

THE CORPOREALITY OF WORKING-CLASS MEN IN LABOR REGIMES AND THE PRIVATE SPHERE.

Summary

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The crisis of masculinity in the contemporary world challenges many traditional tenets of gender theory. In modern Russia, physical labor has always been considered a masculine sphere, and male blue-collar workers are thought to epitomize normative masculinity. However, in the 1990s, when the status of Russian workers was downgraded and their economic standing worsened, the value attributed to masculinity was challenged. Scholars describe a “crisis of masculinity” arising in the post-Soviet transition. Its distinguishing characteristics are the impossibility of conforming to the paradigms of traditional masculinity, defiant physical behavior incompatible with self-preservation instincts, destructive bodily practices, harmful habits, and accidents, leading to the high susceptibility of men to various health disorders.

At the same time, in post-Soviet Russia “man becomes the very liberal subject who forms the basis of ‘genuine’ patriarchy never attained in Soviet times” (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002:451). Nevertheless, the prevalent discourse generates class- or milieu-specific benchmarks for a new hegemonic masculinity constituted through the political techniques of the patriarchal social order, reproduced by commercial mass media, which disseminate stereotypical ideas and images of masculinity. The same mass media produce the image of the blue-collar worker as an uneducated, uncultured person with low wages and poor health, with little chance to succeed in this world, lacking social status and spare time, all of this leading to the symbolic devaluation of traditional forms of manual labor. Thus, under conditions of socioeconomic crisis physical strength stops being an undisputed resource allowing men to conform with the standard model of masculinity.

In modern masculinity research, the theme of corporeality is usually not central or is altogether ignored. However, physicality and ideals of strength, fitness, and vigor are integral to normative masculine subjectivity. According to Raewyn Connell, normative masculinity is produced by means of discourses and practices (1995:45) that “produce” the male body in daily interactions. This body is expressed through certain positions, postures, and movements, and through the availability of certain physical skills and capabilities. Masculinity is formed by a system of bodily representations and the perception of one’s body by others, by ways of acting in work and at rest (Connell 1996:84). The male body is described by Connell as a specific arena, “a kaleidoscope of social meanings” (83) that connects the male body to measurements

of the symbolic. Paying attention to the corporeality of the male worker in contemporary Russia, we are confronted by one of the most hotly debated phenomena, at the intersection of multiple social, gender, cultural, and historical transformations.

In this article I consider the phenomenon of masculine corporeality at work and in the private sphere. By “masculine corporeality” I refer to both everyday discourses about the male body and the corporeal-discursive practices (Foucault 2004:311) that manifest themselves in the interview setting. Given the small number of works devoted to this subject, my research questions are rather broadly formulated here. In particular, this article considers how male workers talk about their bodies and what they say. How is masculine corporeality enacted within the labor regimes at a Moscow construction site and Saint Petersburg factory? What are sexual strategies implemented by male workers? And what is their somatic culture?

The research questions determine the structure of the article. To begin with, I restore the semantic field and reconstruct the meanings contained in the bodily narratives of male blue-collar workers and how bodily perception is influenced by the labor regimes of the construction site and the factory. In my study, “labor regime” refers to the processes of applying technologies of power to the individual body in order to maximize its utility (Foucault 1999:200–201). Then I examine how the corporeality of male workers is realized in the private sphere, as it is involved in the production of a masculine subject. I reconstruct the sexual strategies of builders and factory workers and try to understand how they relate to the labor regime of the construction site and the factory. After that I consider the somatic culture and the care for the self practiced by men in blue-collar occupations. I understand somatic or corporeal culture to mean workers’ attitudes to their bodies, health, and pleasures, and their verbal expressions of bodily states and feelings.

My empirical research base comprises 20 in-depth biographic interviews lasting from 40 minutes to two and a half hours with men in blue-collar occupations, aged 20 to 50, residing in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The interviews took place in 2010–2011 at the private manufacturing enterprises where my respondents worked. Respondents represent a wide range of blue-collar vocations: welder, turner, shaftman, concrete layer, mineworker, stevedore, industrial climber, and others. Each of these occupations requires manual labor and the use of physical strength. The monthly income of respondents varies between 20,000 and 40,000 rubles, depending on the city where they work, the type of enterprise, and the position they hold in the production hierarchy.

Our interviews begin with a brief introduction of the interviewer, a female researcher studying masculine corporeality. Initially, the workers view the subject of the study as unexpected and ambiguous. I follow this with a request: “Please tell me the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about your body,” which aims to bring to the surface respondents’ body-related knowledge and which initially baffles them. This approach is methodologically useful in two main ways. First of all, it allows translation of subjective corporeal experiences into the discussion of the body. Thus, distance is created between the corporeality of a subject and what he thinks and says about his corporeality. Secondly, I set the tone and topic of the in-

terview using this unusual question in order to delineate the boundaries of our discussion. If the conversation were shaped as a standard biographic interview, I would likely be overwhelmed with narrative data that has little to do with masculine corporeality. I discuss with my interviewees the male body within the framework of labor and private domains. Building the conversations around this topic, uncommon in the Russian research context, I discover that these issues are present in the minds of blue-collar workers, but much of their knowledge about their bodies is unconscious. They do not often articulate the problems of corporeality in their everyday language, except in connection with ailments and sports in the case of the older generation or in connection with sexuality in the case of the younger generation. Their frequent discomfort with answering interview questions demonstrates the shortage of verbal means through which they could think about their bodies and articulate corporeal knowledge.

The interview guide contains several thematic sections, wherein male corporeality is approached through 1) the labor system, 2) the private sphere, and 3) the conditions of forming corporeal practices in the natal family and in the teenage period. The interviews end with projective questions about their desired "perfect" body or the body they believe a man should have.

It came out in the course of my research that interviewees' narratives of corporeality at work are built around different aspects of the physical and psychological condition of blue-collar workers' bodies. Men in blue-collar occupations talk about their body at work in terms of mobility, physical activity, and labor operations. A common feature of the interviewees is their tendency to narrate corporeal knowledge through the use of categories such as "youngness" and "oldness," recollections and comparisons of the physical conditions of the past with those of the present. The key points of corporeal "breakage" are experiences of disease and injury. I correlate these narratives with forms of labor organization at the construction site and the factory. I compare these through analysis of discourses of masculine corporeality and sexuality, description of how occupations intersect with the physical skills used in the process of manual labor, labor conditions, labor relations, labor discipline and forms of control, and the spatiotemporal structure of the workplace.

I focus on two different labor regimes that work to constitute masculine corporeality and knowledge about it. Builders and factory workers labor within disciplinary regimes that presuppose the external regulation of the worker's corporeality due to the splitting of manufacturing cycles and labor operations, the placement of bodies in space, their interaction with labor instruments and mechanisms, and time control. I discovered that workers' body narratives correlate with the structure of working time and working space. Moscow builders spoke in plain language and with optimism about their bodies, using categories of healthful lifestyle and diet alongside descriptions of the pleasure of doing sports. Their bodies are subjected to a lesser degree of control due to the "openness" of their workspace, but nevertheless they must comply with certain disciplinary requirements (e.g., a strict ban on imbibing alcoholic beverages at work).

The spatiotemporal framework of the Saint Petersburg factory is correlated with a harsher bodily discipline. The bodies of factory workers grow old and sick quickly. Their narratives are more pessimistic but also more reflexive, not only in regard to workplace malaise and injuries but also the principles of social organization. Here I describe their critical perceptions of not only the workplace but also of the social order at large. Factory worker respondents more often changed jobs in the course of their professional careers and had diverse labor histories as shop assistants, waiters, stevedores, and mechanics, as well as experiences of standing up for their rights at production sites and in unions.

The stable wages and more favorable labor conditions of the builders correlate with greater consistency in their sexual and family life. Unstable earnings and harsh disciplinary requirements on factory workers often sap all their energy so they lack the strength, time, and means for building family relations, making it difficult to maintain a regular sex partner. Under such conditions, their sex life is either lacking entirely or is limited to promiscuous contacts, or they are tempted to commit adultery as compensation for low wages and hard working conditions. In the meantime, blue-collar male workers' narratives about sex hint at a longing for emotional warmth in relationships. In the course of my analysis I uncovered various sexual strategies used by male workers: norm-oriented, pragmatic, and romanticized.

In their narratives about the body, my interviewees draw analogies between physical labor, sports, and sometimes sexuality. These analogies stem from the fact that in all the aforementioned domains men use their body as a resource to prove their masculinity. These analogies also bring into focus their subjective corporeal experiences, revealing the similarity between strenuous exercise and the execution of routine labor operations.

In a capitalist economy, the main goal of any male blue-collar worker is the maximization of his body's "yield" (higher wages), often at the expense of his health. Yet it would be wrong to assert that blue-collar workers neglect their bodies and care little about them. In the interviews they mention the problem of obesity and their desire "to keep in good shape." Most respondents are mindful of their diets, since healthy eating habits, in their opinion, can minimize the harmful impact of their menial work conditions. In the course of our conversations about self-care practices it came out that those with greater cultural capital are more inclined to tend to their health and meet all safety requirements at the work site. But quite often I observed a strategy of combining cautious and destructive self-care practices, for example combining a healthy diet with smoking and alcohol abuse.

In terms of bodily consumption practices and income levels blue-collar workers may not differ greatly from representatives of other social milieus. Like office clerks, they may develop hobbies such as skiing, drive their own cars, buy fashionable clothing, and watch the same films. Although class boundaries may in certain respects be blurred, the image of the blue-collar man as a "loser" continues to circulate in the public sphere, while manual labor still lacks prestige, despite the acute dearth of skilled blue-collar workers in Russia. Men in blue-collar occupations in modern Russian society face difficulties in attaining social prosperity and maintaining psycho-

social health. Grassroots initiatives and self-organized communicative spaces at work could function as sites for social therapy, self-education, and political socialization, offering viable alternatives for subjectification of blue-collar workers. Such spaces could help counteract the symbolic “depletion” of manual labor and reduce the health risks that attend hegemonic blue-collar masculinity.

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