**Fit for work: understanding the organisational effects of masculinities in transition**

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**ABSTRACT:** As society, organisations and work transition into liquid modernity (c.f. Bauman, 2012), so too do masculinities. Where labour once enabled assertions of masculinity through working class toil, fewer opportunities for such work now exist in the West, and men seek alternatives to (re)discover ‘manhood’. In this paper we offer a critical interpretation of mens’ changing identities and their relationships with work. By addressing responses to a perceived crisis in masculinity, we seek a theoretical understanding of contemporary reconstructions of masculinity and discuss their effects. We focus our attention on the concept of working out whilst at work as one response, to unpack problematic distinctions between being ‘fit’ and ‘unfit’ at work, which are perpetuated by organisational hegemonies over workers’ bodies.

**Keywords:** Class analysis, critical perspectives on diversity, critical social theory, theories of identity, masculinity.
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INTRODUCTION

In a recent article, the writer, Tim Winton (2013b: 24) audaciously challenged Australian society’s current silence in public discourse on Class. He attributes a neglect of the nation’s working class origins to the social mobility of many of his generation. It is indicative of a much broader narrative. As Zygmunt Bauman tells us: “work has lost the centrality which it was assigned in the galaxy of values dominant in the era of solid modernity and heavy capitalism” (2012: 139). In short, within a global ‘consumer society’, heavy labour jobs in the West are now few and far between. And so people such as Winton are concerned about their perceived loss of working class culture.

Being from working class origins in Western Australia at the far reaches of Western ‘modernity’, where the resource industry continues to fuel the heavy capitalism of what remains of solid modernity, Winton (2013b) expresses an implicit sense of pathos & remorse for his mobility into the creative, unstable writing profession; not having continued his working class lineage, to retrace his daily boyhood shadowing of his labourer grandfather to the ‘tribal allegiances’ of working class ‘toil’ each day. While he engages with a ‘new old’ neo-liberal economy, he is surrounded by an ‘older’ economy of liberal paternalism (after Gill, 2013; Kerfoot & Whitehead, 1998). This romantic sensibility for the solidity of working class, blue-collar toil is mirrored in his most recent book, with the main protagonist failing to live up to the moral standards of his father; he has lost his work ethic, and with it his Selfhood (c.f. Winton, 2013a). This detachment from the hardened, yet emotional labour of our fathers has become a common existential crisis (after Alvesson, 1998) of the liquid, post-industrial West (Bauman, 2012; Sennett, 1999), but is not a new or straightforward dilemma (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003; S. Linstead & Pullen, 2006). Narratives of masculinity in ‘crisis’ permeate
contemporary literature and film. Such depictions often draw on cultural discourses of authenticity, a perceived effeminate consumer culture and reclamation of a ‘primal’ masculinity as a panacea to the so-called ‘masculinity crisis’ (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003; Godfrey, Lilley, & Brewis, 2012; S. Linstead, 1997).

This apparent crisis has been unravelled in Organisation Studies to provide a less simplistic understanding of work, organisation and masculinity and conceptualise it as a form of resistance to change (e.g. Ashcraft, 2005; Gherardi, 1995; S. Linstead & Pullen, 2006). Indeed, our theoretical appreciation of masculinity and work has given way to more useful, socially constructed understandings of masculinity and domination to appreciate the multiplicities of the lived experience (Pullen & Simpson, 2009). In moving beyond traditional binaries devoid of fixed meaning, certain new sticking points emerge as cultural totems. Experiences are temporarily, spatially, and culturally accumulated by the body to form a sense of self that is more than just ‘men at work’ (Riach & Cutcher, 2014). Yet, the further we delve into issues of post-modernity, the ways in which the masculine work ethic has ‘softened’ appear to be at the crux of a broader identity crisis.

It is no wonder men such as Winton feel such remorse. The key question we ask though is: what of young men now entering the ‘workforce’? This is a group who are increasing uncritically reported as being disengaged with organisation, and uninterested in work (Williams, 2013). Without ‘traditional’ toil to inscribe their bodies, what shapes contemporary masculinities? And so, what are the current intersections between masculinities and work?

In this paper we offer a critical interpretation of mens’ changing identities and their relationships with work. By addressing responses to a perceived crisis in masculinity, we seek a theoretical understanding of contemporary reconstructions of masculinity and discuss their effects. We focus our attention on the concept of working out whilst at work as one response. We see this as an important point of entry because of the sheer ubiquity of workplace fitness programs (Zoller, 2003). Hence we aim to extend the debate on gender multiplicities within Organisation Studies in order to explore the emergent intersections between masculinity and
organisation. This may not offer solace to Tim Winton, but does reflect a rediscovery of idealised masculinities in the relationship between the body and work. A later question to ask will be why?

**MEN, WORK AND IDENTITY WORK**

Nostalgia for the old-working class as resistance to modern understandings of work appear to be historically deep-seated. As Scott (2007) noted, masculinity is indeed dependent on its job-type and class, even if the work itself is harmful, destructive, and dangerous. The relationship between men, work and identity is often reproduced in the early constructions of the working self. In *Learning to Labour*, Willis (1977) illustrates a radical break in the intersection of class-based cultural norms between the working class and others. Working class lads who ‘choose’ a life of manual work may be viewed by ‘others’ as ‘failing to achieve’ at school or in society, but are recreating difference through labour power. As Collinson (1988) found to the detriment of his own sense of self, working class toil has its own structures, symbols, and discourses, which position its actors against the constitutive outsider. Physical work brings with it its own habitus and social strata (Butcher, 2013; Harper, 1987; Riach & Cutcher, 2014). Masculinities are performed to assert these (Ashcraft, 2005; Collinson, 1988). ‘Being a (working) man’ is a symbolic resource (Alvesson, 1998).

It is the void between working class cultural meanings of manhood and those of ‘others’ in society that men like Tim Winton have crossed. White-collar service-oriented work and organisation do not offer the same opportunities to assert ‘traditional’ masculinities. Masculinity is not as easy to locate in new forms of work that assert creativity, intuition, flexibility, and a less hierarchical form of sociality (Alvesson, 1998; Bourdieu, 2001). Hence complex and contradictory gender dynamics are becoming increasingly feminised in work and organisations (Alvesson, 1998; Gherardi, 1995). One consequence is the way in which hegemonic masculinity (re)claims men’s (re)telling of narratives that (re)cast their dispositions as dominant over ‘others’, (re)enacting rationalities and self-perceived hierarchies to gain a more familiar sense of self (Alvesson, 1998; Ashcraft, 2005).
This narcissism (Alvesson, 1998; S. Linstead, 1997; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008) perpetuates the narrative of ‘masculinity in crisis’. The perceived feminization of work, where men feel an apparent loss of influence and voice (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003), is only further complicated by the growing number of white-collar type jobs and loss of traditional blue-collar industry throughout much of Western culture. It is as though an untenable narrative of social (dis)order has emerged that portrays a resistance to this social change (Ashcraft, 2005; Bourdieu, 2001; Brewis, Hampton, & Linstead, 1997; S. Linstead, 1997). They are masks in an ongoing masquerade to positively position the present self with reference to a past work ethic in preparation for future social change (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003; Butcher, 2013; A. Linstead & Thomas, 2002). Such men are caught in a web of denial (S. Linstead, 1997).

However, if we understand work and organisation as being socially constructed, we must appreciate the fluidity of gender and other constructs; the multiplicity of the lived experience (S. Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Pullen & Simpson, 2009).

Though contemporary discourses create ‘discursive subject positions’ of say ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ senses of self and ‘other’, the materiality of the body is fluid (Brewis et al., 1997; S. Linstead & Pullen, 2006). It is not just a physiological system but also a semiotic object. Gender, class, and other social constructs are mapped on the body in an ongoing process of becoming (Brewis et al., 1997; Coupland, 2014; S. Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Riach & Cutchet, 2014). The lived experience is multi-layered across time, and across social and cultural sites; our multiple life experiences are cumulatively etched onto our bodies (Riach & Cutchet, 2014). So with changes through life, whether they be ageing (Coupland, 2014; Riach & Cutchet, 2014) or social mobility (c.f. Winton, 2013b), the body becomes inscribed by its practices to create its habitus (Riach & Cutchet, 2014).

Physical work crafts the body, mobilising it to engage in emotional labour through disciplined practices (Coupland, 2014). This rational, bureaucratic (i.e. masculine) organisation of the body is exemplified in military and sporting contexts, creating hyper-masculinities (Coupland, 2014; Godfrey et al., 2012; Kachtan & Wasserman, 2014).

Meanwhile in work and organisations that do not require engagement in physical activity the
notion of being ‘fit for work’ seemingly becomes redundant (Riach & Cutcher, 2014).

Thus how the body is ‘employed’ by organisations is problematic. Where hyper-masculinities are ‘required’ for work, they are disciplined through training, gendered through contrasting metaphors of feminine ‘weakness’ and masculine ‘strength’, and cyber-organised through the intersections of the body and technology (Godfrey et al., 2012). Bodies (not exclusively men’s) are honed to fulfil short-term organisational functions, only later to be discarded; hence the rise of the aesthetic labourer, whose embodied commodification may be used to further profits (Wolkowitz, 2006). As the now traditional, white-collar, cubicle dwelling employee sips a latte, attempts to maintain ideal posture in a Herman Miller ergonomic desk chair – organisations are creating spaces for him (and indeed her) to ‘reclaim masculinity.’

**RE-INScribing MASCULINITY THROUGH Fitness**

CrossFit is an exercise program marked by its commitment to intensity and, according to the program’s tag line, ‘forging elite fitness.’ The fitness program is quickly spreading throughout much of the world, with over 600 affiliated gyms throughout Australia and New Zealand alone (CrossFit, 2014). Originating with a single gym (or “box” as they are colloquially known) in the 1990s, the exercise phenomenon is now being adopted in parts of the corporate world. According to an exposé in the *New York Times*, organisations are using CrossFit to encourage morale, teamwork, and productivity (Lipinski, 2013). Yet, as one might imagine, the focus on intensity often brings on an extreme, masculine-laden ethos.

CrossFit workouts are so intense that a rite of passage is often referred to in CrossFit speak as meeting ‘Pukie the Clown.’ Meeting Pukie, as the name suggests, means that one has exercised to the point of inducing vomiting. Workouts tend to combine a strength movement and a cardiovascular routine. The CrossFit program’s roots lie in its counter-cultural stance against traditional gyms. Whereas traditional gyms may have fitness machines, televisions and mirrors, the CrossFit box is a masculine space devoid of anything other than ‘functional equipment’ to train the body. Drawing from the notion of ‘functional’ fitness, organisations
have taken up CrossFit as a space for workers to reinscribe their bodies, in perhaps almost the very same ways of their grandfathers. In North America, CrossFit gyms are becoming more common at work. CrossFit at work offer ‘respite’ from the doldrums of everyday cubicle life. Not only do these fitness rituals offer employees an escape from the workday, but some organisations look to the group exercise format as accountability program, as colleagues can workout together, achieve their fitness goals, and then return to the office.

Armed with a 30-pound sledgehammer, CrossFit participants take turns pounding an over-sized tractor tire. “Full extension!” commands a trainer – right after left, each participant takes a wallop on the tire. Workouts involving sledgehammers, kettlebells, pull-ups, sandbag ‘farmer carries,’ as well as traditional Olympic weightlifting movements are part of the CrossFit approach. “Routine is the enemy,” a common CrossFit saying, implies that one must be ready for whatever fitness challenge is presented before them.

Without getting into all of the nuances of a CrossFit lifestyle, our aim here is to provide CrossFit as a case from which we can clearly see the construction of masculinity within the organisation as a hyper-masculine alter-ego to everyday ‘feminine’ work. We see fitness promoted by employers, and particularly CrossFit, as a form of symbolic domination that exploits the body for short-term organisational objectives. Bodies assumed to be malleable and docile (Godfrey et al., 2012) are employed to perform controlled, rational functions. Whether for broader political purposes (after Godfrey et al., 2012) or commercial gain (after Coupland, 2014), organisational ideologies still dominate the social construction of the body in liquid modernity, as they did in solid modernity; inscribing narratives that transform it into a purposeful object.

Yet, such hyper-masculinity is volatile. Complicating this issue is that the CrossFit box creates a space where men and women workout together. Organisations that promote CrossFit may run into issues of creating spaces that are too masculine. Indeed, when the body realises it is being used in such a way, it resists. If workers with more sedentary lifestyles assume a paternal influence from their employer, would they protest? The body is a surface of intensities and pure tension (S. Linstead & Pullen, 2006). Yet, because such inscriptions are
also physical material affects upon the body, resistance is not as easily understood. That is, the body cannot easily feign fitness, unfit employees may become even more disenfranchised as hegemonic masculinity spills forth from the fitness centre.

While extreme fitness provides one example, other contemporary cases also highlight the new intersections of work, organisation and masculinity. Kachtan & Wasserman (2014) show how Israeli soldiers combine their organised masculinity as physical strategies of resistance to challenge the expectations of ‘appropriate’ professionalism imposed on them. Combining gender and ethnic distinctions, those soldiers use body maintenance, their uniforms, and their skin colour to perform resistance (Kachtan & Wasserman, 2014). There are distinct parallels with Ashcraft’s (2005) pilots’ reinforcing of their identities as ‘captains’, with Collinson’s (1988) fellas’ use of hyper-sexualised humour, and with Willis’ (1977) lads’ ‘failure’ at school. We see each case as resistance against the colonisation of the body for ideological purposes. The honed hyper-masculinity developed to be controlled for organisational ‘use’ abandons its assumed docility and is decisively mobilised (after Martin, 2001) against the organiser(s).

So we find three problems at the intersection of work, organisation and masculinity that have surfaced to expose the symbolic violences of organised exploitation on the body. Ideological ‘progress’, its oppositional counterpart of societal ‘decline’ and the ‘employment’ of the body combine to either create hyper-masculine bodies that are ‘fit for work’, or they serve to emasculate men in work roles that do not demand physical ‘fitness’. While hyper-masculinities are celebrated in popular Western culture as exemplary embodiments of ‘manhood’, they are short-lived and volatile, abusing bodies and reinforcing old stereotypes. By this, we mean that through fitness programs like CrossFit, a hyper-masculine body is depicted as the goal. That is, a body that has earned its fruits through a hardened work(out) ethic represents privileged notions of masculinity. The once celebrated ‘Organisational Man’ (Gill, 2013) dutifully confined to the office he worked so hard for, is now encouraged to workout during work to reclaim a body perceived to be ‘fit for duty’. That is, the body confined to the office is acceptable as long as it wears a slim-fit suit, showing that the body
beneath is sculpted, as having the capacity for ‘duty’. Hegemonic masculinity claims office dwellers as long as they have been inscribed with potential (through extreme fitness). Following Bourdieu (2010), Riach & Cutcher (2014) attribute this distinction between ‘fit’ and ‘unfit’ to the rise of avant-garde society, which essentialises the body to create idealised imagery, e.g. the ‘model’ worker. Such imagery in turn enables the institutionalisation of structures of authority and control over the working body by Management to engender conformance to the ideal. Counter to these structures comes resistance to conformance by those who do not wish to conform (after S. Linstead, 1997). As Coupland (2014) suggests, the ‘panoptical gaze of the male connoisseur’ has fallen on all forms of gender, and is consequently internalised by all who are affected by it. Indeed, it is a symbolic structure from which few, if any, are independent.

UNDERSTANDING RECONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY AND ORGANISATIONAL EFFECTS

The Western ‘masculinity crisis’ and the identity work involved in responses such as CrossFit are indicative of the centralisation of consumerism in everyday life and the decentralisation of work (c.f. Bauman, 2012). Young men without ‘traditional’ pathways into culturally significant work have transitioned the construction of their masculine identities in a cyclical structure bouncing from production to consumption (c.f. Nayak, 2003). With transitions away from heavy labour to more sedentary work, fitness is less so an outcome of work and yet is more so an expected ideal within Western society. We now pay to workout in the absence of being paid to toil. Hence while men such as Tim Winton respond by calling for reinstitution of the class structures that once enabled their hegemonic assertions of masculinity through work, younger men are engaging in alternative activities such as CrossFit to (re-)enact contemporary masculinities and therefore their habitus. Most interesting to us is the influence of organisations in these (re-)constructions of masculinities.

Through rationalisation and bureaucratisation of work (and workouts), organisations
continue to assert hegemony over workers’ bodies. Work in the West is less active than ever before. Physical exertion at work is rationalised through technological intervention, and movement is minimised through bureaucratisation. Toil is an ineffective and inefficient use of the Western body; consequently it is becoming increasingly ‘unfit’. Yet Western society’s idealisations of archetypal fitness are simultaneously upheld by the same organisations that no longer provide the work needed to sculpt the body. In its place, CrossFit and other fitness programs are provided, or at least encouraged. Thus the simultaneously normative and normalising effects of organisation on the body is problematic in at least two explicit ways. First, polarised body objects emerge. That is, workers who do not workout may be perceived to be unfit, while those who do workout become the privileged employees, who may be perceived to go ‘above and beyond’ the requirements of their work. Fitness is now the prerogative of the ‘authentic’ employee. He or she must want to discipline their body. Such an attitude harkens back to attitudes towards work, of which several CEOs have picked up and initiated relationships with CrossFit programs for employees whilst at work. Second, there are much broader societal implications, such as increased dependency on organisational healthcare and welfare. Such dependence on an employer for these life-world necessities is an encroachment that may yield to further discrimination of bodies. Fitness protocols may ignore perceived ‘lesser bodies’ that are unable to perform, that are ‘fat’, or persons that have disabilities. In effect organisations exploit the body’s health and wellbeing to extract short-term value at the expense of both the worker and his/her state.

Furthermore, ironically, the push towards organisational fitness may very well undermine attempts at organisational wellness. Dale and Burrell (2014) explore the tensions between organisation and wellness, theorised organised embodiment. The crux of the issue rests on the fact that organisational wellness “obscures its necessary ‘other’, namely unwellness” (p. 160). Thus, the ‘other’ side of wellness, those that are unwell, or the unfit, may rarely be the focus of scholarly attention (with notable exceptions like McGillivary, 2005; Zoller, 2003). It is precisely this sentiment from which we look to extend this research to more fully explore with respect to work, organisation and masculinity.
For now, we have mapped the current landscape of masculinity, labour, and the body. We envision questions surrounding corporeal ethics that, if remain unquestioned, may only further perpetuate discourses of masculinity crises and responses aimed at disciplining the body. Narratives of society in decline are perpetuated by organisational abuses of the body. While there very well may be economic incentive for corporeal control, we must situate the consequences in the fore.

REFERENCES


