

# Interrogating silent privileges across the work–life boundaries and careers of high-intensity knowledge professionals

Silent  
privileges  
across work–  
life boundaries

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Privilege is often silent, invisible and not made explicit, and silence is a key question for theorizing on organizations. This paper examines interrelations between privilege and silence for relatively privileged professionals in high-intensity knowledge businesses (KIBs).

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper draws on 112 interviews in two rounds of interviews using the collaborative interactive action research method. The analysis focuses on processes of recruitment, careers and negotiation of boundaries between work and nonwork in these KIBs. The authors study how relative privilege within social inequalities connects with silences in multiple ways, and how the invisibility of privilege operates at different levels: individual identities and interpersonal actions of privilege (micro), as organizational level phenomena (meso) or as societally constructed (macro).

**Findings** – At each level, privilege is reproduced in part through silence. The authors also examine how processes connecting silence, privilege and social inequalities operate differently in relation to both disadvantage and the disadvantaged, and privilege and the privileged.

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**Originality/value** – This study is relevant for organization studies, especially in the kinds of “multi-privileged” contexts where inequalities, disadvantages and subordination may remain hidden and silenced, and, thus, are continuously reproduced.

**Keywords** Knowledge professionals, Knowledge-intensive businesses, Privilege, Silence, Careers, Work/nonwork boundaries

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

This paper examines the interrelations between privilege and silence for relatively privileged professionals in high-intensity knowledge and accounting businesses. Privilege is itself often silent and is maintained by various silences. So how are privileges reproduced, maintained and often not contested through different kinds of silences? We focus on how silence enables the continued and unquestioned operation and sustenance of privilege. This paper thus addresses the interrelations of privilege and silence, what we call *silent privileges, to refer to both silences around privilege, and silences around inequalities, even subordination and disadvantage, within that privilege and amongst those privileged*. We use the term, privilege, here in relation to different social divisions within organizations, and not in the specific senses of high-level elites or legal privilege. Likewise, when we talk of privilege and silence, we focus primarily on privileges and silences in organizations, rather than individual or wider societal privileges and silences. This perspective is also relevant to how silence produces privilege “in the first place”; however, to investigate that demands a broader, longer-term historical perspective.

These issues of silence and privilege also operate intersectionally, in the context examined, namely, that of white, well-qualified, high-intensity knowledge professionals working in knowledge-intensive businesses (KIBs), specifically large international professional services consultancies, specializing on accounting and related activities. Such KIBs rely upon professional knowledge and qualifications, undertaking specialized, confidential business-to-business services, in accounting, management and legal consulting (Miles, 2005; Miles *et al.*, 1995; Strambach, 2001; Martinez-Fernandez *et al.*, 2011). An important feature in this context is often the presence of a strong corporate culture, and associated, often invisibly regulated social identities (Carmona and Ezzamel, 2016; Kornberger *et al.*, 2011; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). The KIB organizations we have studied comprise and house, for the most part, relatively privileged, often multiply privileged, occupational groupings [1]. The frequent silences around privileges, that is, the silent privileges, themselves operate and are constructed intersectionally in relation to inequalities of, for example, age, class, education, ethnicity/racialization, gender and their mutual constitution (see Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; McCall, 2005; Lutz *et al.*, 2011).

Drawing from interviews from five organizations across six countries, this paper has both empirical and theoretical aims. First, we investigate empirically the relations of privilege and silence among knowledge professionals in these specific kinds of KIBs. In particular, we examine how certain silences are maintained around privilege in relation to recruitment, work/life boundaries and careers, the central aspects of both the everyday life and the broader organizational structure and development of high-intensity knowledge businesses. Furthermore, we examine how those silences reinforce privilege for some knowledge professionals, and discriminate against, and indeed damage, other still relatively privileged professionals.

Our study indicates that the organizational norms that privilege employees on multiple dimensions in turn create what could be described as a golden cage, silencing potential deviations, weaknesses or vulnerabilities, with severe consequences for well-being at work and career advancement. Moreover, by looking at silent privileges among knowledge professionals, we address the fine-tuned, subtle, yet in practice often very clear, inequalities among the professionals privileged on multiple dimensions. In this situation, silences can operate as a central medium through which not only privilege itself but also an image or representation of privilege, an almost homogenizing norm, can be created, hiding potential intersectional inequalities as well

as relative weaknesses or vulnerabilities among privileged professionals. Such a representation, and the silences within it, may obscure intersectional differences and nuances regarding privilege and the privileged. These patterns of privilege and silence are also often heavily entwined with gender relations, understood intersectionally. Thus, intersectional positions can be re-enforcing either privilege, or disadvantage, as social categories, for example gender and class, are often coconstituting and coconstituted, as we discuss further below.

We also discuss and interrogate the more general theoretical implications of our findings in terms of the interrelations of privilege and silence. Privilege, that is, relative privilege, within social inequalities connect with silences in multiple ways. Privilege is partially (re) produced through silence at different levels: micro, in terms of individual identities and interpersonal actions; meso organizational; and macro societal. Such silences are not only literal silences on specific issues but also concern how relevant topics are spoken about or represented, with various omissions and commissions. Moreover, we discuss how these processes connecting silence, privilege and social inequalities also operates differently in relation to both disadvantage and the disadvantaged, and privilege and the privileged.

### *Privilege and silence in organizations*

Silence is a key question for theorizing on organization(s) that has been approached from different theoretical and empirical perspectives. In some respects, silence is a recurrent, yet still neglected, theme in organizational research. Silence can mean many things ranging from the literal meaning of lacking words to the metaphorical, for example, talking about something while leaving aside key relevant aspects (Hearn, 2004; Harlow *et al.*, 1995). In organization studies silence has been typically examined metaphorically in terms of not taking up potentially important organizational or work-related questions (e.g. Morrison *et al.*, 2011) but also more literally as an act of not uttering words (Dupret, 2019).

Based on a literature view on silence in organizations, amounting to over 200 published items, we identified three central, to some extent overlapping, approaches, focused on: organizational behavior, discursive/narrative and social divisions. These approaches differ in terms of how silence is conceptualized and examined empirically. Central to the organizational behavior approach is the conscious silencing of the organization's problems or ideas, especially regarding improvement of the organization. There is, for example, an established body of literature on employee voice and silence regarding why, and what kind of, people choose or do not choose to voice their concerns in organizations (Bisel and Adame, 2019; Hirschman, 1970; Morrison *et al.*, 2011; Morrison and Milliken, 2003; Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Weiss and Morrison, 2019), as well as, for example, the manufacturing of consent (Burawoy, 1979). The focus in the discursive/narrative approach is on the social construction of organizational realities, notably what is being excluded or omitted from these constructions. In contrast to the organizational behavior approach, being silent is not necessarily a conscious choice but often a less conscious or unconscious aspect of how organizations are depicted. Yet, these two approaches seem to share an interest in potentially central issues that are not talked about. Building on this, we see silence in organizations as conscious or unconscious putting aside of potentially central organizational or work-related issues or aspects.

Thus, central to silence in organizations is what are the issues or aspects that are not talked about. Silence, in both organizations, and researching organizations, has been explored more broadly in relation to social divisions, notably gender (Hearn and Parkin, 1987/1995; Smith, 1987; Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Simpson and Lewis, 2005), race and racialization (Macalpine and Marsh, 2005), and sexuality (Ward and Winstanley, 2003).

Specific social divisions produce different kinds of privilege and privileged positionings, based on, for example, whiteness, able-bodiedness, heterosexuality, class and "Western-ness" (for example, Frankenberg, 1993; McIntosh, 1988; Meekosha, 2006; Pease, 2010). However, privileges and privileged positionings are not one-dimensional, nor are they based on a single

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social division; rather, privileges and privileged positionings are formed intersectionally. Moreover, by privilege, we follow Bailey's (1998) distinction from simple advantage, in noting the systematic, unearned and conferred character of privilege. To put this another way, privilege brings advantage, but not all advantage brings privilege.

Silence is a key question in (re)producing inequalities and privilege. The concept of voice has been connected to privilege, for example, in terms of powerful organizational positions (e.g. Morrison *et al.*, 2015), but silence has been also identified as a central factor in masking inequalities and thus maintaining privilege (Collinson and Hearn, 1994). Silence around social divisions and interrelated inequalities occurs, is present, and is represented, in everyday organizational life, in different organizational processes, and at both organizational and individual levels. For example, organizational silences also construct the image of the "ideal worker", ideals strengthened by the neo-liberal ethos of "equal" organizations that embrace diversity; this, in turn, may (re)produce silent or silenced gendered practices (Acker, 1990, 2006; Benschop and Dooreward, 1998; Harlow *et al.*, 1995; Hearn and Parkin, 1987/1995; Husu, 2001; Zanoni *et al.*, 2010; Tuori, 2014). Also, by offering organizational flexibility, management can silence the demands and needs in the private sphere, and implicitly prioritize work by presenting the offered flexibility as an exclusive right to key employees, yet simultaneously expecting gratitude and commitment from employees to intensified work and long hours (Bathini and Kandathil, 2019; Mescher *et al.*, 2010).

Within many organizations, individual level silences are strongly affected by the contemporary neo-liberal ethos dominating among societal voices (Brown and Brown, 2003; 2006; Harvey, 2005; Elliott and Lemert, 2006), with stress on the notion of personal choice; this ethos tends to neglect the recognition of privileges and inequalities between groupings of people and between individuals, including differences among the privileged. Organizational silences can be created through inclusion and exclusion of members, giving voice to dominant groupings and neglecting silent or silenced groupings, and through the maintenance of domination by and with silence, including silence towards demands of change or acknowledgment of inequalities (Harlow *et al.*, 1995).

Moreover, silences on social divisions can be seen as intersectional. Within the vast and growing literature on intersectionality, there is significant debate and indeed disagreement on the theoretical underpinnings of intersectionality as theory, concept and method. For some, intersectionality is understood in several different, and often contradictory, ways (see McCall, 2005; Holvino, 2010; Misra, 2018); other commentators present a specific, prescriptive approach to intersectionality against what are to be considered faulty, not fully intersectional, uses of and approaches to intersectionality (May, 2015). Prescriptions of the one best way of approaching intersectionality should be treated with caution. A recent major contribution is Hill Collins and Bilge's (2016) *intersectionality* which provides an inclusive synthesis, "a roadmap for discovery", and "an invitation for entering the complexities of intersectionality" (p. 8), in foregrounding the themes of relationality, social context, power, inequality, social justice and critical praxis. In recent years, the concept and deployment of intersectionality, along with such themes, although with different emphases, has enjoyed growing popularity as a way of analyzing the complexity of people's positionings, experiences and identities in organizations.

Intersectional analysis has often focused on groupings that are disadvantaged on multiple dimensions, especially those related to gender, race and class (e.g. Hill Collins, 1993). This is even though intersectional analysis would ideally connect the analysis of disadvantage with privilege (May, 2015; Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). Given current emphasis on multiple disadvantage, intersectional analysis needs to "move beyond those who are subordinated along more than one social dimension to explore the experiences of those who occupy positions of both privilege and subordination, as well as those who are multi-privileged" (Pease, 2010, p. 20; also see McIntosh, 1988; Kimmel and Ferber, 2010; Aavik, 2015). However,

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with all these developments the study of silence in relation to intersectional gendered/aged/raced/ethnic/sexuality individuals and collectivities has not been addressed.

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### Methods and data

The study upon which this paper is based examined the complex intersectional processes of age, generation, gender relations and organizational positions of knowledge professionals in five large international business-to-business professional services firms, with national subdivisions that offer consultancy services mainly in accounting and related fields, such as legal, management and information technology work. The initial empirical focus of the study was on the boundaries between work and nonwork, often referred to as “work-life balance”, and the career aspirations of the knowledge professionals. These organizations are characterized by a particularly high-intensity work environment. Considerably stressful conditions, high organizational commitment and long hours’ culture are commonplace among these highly educated, highly skilled, and indeed privileged, knowledge professionals. The stressful conditions may be due to different factors. These include the harsh, competitive business culture, the mobile and boundaryless nature of ICT-based knowledge work in 24/7 businesses (Alvesson, 2004; Pyöriä *et al.*, 2005), strong and molding corporate cultures (Kornberger *et al.*, 2011; Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Anderson-Gough *et al.*, 2005; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), and at times complex national–transnational–global work relations (Boussebaa, 2009; Spence *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, these organizational conditions are complicated by intersectionally gendered organizational hierarchies (Hearn and Louvrier, 2015), multidimensional social inequalities (Lutz *et al.*, 2011) and inequality regimes (Acker, 2006).

The initial empirical data for this article were collected for the Academy of Finland funded project, “Age, Generation, and Changing Work-Life Balance and Boundaries: An Intersectional and Interactive Ethnographic Study”, running from 2012 to 2014, led by Jeff Hearn. The data were gathered by postdoctoral researchers Charlotta Niemistö and Mira Karjalainen. The data comprise 112 interviews in six countries, time diaries, corporate documents and respondent drawings on career and work–life relations. The data analysis has been part of the project, “Social and Economic Sustainability of Future Working Life”, financed by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland 2015–2020. This article focuses on the interview data.

The study entailed interviews with 27 men and 34 women, in top management, middle management, professional knowledge workers and HR in these KIBs in Australia, Finland, Ireland, Sweden, UK and USA respondents ranged in age between 25 and 55 years. Few men and women at the lower levels in the organizations had care responsibilities, and nearly all lived in dual career relationships, some were single. In mid-career phases, most of the respondents lived in dual career relationships and having children was much more common, although more so among the men than the women. At the top levels, all the men had children, and of the four women in this group three had children. The women were single or lived in dual-career relationships, whereas the partners of the men in the top positions most often had the main responsibility of care responsibilities in the family, and often worked only part-time. Forty-one of the lower- and middle-level employees, five of the top managers, and four of the HR personnel/managers were interviewed twice, 11 respondents were interviewed once, and one middle-level employee was interviewed three times, thus adding up to a total of 112 interviews. There were slightly more women interviewed in the first round, and the discrepancy grew bigger as more women than men were available for the second round of interviews. Moreover, the higher in the corporate ladder, the less time they found for the second interview. Although these changes in the research design were minor, they nevertheless may have had an impact on the study as the second round interviews revealed

more of the silences around the work and corporate culture. The gender of the field researcher always plays a role in qualitative research as the interviewee may feel more close or relate easier to researcher based on their gender, although sometimes the dynamics are opposite. In this study, both field researchers were women.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 130 min. The table (Table 1) below summarizes the respondents by gender, organizational level and the number of interviews conducted within each of the groupings. We have defined the junior level to range from entry level up to assistant manager levels; middle level to range from manager level to director level and top level refers to the different levels of partner within these companies. Respondents were grouped according to their hierarchical levels of responsibility and reported possibilities for independent action. In general, national context, even with differences in, for example, parental leave systems, did not significantly affect the analysis in focus here (Spence *et al.*, 2014); rather, national context was taken into consideration in the analysis of individual persons and organizations.

The research we conducted was strongly informed by the collaborative interactive action research (CIAR) method (Bailyn and Fletcher, 2007), along with gathering a variety of other company documentary, observational, time-diary and visual data. The interviews, using the CIAR method, were typically in two separate phases: the first round of interviews focused on (1) work situation and colleagues, (2) boundaries between work and nonwork, (3) career aspirations and (4) life outside of work. At the end of the first interview, the respondents were given a time-diary with questions about their day to be filled in during one week, including “*what time did you wake up*” “*when did you first think of work*” “*when did your workday start*”, “*when did your workday end*”, as well as some space for daily individual reflection. These self-reported time-diaries gave additional vital data on the work and nonwork boundaries of the respondents. The two field researchers first analyzed the data individually from transcripts, time-diaries, and other documents, by close readings and thematic analysis, cross-reading and, then, thorough discussions of each of the individual analyses. The CIAR method further requires structured feedback to respondents in a second interview. This collaborative feedback was discussed and clarified together by the researchers, in order to be able to reflect on the first interview from the “outside”, as only one researcher conducted each interview. This feedback and initial analysis provided the basis for the second interview questions, and thus what often proved to be a very different experience for both interviewer and interviewee. Although the first round interviews were often very informative, in the second interview it was possible to get deeper in topics discussed. This gave a chance for the

Level	Men	Women	No of interviews
Junior	8 (7 interviewed twice, 1 interviewed once)	15 (all were interviewed twice)	45 (23 I round interviews, 22 II round interviews)
Middle	9 (8 were interviewed twice, one was interviewed three times)	11 (all were interviewed twice)	41 (20 I round interviews, 19 II round interviews and an extra interview)
Top	9 (4 were interviewed twice, 5 were interviewed once)	4 (one was interviewed twice, 3 were interviewed once)	18 (13 I round interviews, 5 II round interviews)
HR	1 (interviewed twice)	4 (two were interviewed twice, 2 were interviewed once)	8 (5 I round interviews, 3 II round interviews)
Total	27	34	112 (61 I round interviews, 51 II round interviews)

**Table 1.**  
Summary of interviewees

interviewee to reflect on what was said previously, as the researcher brought up themes that they felt were important to discuss in more depth or needing clarification. The self-reflective nature of the second interview was amplified by the discussion of time-diaries the interviewees had written. This created an atmosphere in which the silences around privileges became more perceptible.

The aim of the CIAR method in this research was to understand, and cocreate knowledge of, different practices around work–life balance, examined through intersectional analysis of gender, age, generation and organizational position. During the process, we realized that there were silences around privileges and privileged positions that needed analysis. The research methods also included reflecting on doing intersectional research as representatives of our own, often relatively privileged, social categories. All authors are relatively privileged, in that we are all white, postdoctorally educated and able-bodied, and we have sought to be reflexive in this respect in the analysis process. The CIAR method as a form of action research typically includes an intervention in the target organization. In our case, the intervention was translated into awareness-raising of individuals' situations during the research process, and anonymized company feedback at the end of the project. Accordingly, we based the second interview on initial analysis of the first interview and the time-diaries to (1) ensure that the interviewer had understood the respondent accurately, (2) deepen discussion of especially interesting aspects in the first interview and (3) learn more about what was left unsaid or implied in the first interview or the reflections in the time-diaries.

Indeed, in our fieldwork, it soon became apparent that it was not possible to analyze work–life balance and career aspirations of the knowledge professionals without taking into consideration the multiple silences in the organization, at both the organizational and individual levels. The first round of interviews almost always included pervasive discourses of success, successful self-management of individual boundaries and control over work – what we might see as a form of background “organizational noise” – while in returning for the second interview we were able to construct a more complex picture. Ignoring silences, or sometimes subtle hints of different kinds of silences, might have suggested a “neater” picture of the organizations as seemingly equal and fair contexts, and positioned the respondents as successful, content individuals and a distinctly homogenous group. However, this was not the whole story.

The CIAR method has been shown to work well where the research seeks to make explicit inequalities that are often implicit, for example, in studying gendered assumptions underlying practices and procedures in organizations (Bailyn and Fletcher, 2007, p. 2). Further, the multiple methods of enquiry enabled us to analyze organizational silences and nonsilences, when studying these professionals and organizations. More concretely, CIAR method, along with the combination of time-diaries and interviews enabled us to examine: (1) the two rounds of interviews in relation to each other and (2) the information from time-diaries in relation to the interviews. We used a rigid coding system for managing our rich dataset, cross-referencing the first and second round interviews, time-diaries and visual data. This allowed us to group data as needed, in terms of interview rounds, gender, organization and organizational ranking, for example. As an analysis method, we employed thematic analysis, which allowed capturing patterns or themes across qualitative datasets (Braun *et al.*, 2019). This enabled the analysis across multiple and different kinds of data. By utilizing thematic analysis, we asked what kind of silences there are around privileges in the contexts of work–life balance and career. By analyzing the differences between the different sources of data, especially the first and the second rounds of interviews, we could identify issues that were discussed in the second round of interviews, but not in the first round. We interpreted the exclusion of these issues in the first set of interviews as forms of silence, as there was sufficient time, opportunity and indeed encouragement to bring them up in the first round.

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Moreover, given our intersectional approach, we also examined how the knowledge professionals in their different intersectional positions, in particular in terms of gender, age, family situation, and career position and phase, talked and/or did not talk about the boundaries between their immediate work and nonwork. Furthermore, being based in a business school and having previous related experiences of both business and knowledge work assisted in the interpretation and data analysis. We now move on to focus our analysis of privilege and silence, the silent privileges, operative in these KIBs.

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### *Privilege and silence in the knowledge-intensive businesses*

In the interviews, work–life or work/nonwork balance-related issues were explicitly discussed. Also, an overarching research question in the project was how knowledge workers of different ages and genders and at different career stages regarded their work–life balance. We explicitly asked about the respondents’ career stages, and both past and anticipated career advancements. These two themes were leading the way for our analysis. A third main theme concerned gender hierarchy: the higher the organizational position, the fewer the women. Simultaneously, we were told that the companies recruited women and men relatively evenly to the lower career stages. We focus here on the findings around these main themes. Thus, we now focus on three major, and tightly intertwined, organizational processes in which privilege and silence operate and interact: recruitment; work/nonwork “balance”, or its lack; and career advancement in the organizations. We begin with recruitment, and how even early on that feeds into career processes, and then continue with how work/nonwork relations intensify those patterns of career advancement and nonadvancement, in the organizations. In particular, we consider how privilege and the appearance of privilege are (re)produced in these processes through silence. In these settings, we use silence to “deconstruct” privilege, showing how privilege might comprise different nuances, including relative subordinations, even among people considered privileged on multiple dimensions. Moreover, by examining silent privileges through intersectional analysis, we identify hidden inequalities among the privileged.

*Recruitment.* These KIBs are keen to recruit graduates from universities, business schools and technical universities, whom they call “the best of the best”, meaning top students in accounting, finance, law, management, business, economics or engineering with good grades and – what seems to be – desired qualities both regarding their self-presentation and academic as well other qualifications. The organizations often recruit directly from the universities by specific recruitment campaigns. The recruited are mostly young people in their early- or mid-20s, middle class, (in our data) exclusively white, men and women with a (usually good) university degree. These businesses have also frequently recruited former top sportspeople with the right academic background, stating that these have the right kind of resilience for the job and perform their work tasks with discipline.

In recruitment, the gender division is relatively equal, and the recruitment is completed in at least seemingly gender-neutral manner. When recruiting young professionals, the corporate culture has a very strong effect on the employees, and the identity work imposed on and for these employees is enacted strategically even if such social control is maneuvered “softly” (Kornberger *et al.*, 2011; Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Anderson-Gough *et al.*, 2005; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). From the recruitment there begins an internal competition between the young people, frequently characterized by both the managers and themselves as having high levels of expertise, and being career-hungry. The frequent statements feed a strong competitive organizational culture, thus meaning that devoting oneself to the demanding job was generally unquestioned. Privilege is partly obtained in recruitment, and partly earned on the job by silently adjusting to the competitive and greedy organizational culture.



*Careers.* In recruitment these organizations frequently make statements about valuing diversity and equal opportunities where only results and performance matter, and that everyone has the same opportunities to advance in their career. In other words, the organizations are portrayed as fair and meritocratic. These statements are also repeated to the young professionals during their first career stages, in turn feeding into the broader patterns of career development. This, together with the “the best of the best” culture molds the recruits, mentally and physically, and they in turn use similar rhetorics in adapting to the corporate culture (see [Anderson-Gough et al., 2005](#); [Maupin and Lehman, 1994](#)). Indeed, many of the knowledge professionals even appeared physically similar (white, able-bodied, fit, conventionally “good-looking”, well presented, dressed in the same manner) ([Karjalainen et al., 2016](#); also see [Anderson et al., 1994](#); [Haynes, 2012](#)), used very similar vocabulary and rhetoric, and recounted very similar narratives, at least in the first round of interviews. By going along with the rhetorics, these young professionals portray themselves as strong and capable, hiding possible insecurities and any signs of weakness, thus reproducing the privileged image through silence. Hence, while these processes of recruitment, socialization and career development reproduce privilege both in and on the organizations, they simultaneously create silences there (see [Table 2](#)).

Although diversity was a strong slogan in several of the studied corporations, it was hardly visible in practice. This was illustrated by a partner and top manager in one of our case companies that celebrated diversity in their corporate talk claiming diversity as one of their key values:

Our workers are very much from the same mold. If we would not put “Diversity” up there for everyone to see, the truth of what we are would be revealed (male top manager, married, dual career couple with three children, Finland)

One way to silence inequalities is to make a lot of noise about the organization being equal, or to hide homogeneity by making a fuss about being diverse. Another way to talk about social categories at the organizational level is to embrace diversity, framing it in a specific and positive way. Diversity was often seen as analogous to having both male and female employees in the organizations – without specifying their organizational level or power. Yet in these organizations, the division between men and women changed radically after the mid-

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Nonsilence (spoken, noise)

*The meritocratic, equal and diverse organization*  
Statements made the first round of interviews, also statements made in recruitment and taught top-down within the organization

- (1) We value diversity
- (2) Only results and performance matter, so that everyone has the same opportunities to advance in their career: you will succeed if you work a lot and are flexible

Silence (nonspoken)

*The meritocratic, equal and diverse organization*  
Realities told in the second round of interviews, but not spoken about within the organizations

- (1) Fears of not fitting in, a need to look and talk like all the others in the organization: is there in reality any room for exceptions to young, able-bodied, conventionally good-looking, well-presented and fit, highly educated, heterosexual, white males and females?
- (2) While trying to perform one’s best in order to be acknowledged, recognized and (at least eventually) promoted: endless flexibility toward the organization, insecurity, burnout, depression, medical aid for coping with work, (fear of) stagnation of career advancement, psychological ill-being hidden in and from the organization

**Table 2.**  
Silence and nonsilence  
in and on “the  
meritocratic, equal and  
diverse organization”

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steps of the career: only very few women made it to the top levels. Further, talk about visible social categories, such as skin color, ethnicity/racialization and disability, were largely absent, and less visible categories, such as sexuality and religion, were downplayed and remained hidden (see [Brower, 2013](#); [Clarke and Turner, 2007](#); [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, 2011](#); [Organization, 2014](#)).

At the same time, the tendency not to explicitly voice or portray diversity was explained by many of the interviewees by emphasizing that everyone is an individual, and thus referring to less need to talk about diversity more generally. Individuality is strongly present and talked about explicitly in the interviews, and the neo-liberal ethos of one's "own choice" that was frequently used in the interviews positions the respondents as privileged individuals with endless possibilities and freedom of choice. But, interestingly and paradoxically, the many individual representations of individuality were almost identical to each other, at least this was so during the first round of interviews; in many of the second round interviews, the surface performance cracked, or at least was recast, and respondents started talking much more openly. Often neo-liberal representations are silencing inequalities and presenting the individual as capable of managing his or her own career and life unaided, regardless of hindering organizational or societal structures. The second round interviews were often much more open and revealed at least some of the unequal positions and processes in the organization.

In these KIBs, such similar and nondiverse "diversity" and "individuality" is maintained not only by actively recruiting employees with similar characteristics but also by reference to and apparent belief in meritocracy. According to [Greiger and Jordan \(2013, p. 263\)](#), meritocracy, or perhaps the myth of meritocracy, is one of the assumptions underlying contemporary capitalism; it proposes that those who succeed are the most qualified, without acknowledging the advantages that come with privilege. Those who have (societal and/or) organizational privilege often have freedom to ignore, tone down, indeed silence, that privilege ([Greiger and Jordan, 2013](#)). This was very much the case in these organizations, as illustrated by this male top manager: "*This is the most gender equal organization in the world. Only the numbers count*". At the same time, some respondents were very upset because they were not promoted, even if their performance in figures would have suggested that. Further, 24/7 availability was also maintained in order to appear as management material.

In the companies, the notion of meritocracy was used as means for the construction of an "equal" organization. In other words, it was through deploying the notion of meritocracy that the construction of an equal organization took place. Through this, career advancement, as well as nonadvancement, was justified, without further critical reflection of the measurements and evaluations and their validity. However, in the process of advancing, or not, many hidden structures and power relations play a crucial role: is one of the top managers watching your back and sponsoring your career? Are you recruited to career-advancing projects and do you get to work with key personnel? In spite of formal recruitment policies to internal projects, the selection process seems to be informal, decided by the more senior members of the organization. In short, becoming "chosen" for the good projects might mean having the "right" characteristics in a very (male) homosocial manner, that you have the right "attitude" regarding availability, and that you manage to position yourself as valuable to the company. The possibilities to become successful most often meant giving up other aspects of life than work, being available for work all the time. Thus, work/nonwork relations, or rather imbalance, intensify inequalities within career development processes.

*(Lack of) work/nonwork balance.* Hence, "flexibility" is frequently voiced as a virtue in the organization, but flexibility is used as a value in order to commit employees to be flexible toward the organization, not *vice versa*, very much in line with the findings of [Bathini and Kandatihil \(2019\)](#) and [Mescher et al. \(2010\)](#). In practice this meant psychological 24/7 availability, which oftentimes was framed within individuals' own choice of devoting oneself

to the work organization without questioning it, at least by voicing anything. One example of a very uncritical talk about the blurring of boundaries between work and nonwork came from a male consultant in his 30s, cohabiting, in a dual career relationship with no children, who often worked remotely and was available all the time: *It's not a problem for me that there is no boundary, because I'm the kind of person who likes it that way and likes to reply to emails right away. Nobody is forcing me.*

The expectation of 24/7 availability is particularly interesting, as according to nearly all the more junior level interviewees such availability was actually *not* seen as key for advancement. It had not been communicated to the employees as an explicit expectation. But, informally, as the career advanced, those who had made it to the next level of the organization seemed to have learned that this indeed *is* the corporate expectation. Those workers not willing to do this usually “chose” to leave. The majority of these seem to be women, highlighting intersections of gender, occupation, status and family/care situation. Women tend to leave before, or shortly after, starting a family. A female middle manager in her late thirties, with a partner also pursuing a career and two children echoed the top management view of the most gender equal organization in the world, explaining the fact that very few women make it to the top of the organization by saying that the women themselves do not want to be available 24/7 and sacrifice their work–life balance. While she attributed women with agency in their own nonadvancement, she simultaneously silenced possible gender and other inequalities in the organization (see [Table 3](#)).

Privilege and silence are central also when studying the boundaries between work and nonwork of the people in the organizations. Questions of work–life balance can often be discussed from the intersectional perspective of gender relations, gendered life stage and existing or potential care responsibilities. A number of more specific studies have addressed the relationship of family and career amongst accounting professionals, and in most cases these report that marriage, children, more children and work–family conflict are associated with less professional success or perception thereof for women in this type of knowledge work ([Anderson et al., 1994](#); [Windsor and Auyeung, 2006](#); [Dambrin and Lambert, 2008](#); [Lupu, 2012](#); [Buchheit et al., 2016](#)).

In our data, having care responsibilities were interpreted as having children; no other explicit care responsibilities (such as care for older parents or those with disabilities) were reported. Having children often meant in practice being over 30 years and being in at least a middle or senior management position. Especially younger, more junior level women

Nonsilence (spoken, noise)	Silence (nonspoken)
<p><i>Boundaries between work and nonwork</i> Statements and manifestations made officially and in the first round of interviews, pride of being able to push ones boundaries, presented as an own choice in a neo-liberalist ethos</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Only results and performance matter</li> <li>(2) You will succeed if you work a lot and are flexible.</li> </ol>	<p><i>Boundaries between work and non-work</i> Realities told in the second round of interviews, not spoken about within the organizations</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) While trying to perform one's best in order to be acknowledged, recognized and (at least eventually) promoted: work overload, strict monitoring and performance measuring; fear of not advancing in career. In practice also ongoing struggle with boundaries between work and nonwork, and how to manage them</li> <li>(2) Flexibility means in practice, that work is always taking from private sphere, and prioritized over family leisure, friends, hobbies, etc.</li> </ol>

**Table 3.**  
Silence and nonsilence  
on the work and  
nonwork

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employees seemed to consider this as a “safer” career stage to have children: being established enough in the organization and having enough power to be able to at least partly organize one’s workload and time. In reality, this was, however not often the case, as was similarly concluded by another study by Kornberger *et al.* (2011). We found that parts of the work just became more invisible. At these levels, the employees with children had their workdays divided into a 9-to-5 workday at the office and a “night shift” with some or several hours of work at home when the children had been put to bed (Niemistö *et al.*, 2017). But, this work was partly invisible to the younger employees; thus they had an illusion of freedom in higher levels of the organization, and perceived this as something worth pushing for and pursuing. Thus, an intersectional take on inequalities within relative privilege needs to acknowledge not only gender but also the interrelations of age, generation, life stage, and family and care situation, among other dimensions.

In many cases, parent–employees were much more aware of the boundaries between work and non-work than those without children were, yet they seemed to be as willing to push the boundaries as the childless employees were. At the same time, possibly advancing this willingness, there seemed to be a fear of being considered less capable of taking responsibility at work and advancing to more demanding organizational positions when having domestic care responsibilities. This was especially apparent among employees who were mothers, which contrasts the earlier views noted, and quoted on these organizations being the most gender equal in the world. These women had to prove themselves on at least two fronts, at work and at home: they wanted to at any cost avoid the risk of being “mommy-tracked” (Benschop and Dooreward, 1998).

For nearly all interviewees, employed work took up the dominant part of their lives and waking time. In many cases, the notion of work/nonwork balance as a “balance” was effectively or almost non-existent. In the first round of interviews, the respondents almost always adapted to pervasive discourses of success; by going back for the second interview we were able to construct a more complex analysis of the organizations and hear more beyond some of the initial organizational silences. Many respondents communicated, especially in the second interviews, being stressed and not being able to “keep it all together”. This they did not, however, discuss with their colleagues and superiors in the organization. They often pondered on how they might advance, or not, in their careers, and became more critical toward the employing organization.

Greater burnout and work–family conflict has previously been reported in large accounting companies (Buchheit *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, the respondents in some cases talked about extremely personal experiences, such as their symptoms or diagnosis of depression or burnout. In most cases, superiors and even colleagues (“the organization”) were unaware of these conditions. Usually, the respondents chose not to use the corporate occupational health services but preferred seeing a doctor outside of occupational health care, and keeping different kinds of medications (antidepressants, sleeping pills and so on) private. All the respondents with burnout or burnout symptoms experienced fear of appearing weak in the eyes of their superiors and colleagues. The theme of competition was often outlined as part of a culture of toughness, where the weak ones would not survive or advance in the organization. One of the male top managers even used the metaphor of being fed to the wolves if weakness was shown in the organization. Individualized, psychological (or perhaps psychologized) toughness was another intersecting reality, along with gendered family and care situation.

Middle level employees, i.e. managers, senior managers and directors, were seemingly the most pressurized. This at least partly resonates with previous research in similar organizations (Kornberger *et al.*, 2011, p. 531). Many middle managers were extremely pressurized, perhaps even oppressed, standing between top management’s expectations of results and young employees’ need for protection from extensive workloads. In working

between these pressures, they were liable to become burnt out. For some, these conditions had been ongoing for several years, whereas others felt they would recover or had recovered during relatively long summer vacations. Even those who had previously recovered were anxious about their future and their capability to handle the workload so they would not experience burnout again. Specifically, it became clear that these issues were often perceived as taboo within the organization, and as such not discussed with superiors or colleagues.

If and when alerting top management, these middle managers seemed to be afraid of seeming weak, thus weakening their own organizational position and possibilities to advance. Many times, top management seemed to respond with avoidance, or even total silence. This left the middle managers in a very tough position and often also without support from their superiors. Interviews with top management also indicated that not all in the very top felt that exhausting workload and burnout were real problems, with such statements as “*some can get burnout by staring at the floor*” (male top manager, 40+, married, three children, Finland).

Overall, and bringing together recruitment, work/nonwork and career advancement, these patterns were intersectionally gendered, and increasingly so at higher career levels. For example, even though concerns about “keeping it all together” were expressed by some men, especially middle managers, men’s collective, though not always individual, power is preserved, partly through assumptions around and constructions of the intersectionally ideal worker, usually meaning white, heterosexual, able-bodied men (WHAMs) and masculinities (Hearn and Collinson, 1994). Moreover, these WHAMs are relatively free to concentrate on their careers; in our data, the female spouses of top men managers had given up employed work totally or chosen a less ambitious career path. The female respondents in our data most often lived in dual career relationships, and, although often trying to advance their own careers, were still the primary caretakers at home, and were thus held back in competition around “flexibility” and availability for long, unpredictable working hours. These findings are in line with previous research by, for example, Kornberger *et al.* (2010). Indeed, in spite of being privileged on many dimensions, and the ethos of equality, these women were certainly disadvantaged in the organizations, even oppressed by their (paid and unpaid) workloads. Their relative privilege created the space for further silences: in effect, the “golden cage” of the organizations, where potential weakness is hidden, as voicing the inequalities or grievances would re-position these seemingly privileged people. Not surprisingly, these professionals, like many of the pressurized middle managers, wanted to remain even seemingly privileged. Thus, even though people leave, and newcomers are appointed, the organizational structures, and the interconnections between privilege and silence, remain.

## Concluding discussion

Drawing from a study on large international professional business-to-business service companies, this paper has both empirical and theoretical concerns: the interrelations of privilege and silence among high-intensity knowledge professionals in specific knowledge-intensive organizations; and, the more general relations of privilege and silence.

Our case companies are high profile, ostensibly successful international professional services consultancies that recruit “*the best of the best*”. In these organizations, capitalist corporate culture is very strong, shaping and homogenizing the work identities of professionals, and leaving little room for questioning or critical discourses within the organizations. Both formal and informal practices are reproduced in the organizations, and the competitive culture molds young employees to consciously and unconsciously homogenize the organization. Capitalist competition defines the culture, and employees’

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individual agency and “own choices” are emphasized in individual narratives. Corporate cultures also play a crucial role in how the supposedly “flexible” professional knowledge work is performed and experienced in practice, often in ways that are dependent on organizational position and status (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Daverth *et al.*, 2016; Niemistö, 2011). Accordingly, in such organizational contexts, attention needs to be paid to multiple intersectional dimensions and modalities of social relationships and power relations that affect organizational policies and practices, as well as interpersonal relations, individual opportunities and choices, and the silences that these may create.

The invisibility of privilege(s) is strongly, and paradoxically, present in our data. In many ways, the knowledge professionals studied are multiply privileged – in terms of education, status, white ethnicity, able-bodiedness and assumed heterosexuality. Yet, at the same time, there are pronounced inequalities between different groups and individuals. These inequalities were often linked to organizational position and power, but also to intersections with and mutual constitution of wider social divisions, such as gender, age, generation, education, family and care situation, and to the relatively limited control over individual work/nonwork boundaries. The everyday relations of work and nonwork, so-called work–life balance, are consolidated into the longer-term relations of career, whether advancement, stagnation or exit, and family and life trajectory.

The knowledge professionals’ privileged positions are rarely made explicit as such, and the prevailing implicit norm in the corporations is an ideal worker possessing these multiple privileges. This may not be so obvious at lower levels and younger age, with superficially at least more gender-neutral expectations there. However, the outcomes differ for men and women at different organizational levels and career stages, leading to very clear gender divisions at upper levels. At middle levels, there is more complexity and ambiguity, with intersections of age, gender, formal position and informal networks, along with current and future family situation, impacting on how the expectations of the ideal worker may or may not be met. Thus, in these organizations there are strong images of privilege that silence intersectional inequalities, as well as potential, often psychologized, “weaknesses” among the privileged. Within such a privileged, yet pressurized, organizational context, there are thus many unequal positions and positionings often, but not always, related to organizational hierarchy.

Scrutinizing multiply privileged professionals, who “have made it” and who are seldom positioned as weak or disadvantaged, reveals much about insecurities, failings, lack of well-being and unhappiness. It was especially clear that negative feelings and fears were kept far away from colleagues and superiors. Meanwhile, colleagues were often defined as friends, with the demands of work leading to colleagues spending long hours together, during peak seasons almost all of waking time, with barely any time to meet people outside work circles. This strengthened both the molding process and supposed homogeneity of the organization. Reductions to such homogenizing norms almost always create further ongoing discrepancies that are in turn typically silenced, organizationally and individually. Even multiply privileged individuals thus struggle against structural inequalities and organizational patterns, as well as with and against the extremely permeable boundaries between work and nonwork that allow very little room for activities outside the organizational world.

Finally, in terms of more theoretical reflections, we place this empirical analysis into a broader framing. Looking at these questions more broadly, relative privileges within social inequalities interrelate with silences in multiple ways. The invisibility of privilege can be seen at different levels, in terms of: individual identities and interpersonal actions of privilege (micro), as organizational level phenomena (meso) or as constructed societally (macro). At each level, privilege is (re)produced in part through silence. Silence also involves nonsilence, and *vice versa*, although the forms of silence are vastly different in relation to privilege and the

privileged, and as against disadvantage and the disadvantaged. Silences on and around privilege and inequalities in organizations are not only about literal silences on specific organizational issues or social categories but also about telling certain kinds of stories while leaving out others.

Silence, and indeed nonsilence, operate in different ways in relation to both disadvantage and the disadvantaged, and privilege and the privileged (see Table 4). First, the subordinated or disadvantaged may become spoken of and made visible, as the category that is often looked at, stereotyped, scrutinized and marked, or made other, at the same time as their voices are silenced or not heard. Second, privilege can be nonsilent and spoken in a dominant way, for example, by using structural and hidden power, or overstating the importance of certain features of organizational life that favor the powerful. At the same time, privilege is often taken-for-granted, not requiring to be voiced in order to be justified. The “privileged” often get their voices heard, to the extent to be taken as normalized or universal, but with their privilege remaining silent and invisible (Harlow *et al.*, 1995; Simpson and Lewis, 2005). This stems in part from the often taken-for-granted silences around privilege, and their naturalization and normalization.

To summarize: silence is a central and powerful issue in relation to intersectionality and intersecting social divisions, inequalities and the reproduction of privileges in organizations. Occupational groupings are seldom homogenous, and within groupings of multiply privileged professionals there are further differences of relative privilege and subordination. Within the category of knowledge professionals, the importance, distinctiveness and indeed privilege of the occupational grouping can be exaggerated – in both organizational/managerial discourses or success and academic analysis thereof – by generalizing those characteristics to apply to all members uniformly and obscuring intersectional relative privilege and disadvantage. Thus, privilege can remain normalized, invisibilized and silenced, which is exactly how, through silence, privilege is reproduced and maintained in organizations. This is an effective way of silencing differences between people within and outside organizations and creating cultures and practices that serve dominant interests and purposes, for example, long hours’ culture in capitalist corporate organizations. Silence can be thus used, in different ways, to obscure the voices, representations and subject positions of both dominant or dominated social categories, as well as being a means of organizing and managing, and a form of narration of individual success. As such, perhaps paradoxically, silence needs further un-silencing, even with its awkward undecidability.

	Non-silence	Silence
Non-privileged/ Disadvantaged	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Stereotyped, scrutinized</li> <li>(2) Resistance by persistence</li> <li>(3) Tolerated</li> <li>(4) Obscuring of being dominated, e.g. over-stating “all is well”</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Silenced</li> <li>(2) Resistance by distance</li> </ol>
Privileged/ Advantaged	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Authoritarianism</li> <li>(2) Domination of discourse, social interaction and social space</li> <li>(3) Paternalism and subtle control, e.g. control of subordinates, disguised in flexibility and autonomy of knowledge work</li> <li>(4) Obscuring of domination, e.g. over-stating equality, diversity and good public image</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Privilege taken-for-granted, naturalized, normalized, with no need to speak or to justify</li> <li>(2) Freedom to ignore, play down, tone down</li> <li>(3) Indifference</li> </ol>

**Table 4.**  
Examples of silence  
and nonsilence among  
the disadvantaged and  
the privileged

## Note

1. We use here the term “groupings” to refer to actual and potential social categories (cf. Bentley, 1949), rather than “groups” which can suggest specific teams or small groups within the organizations.

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