomes, economic dependence on their women partners, as well as often taking on primary responsibilities for childcare and chores at home. Men's identity talk draws on two major spheres of life – family and culture; and work and economic success. Hence, these migrant men employ both 'conservative', as well as 'alternative' sources of masculinity that are more associated with women and femininity in their country of origin, for empowering themselves.

**Table 1:** Discursive investments in participants' masculine identity talk

Participants	'Alternative' discourses (that potentially undermine Estonian male norm)			'Conservative' discourses (that most likely reinforce Estonian male norm)		Total
	'Caring Father'	'Supportive Spouse'	'Civilised Adult'	'Professional Man'	'Well-off'	
Raimond	X	X	no	X	X	4
Karl	X	X	no	X	X	4
Artur	X	no	no	X	X	3
Peeter	X	X	X	X	no	4
Mihkel	X	X	X	X	X	5
Joosep	X	X	X	X	X	5
Oliver	X	X	X	X	X	5
Ervin	X	X	X	X	X	5
Marko	X	X	X	X	X	5
Toomas	X	X	X	X	no	4
Total	10	9	7	10	8	

Source: authors' compilation

Intriguingly, the analysis demonstrates that most interviewees use the two oppositional identity strategies (see Table 1) in turns. This might result in fragmentary, and internally conflictual masculinities. This also brings attention to the agency/structure or reflexivity/subjectification debate regarding the men's identity construction (Roseneil & Seymour 1999), an issue to which we return in the discussion.

### Alternative masculine identity talk

The study participants employed three discourses that might expand the opportunities of empowerment for men. All depict themselves as 'caring fathers', and most do as 'supportive spouses', and as 'civilised adults' who are very keen on culture and the arts, and care far less about work and money, the normative attributes of masculinity in Estonia.

#### 'Caring father' discourse

Interestingly, many men in this study admitted that they barely negotiated migrating with their partners, let alone fighting against it. They agreed almost immediately because they were facing burnout or were just getting bored in their work lives. It is worth pointing out that most couples moved to 'Old Europe' at the beginning or the peak of economic downturn, which struck Estonia, a small and liberal economy, harder than larger, more stable economies. Hence, many fathers viewed the chance to stay at home for a while as a well-deserved break and a timely escape from their stressful professional lives.

All the families in this study have young children. Some go to primary school, others to preschool, and some are just babies; all the children need regular if not constant care, and the fathers are typically responsible for the bulk of it. No wonder that all the interviewees then claim the 'caring father' identity. Raimond, a father of one grown child and a four-year-old toddler provides a good example.

**Raimond:** *Now looking back I think that perhaps I wasn't involved enough in raising my older kid. I should have done things with her, spent some more time with her. Now that I am older and wiser, I see that I have worked a lot in my life and will probably keep on working in the future; but my son is a kid for such a brief time, and it's his interests that count the most at this moment. Work is no longer a priority to me, my child is. [...] This little boy is of utmost importance, my dearest hobby. You know, when he has a nightmare and wakes up at night it is me he calls for. Daddy is the one he needs, to be in my arms, to be carried by me. No one else will do. (Art teacher; two children; wife is a doctor).*

Raimond positions himself as wiser and as irreplaceable, but not for having a career or for succeeding with tasks no other colleague can perform; instead, he considers himself wise for his active fathering and being irreplaceable for his son. His discourse clearly prioritises his child over his occupation. Raimond positions paid work as of secondary importance only and, moreover, as something that potentially endangers his focus on what is of most importance – his son and his caring identity. The extract above demonstrates that one can distance oneself from work as well, although it is far more common to emphasise being different and distancing oneself from another person or a group in forming a self.

#### 'Supportive spouse' discourse

The men interviewees typically praised their partners and the mothers of their children as the most talented and capable professionals that deserve the chance to advance their careers internationally. Some interviewees might unconsciously identify with their wives' professional status; more explicitly, men position themselves as the ones that provide women with the opportunity to advance their careers. Men do so by agreeing to expatriate in the first place, and, when abroad, by setting their partners free from managing homes and children. Next, we report part of a dialogue between the first author and Peeter, the husband of an Estonian diplomat and a father of three, to illustrate men's 'supportive spouse' discourse and the subject positions it typically entails.

**Interviewer:** *How did you and your wife decide that she will leave Estonia?*

**Peeter:** *We discussed it years ago that her position will lead to work abroad. I decided at the time that one thing I must not do is to obstruct her career by disagreeing to follow her. You see, I knew that there is no way she would leave her family in Estonia. From early on, I had agreed to try and organise my own things so that we could leave when her career calls.*

**Interviewer:** *Oh, your wife's career seems to be almost sacred to you?*

**Peeter:** *I think I'm being totally adequate. The personality traits of my wife are most appreciated at work; more people, not just the family, but all people could benefit from her skills. She is the kind of person that would not run from responsibility, and she is good at controlling the processes. It would be unreasonably jealous of me to stop her, of course, provided that she does not forget about her family. (Manager; three children; wife is a diplomat)*

Peeter, like other men in our sample, depicts himself as a generous person, benevolent to his wife and perhaps to the wider populations. Men claim a positive identity in spite of being 'bass players' to their wives and children, as another informant phrased it.

Importantly, interviewees are typically rather conscious about their women partners' dependence on them and about the crucial role they play for the family's future. "She wouldn't be able to do it without me. We are a team," one father boasted positioning her partner as the dependent one. This reflects a claiming of power, but again not the kind of power derived from men's professional world, but from their emotional and supportive positions or indeed the potential withholding the latter.

### 'Civilised adult' discourse

Most Estonian men that had followed their women partners to 'Old Europe' rejoiced in their new opportunities to read books, enjoy museums, exhibitions and architecture, and travel around Europe and beyond – things they had barely had time for in Estonia when overloaded with work and their obligations to support the family. "Culture abounds here," one man celebrated, "this is the grand, powerful and classic Europe I am living in the midst of!" He positioned himself as a civilised person – a man of culture compared to his one time more materialistic and weary self back in transitional 'New Europe'.

Secondly, most interviewees appreciate living away from small and remote Estonia for gaining a broader view on the economic and political processes influencing the contemporary world. The men typically claim they have benefited from the distance and now see Estonian developments through a different lens. Some position the persons they have developed into through expatriation as more steady and dignified compared to Estonians back home, "many of whom seem to have gone capitalistically nuts," as one manager interviewee expressed (referring to Estonians' real estate development: a passion he believes would soon prove to be financial nonsense). Joosep, a former teacher, among some others distances himself from Estonia and his compatriots for their alleged lack of political culture and civilised manners:

***Joosep:** Indeed I appreciate the more ancient cultural stratus of Estonia; but when witnessing the disagreeable affairs of my compatriots here in Europe, as well as the politics of Estonia I'd rather not be an Estonian; it's just shameful. However, I believe that the Brussels milieu, the work Estonians do here, and people they communicate with have had a considerable influence on Estonian citizens in Brussels. I can say that I myself have changed. But I'm becoming increasingly worried, I feel so embarrassed and ashamed when I read the papers, browse the Internet or watch TV, it's so embarrassing to observe how Estonians treat their compatriots...*

***Interviewer:** Could you give me an example?*

***Joosep:** Elections are the first thing that comes into my mind, and the related television discussions, public talks in the media. The culture of Brussels would never accept obscenities of that kind! Here only migrants or people with little education might be seen talking smut comparable to what can be seen in Estonian politics. A profound cleavage exists between those categories [Estonian politics and Brussels culture]. (Teacher and a manager of small business; two children; wife is a diplomat)*

Joosep differentiates himself from uncivilised and uneducated Estonians back home based on his personal sophistication and style he has developed in his new homeland. Instead, he identifies with Brussels, which is depicted in his discourse as the centre of European civilisation and 'high culture'. Despite being househusbands, a status perhaps diametrically opposed to Estonian dominant work-centred masculinity, the study participants rather efficiently position themselves as higher class persons, a desirable identity for many men.

Last but not least, the civilised adult discourse renders study participants an opportunity to position themselves in the public realm in spite of diminished or suspended relations to paid work. Constructing a 'bigger picture' of Estonia and its development, looking on it from a distance, contrasts with the inward and limited lives of the so-called 'typical' housekeepers, stereotypically housewives. Rather, the civilised adult discourse refers to a certain latitude in the men's perspectives, as does involvement with fine arts.

## Conservative masculine identity talk

Rather paradoxically our research participants very often insist that they are ‘professional men’ and somewhat less intensely ‘well-off’. Both discourses clearly comply with dominant Estonian masculinity. Interviewees draw on those discourses in spite of being marginalised by them. It might be that they identify with normative masculinity not because they are representatives of it, but because they prefer to think of themselves as such and to present themselves to society as ‘normal’ men. Identity talk strategies discussed below reflect that interviewees are *complicit* with Estonian hegemonic masculinity, to borrow the conceptual apparatus from Connell (2005).

### ‘Professional man’ discourse

The ‘professional man’ discourse proved to be most popular among the interviewees. This was somewhat surprising considering that their working lives had considerably slowed down in favour of the duties and perhaps pleasures of the more private realm. Men positioned themselves as professionals by drawing either on their occupational history and/or future expectations, as well as by discursively overstating their current professional engagements. Oliver provides a good example of this kind of identity work. As a journalist and the husband of an Estonian diplomat now working in Western Europe, he rather reflexively jokes about his identity talk, “I wouldn’t say that I pretend to be a journalist,” he says, “I’d put it like this – I’m a freelancer.” However, he is not entirely comfortable with the idea of participating in this study on Estonian professional women and the more domestic men migrants in Europe.

*Oliver: I shouldn’t be included in this study, I think. You see, most men here don’t work at all, while I have a background in journalism. Yes, there’ve been busier times for me, but journalism is where I come from. I am accredited here you know, I attend press conferences, talk to Ansip, Andrus Ansip [the Prime Minister of Estonia] and write articles on what he told me. I might be publishing less these days, but this special position remains with me. [...] Some men here have been involved in construction works or the like, but most of them do absolutely nothing, they take care of their children at most. That’s why I believe I am not a typical man here. My relationship with the functionaries here is sort of professional; I am not merely a husband. (Journalist; one child, wife is a diplomat).*

Oliver positions himself as an active professional, indeed as a fellow of the political elite. He also insists on being essentially different and we would add ‘better’ or ‘more valuable’ from other Estonian men who have followed their professional wives, and who are positioned in the extract as ‘passive’ and ‘merely husbands’. So, here the hierarchical relations and status struggles between different masculinities become explicit.

Another strategy several men employed in order to bolster their masculinity was to claim their work is of comparable worth to that of their women partners, if not even more important. This can be interpreted as the interviewees’ defence strategy from the societal evaluations that might cast doubt on their professional qualities, especially with the backdrop of their partners’ international careers and “pay checks comparable to that of the president of Estonia,” as one man put it. Raimond, a teacher of visual arts, married to a physician, is one among several men who engaged in such a comparison with his wife.

*Raimond: This is just a joke, but when she [his wife, a doctor] does badly, her patient will be buried under the ground; if I mess up with one of my students his memory will haunt me for decades. [...] Spoiling a talent follows you all your life, no matter if there might not be anyone else in the world but you who knows about it. (Art teacher; two children; wife is a doctor)*

Raimond is of the opinion that contemporary physicians, his wife among them, do not need to be as talented and dedicated as their predecessors, whose work was supported by neither advanced medical technologies nor standardised manuals for most conditions and symptoms. In his view, doctors' personal responsibilities have dispersed during the recent decades. His own profession, to the contrary, has not been affected by those developments. Hence, Raimond, like several interviewees that have slowed down their careers, insists that he is no less valuable as a professional than his partner, in spite of her celebrated career. Interestingly, Raimond felt rather uncomfortable with questions about his wife's professional responsibility; he returned to this issue several times during the interview, seemingly not intending to create a competitive effect. This exemplifies that story lines or discourses have their own logic, and that positioning is not necessarily intentional. People may become enmeshed in their subject positions implicit in their talk without necessarily having intended to position each other in particular ways (Burr 2003: 115).

#### 'Well-off' discourse

Most men were more or less disturbed by the gap between their own and their partners' income, especially against the background of their own breadwinner status from the not very distant past. Several interviewees admitted quarrelling with the mothers of their children about money, and some who were economically dependent on their wives talked about restricting their normal consumption habits.

Nevertheless, in all but one of the households, the overall income had considerably risen although expatriation implied men's relative or complete withdrawal from paid work. Many interviewees can afford spending considerably more than they could in Estonia. "We even took the grandmother to the Canaries. And it makes a difference if you can go there only once or three-four times a year," one man rejoiced. Some study participants identified their women's much higher income by viewing it as 'family income' that belongs to them as much as to their partners, who technically had earned it – "I think that what is left after paying all the taxes should be shared equally between us." Hence, it was a bit of a paradox that male study participants often positioned themselves as better off away from their homeland, and better at home than in their previous work-centred lives in Estonia. They saw themselves and their families as the winners in the recent transnationalisation of work since European Union enlargement in 2004. Interviewees also compared their relative economic ease with the situations of their friends and colleagues back in Estonia, which they considered rather grim.

*Karl: Our initial plan was to return in five years, but then the economic downturn came. We see no possibility to come to live in Estonia at the moment. We're stuck here in Brussels. We couldn't move even if we wanted to. [...] We can see and read and hear how many people in Estonia are getting desperate. [...] Some practically starve, others have major problems, they're unable to pay their bank loans and so on. People face grave problems in Estonia. We're doing just fine [in Brussels]. (Engineer; two children; wife is a diplomat).*

Karl was one interviewee among several who expressed relief at not having to struggle for acceptable working conditions, indeed for work as such in the Estonian labour market that was characterised by high unemployment when the interviews were conducted. Many informants positioned themselves as the relatively well-off in the global economic relations. Hence, the economic comparison of post-socialist regions and the more powerful regions of Western Europe, and the men's identification with the latter, became employed as a basis for personal dignity and strength for which the men 'at home' and 'away from home' yearned.

## Discussion

While men and masculinity are culturally very much equated with professional careers and financial powers, Estonian men who have followed their professional women to 'Old Europe' spend most of their time in the private domestic realm, as fathers and spouses. Those private domain activities are culturally highly feminised and most probably somewhat feminising to the men practising them. 'Masculine identity talk' can be seen as the men's response to that challenge.

This analysis suggests that personal identities are not necessarily equivalent reflections of social identities and structurally based roles (see also Snow & Anderson 1987). Interviewees in this study construct themselves as powerful, indeed, as public men in spite of their realities as seen from the outside. This confirms that identity is not determined by the social roles one performs; it is also *processual* – an effect of relentless identity work and identity talk (Rounds 2006). Masculinity discourses have a constitutive nature, and they manifest themselves in gender identities, although the latter are constantly, but not necessarily consciously, in process. Study participants engage in both 'conservative' discourses that most likely reinforce the Estonian male norm and the 'alternative' discourses, in order to obtain a sense of personal worth (see Table 1 for discursive investments by participants). For example, they use the discourse of the 'caring father', and the 'supportive spouse' that provide alternatives to the dominant Estonian masculinity, in turn with discourses of the 'professional man' and the 'well-off', which rather reinforce the male norm. The co-existence of potentially oppositional discursive strategies in affirming one's masculine identity is typical in the sample. Thus, the innovative, private and family-centred lifestyles of the men who are 'secondary migrants' in the EU do not necessarily mean they are consistent and conscious reformers of masculinity and gender relations more broadly. The men's conflicting discursive investments in their masculine identities bring us to the complicated debate over human agency (see Roseneil & Seymour 1999). Defining agency as an individual's conscious action that (s)he deliberately chooses from different alternatives, and that (s)he exercises control over, we would doubt the study participants' agency to some extent. The interviewees tend to accumulate all the possible discourses that culture avails them without much selectivity. It is rather hard, though we would argue not entirely impossible to view their inconsistent and conflictual masculine identity talk as resulting from a reflexive construction of self-identity (Giddens 1991). However, we would rather say that the interviewees do not exercise strong control over their personal subject positioning in discourse (Davies & Harré 1990); they are instead transformed into subjects by culturally powerful discourses (Althusser 1971). Hence, as for the political implications of this study, the participants' agency to resist or transform dominant masculinity discourses and, therefore, to challenge Estonian gender order seems volatile.

To conclude, in this article we have sought to address as major themes the construction of identity through both distancing from and specifying closeness to certain others. 'Being different' or representing oneself as different can be understood as part of the general processes of identity formation, identity talk and what might be called identity practice, whether more or less consciously. It is, as such, the complement of 'being' or representing oneself as similar to or the same as others in certain noteworthy respects. For men, there are further aspects of both these processes of distancing and closeness that can be related analytically to intersections of gender and other social divisions. Two, not wholly separate, processes can be identified that are psychological, discursive, and more broadly socio-political. First, men as members of a superordinate social category are, like other superordinates, likely to more or less consciously obscure and deny that privilege – in this case, gender privilege, to obscure and deny 'naming men as men' (Hanmer 1990, Collinson & Hearn 1994). This contrasts with women and members of other subordinated social categories, who are likely to be 'massed' as members of that social category, even when that categorisation is linked to or qualified by another positively coded status category – as with 'women managers' or 'women

doctors'. This 'massing' may or may not be internalised by the individual women themselves. In contrast, men in denial of privilege are likely to represent themselves as individuals, personalities, character(s), indeed persons. Second, the gendering of men does not exist in isolation but is better understood as intersectional gendering, in which gender is constructed in relation to other social divisions. Accordingly, (almost all) men are themselves subordinated in some respect, in relation to social division, for example, by class or country of origin – and certainly so, in relation to some other men and often in relation to some, though usually less, women. Emphasising distancing from other men in this scenario is a way of dealing with a different form of denial – the denial of subordination – even if the man/men concerned are superordinates in relation to women within a given category of subordination, for example, as working class. Thus, distancing may be a way of both maintaining masculine identity and using masculine identity in superordination, subordination, and their complex interrelations. Finally, as noted earlier, it is important to place these discursive strategies within the broader historical, structural contexts of transformations and migrations within Europe. Changes in enactments of citizenship, both formal and intimate, coupled with references back to Estonia and its gender order give rise to tensions, and make possible specific discourses, subject positions and forms of identity talk, even if they are contingent and even, in some senses, unspecifiable in advance.

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