
Class and Masculinity in Contemporary Management Consulting Firms: Some Practical Recommendations

Andreas Giazitzoglu & Daniel Muzlo

Abstract

It is relatively unusual for white, working-class men to find employment in prestigious management consultancy firms. When they do find employment in these firms, their working-class masculinity is seen as problematic, and not in line with clients' and co-workers' expectations. In turn, they must modify their identity, by learning and enacting what the literature refers to as "corporate masculinity". But how does this learning process occur? And how can consultancy firms better integrate working class men, to maximise the value of their contributions? Based on empirical research we conducted (Giazitzoglu and Muzio, forthcoming), this short piece explores the experiences of a pool of white working-class men who found employment as IT specialists in a prestigious management consultancy firm. After discussing our research and what it reveals about the way professionals from working class backgrounds learn corporate masculinity, we consider some practical recommendations.

Of Mice and Men: Class, Masculinity and It

Studies that investigate management consultancies from a cultural perspective show that a form of white, middleclass 'corporate masculinity' is seen as 'ideal' within consultancy firms (Gregory, 2016). Hence, management consultancies have traditionally employed a disproportionately high number of middleclass white men, especially in senior corporate roles.

When employees 'fail' to fit the corporate male ideal, there is pressure on them to replicate the identities of corporate men. This is most notable in studies of gender, such as Wajcam's 1999 study of female managers who had to learn to 'manage like a man' in order to avoid gender-discrimination and progress their careers. The same holds true for working class men, who must align themselves with a dominant form of middleclass 'corporate masculinity' despite their working-class backgrounds. Existing quantitative studies reveal that only 8.4% of IT professionals come from 'manual, semi-skilled or unemployed' – i.e. working class backgrounds (Friedman et al, 2015: 273). Analysis also reveals male IT professionals from working class backgrounds earn an average of £11,000 a year less than men from privileged backgrounds doing the same roles (Friedman et al, 2015: 277). As such, when working class men find themselves in management consultancy contexts, they experience class-based exclusion and discrimination, manifest in a lack of pecuniary reward and a lack of access. In this context, if they are to progress in their careers, they have to learn to enact appropriate forms of corporate masculinity, in order to better fit in, and offset the penalties that their working-class backgrounds generate.

Codes of masculinity exist in a wide range of forms including: what men wear, their tastes in food, sport and clothing, their knowledge and interests, the institutions they are associated with, and their vocal accents. In the UK, there is a clear distinction between middleclass masculinity and working-class masculinity. The former is defined by codes of affluence. It is associated with expensive tastes in clothing, nuanced knowledge of 'high-brow' themes like literature, classical music, wine and art, and links with exclusive institutions, like Oxbridge. The latter has associations with less highbrow aspects, such as football culture and, typically, an exclusion from and even mistrust of elite institutions. As nuanced sociological accounts reveal (e.g. Giazitzoglu, 2018), it is defined by loyalty to 'the lads' (i.e. other working class men), over-emotive reactions and hedonism and machismo in the form of womanising, alcohol consumption and undertones of physical toughness and violence. It is a form of masculinity that is, for Jones (2011), 'demonised', especially within UK media representations.

Context & Findings

We conducted multi-year research, interviewing 10 white male participants from working-class backgrounds who found employment as IT professionals in a prestigious, global management consultancy firm. Our research investigates how participants learned to enact middleclass corporate masculinity, over multiple years, as a result of their employment and immersion in the cultural context of the elite firm that employed them.

We found that when participants entered Ferguson, their working-class backgrounds and associated forms of masculinity resulted in them feeling stigmatised, alienated, and discriminated against. For example, participants mentioned how their line managers 'looked down' upon them. This subordination was not linked to the quality of participants' work. (Participants' programming skills are considered to be exceptional within their firm). But because of their working-class identities, in the form of their 'overly regional accents', 'lack of knowledge about wine and restaurants and the stuff consultants talk about' and clothing choices, which were seen as inferior, and incongruent with clients' and co-workers' expectations. Participants were negatively judged in relation to more affluent recruits from middleclass backgrounds, who were able to enact corporate masculinity naturally:

'We called them the golden boys ... their backgrounds were (Russell Group University) and they were just different ... the managers thought they were great because they were posh, even though they were (expletive) at programming'.

However, over time, participants subscribe to the organisational belief that working class masculinity is inferior, and something to be replaced by corporate masculinity. In turn, participants learn to align their personal identities with corporate masculinity. By so doing, they find a level of 'fit' and integration within their firm. Participants' learning processes are guided, to a large extent, by organisational inductions they attend. Inductions occur within six months of being recruited.

At inductions, 'codes' of corporate masculinity are communicated to and learned by participants (e.g. what to wear, how to speak to clients etc). Participants describe the corporate masculinities they learned as existing in their clothing, in the form of 'white or maybe blue business shirts', with 'ties that have a thick knot ... never a skinny tie'. They also mentioned it exists in embodied codes, like having 'neat haircuts and manicured nails', and in their vocal styles, which become modified to have 'as little regional-accent as possible'.

From around the second year of employment, participants begun to conform with increasing zeal to codes of corporate masculinity. However, our findings don't suggest that the learning of corporate masculinity by men from non-privileged socio-economic backgrounds is a linear process. Instead, it is a dynamic one, infused with challenges and difficulties. Ultimately, despite participants' learning how to enact corporate masculinity, they never feel fully integrated within the culture of their employing firm. Instead, they are always beset by a sense of being second-class citizens: a lesser subculture of corporate masculinity, inferior to and alienated by colleagues from more affluent backgrounds. Participants' discourses suggest they suffer from a sense of imposter syndrome, with their non-privileged socio-economic backgrounds making them feel 'not good enough no matter what'. Further, when participants return and interact in their communities of origin, they experience ridicule on the basis of the corporate masculinities they have learned. This was made clear by one participant who was ridiculed by family members when he went for a meal with them on the basis of him wearing cufflinks – an act that is seen as legitimate and normative in his firm, but an act that was seen as almost offensive by family members – 'only snobs and snitches wear cufflinks'.

Simultaneously, participants distance themselves from 'dropouts', i.e. men from similar socio-economic backgrounds to themselves who found employment as IT professionals but who failed their probations. Participants discuss dropouts in sneering ways:

'I remember one evening I was working in the office with (names) ... Do you remember a song about I think it was Gangnam style? And there was this dance to it? and all he kept saying was I can't wait to go out into the bars and do the dance, I've been learning it all week, so I can dance with my mates, and he left about 7 pm and went straight out. I worked late that night thinking yeah enjoy your stupid dance, that's why you've never made it here, because you'd rather be in a (uses derogatory) with a bunch of (uses derogatory) doing some stupid dance than delivering to clients' (HB)

Thus, while participants feel like 'imposters' in their employing firm, they have lost touch with people in their communities of origin and former co-workers from similar backgrounds to them. In this sense, our research suggests the learning of corporate masculinity results in professionals from working class backgrounds failing to feel integrated in either of the cultural contexts they straddle.

Recommendations

The primary lessons learned from our research is that (1) some (though not all) IT professionals from working class backgrounds are willing and able to abandon codes of working class masculinity in the context of the contemporary management consultancy and learn to enact corporate masculinity, and (2) working class IT professionals are – of course – able to contribute to their organisation through hard work, diligence and skill, despite the working class identities they enter employment with being seen as problematic by co-workers and, especially, line-managers.

A study by McLeod et al (2009) demonstrates how advertising executives from working class backgrounds are able to engage with working class target audiences in ways executives from middleclass backgrounds can't. Thus, the backgrounds of working class executives add value to advertising firms. Similarly, working class IT professionals are highly valuable to consultancy firms. To see working class men as 'lesser' on the basis of their lack of middleclass codes is limiting, and stops their own contributions being identified and appreciated.

Thus, management consultancies should not – as they appear to – discriminate against working class applicants when recruiting. Consultancy firms should look past what may materialise as a lack of 'professional polish' shown by working class men, and realise working class men bring their own skillsets, viewpoints and contributions to management consultancy firms.

Simultaneously, consultancy firms should not be opposed to 'socialising' working class recruits, thereby showing them how to conform to corporate masculinity, should they want to. For doing so helps to anchor working class recruits. It also, by virtue of prolonging their employment in firms, allows working class men to realise upward

mobility in the form of heightened economic capital. This can be read as a benefit, especially given that working class men are the group least likely to experience upward mobility in British society. However, this upward mobility comes at a psycho-social cost: professionals from working class backgrounds are not fully integrated in the corporate world they enter or the working-class world they left behind. Firms should be aware of these costs, and look to support working class employees as their careers develop.

References

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