

Body Beautiful?: Gender, Work and the Body in Professional Services Firms

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Context – gender, work and the body

- Previous work on experience of mothers in accounting
- Significance of physical body in experience of professional work
- Combined relationship of gender, identity, work and the body within professions and professional service firms
- Physical body is an important facet of professionalism because it is symbolic of aspects of identity and the self, an embodied representation of a perceived identity
- Attitudes towards the body may also be gendered suggesting that ‘the ways in which women’s and men’s bodies are perceived, categorized and valued are undoubtedly important in legitimizing and reproducing social inequalities in the [accounting] profession’ (Haynes, 2008a, p. 345).

Context – accounting and law

- Oldest, established professions
- Scope & size of PSFs:
 - PWC - \$26.2 bn revenue 2009
 - Global law firms – revenue > \$1 – \$2bn
- Servitisation of economy
- Identification as a profession – professional identity
 - Public service
 - Client service
 - Technical competence
 - Socialisation into behavioural attributes and career expectations
 - Firm as locus of professionalisation
 - Professional characteristics

Women in accounting and law professions

- Historical barriers to entry for women
- Recent decades – significant increases in female intake
 - Law Society enrolments = 63%, 2001- 2007.
 - Female a/c students – 48% (POBA)
- Problematic to retain & progress women
 - Culture & Glass ceiling effects (Sommerlad 1998)
 - Discrimination (Nicolson 2005)
 - Work/family commitments (Windsor & Auyeung 2006)
 - Masculine models of success (Kumra & Vinnicombe 2008)
 - Embodied identities, emotions, practices (Haynes 2008)

Aim and research questions

Overarching aim - to evaluate the role of the physical body in professional identity formation within professional services firms.

Research questions:

- How is the identity of professional inscribed on the physical body?
- What is the role of the PSF in defining, controlling and legitimising professional body image?
- What is the importance of the body in defining the individual's professional perceptions of the self?
- How do women manage their bodies in undertaking professional work?
- How is the physical body gendered in PSFs?

Research methodology

- 30 in-depth semi structured interviews with female lawyers & accountants in PSFs
 - 15 US & 15 UK
 - US - large international law firms, Big 4 & medium sized firms on west coast
 - UK – Large & medium sized PS firms, nationally
- Career trajectories from 2nd year associate to equity partners with 28 years experience
- Personal contacts, women's networks and snowballing techniques
- Not intended to be representative – explore & interpret experiences & meaning

What is 'professional'? - appearance

Nature of professionalism goes beyond technical attributes to incorporate aspects of behaviour, embodied in the form of required attire, dress and presentation.

“The whole group of first level people will go up to our Headquarters and there will be two or three days training, now 90% of it will be technical, you know, how to audit, how to do that, but they often throw in something light, like business etiquette or how to present yourself, and appropriate dress and appropriate behaviour and how to eat properly.” (Partner A - Accounting firm)

Women's 'professional appearance'

Women have to present themselves in a way that exudes their status and ability as professionals, and adds **credibility** to their competence:

“I certainly find that with women they have got to understand the consequences of the way that they are dressing but if they dress in a way that is not traditionally professional, or too casual, or too sort of trendy that veers away from the business look, I think it effects their credibility and I think it is hard, you know, the Junior Associates are already struggling with looking young, with not having a lot of experience, maybe not having a lot of confidence yet, and then on top of it your appearance is not emanating this...”
(Partner B – Law Firm)

‘Professional demeanour’ and the client relationship

The role of the client in professional services firms is central to defining the nature of professionalism and how this is embodied

Professional presentation is related to the credibility of a professional in the eyes of the client:

“How they present themselves, their dress, *demeanour* and so on, is in the mix as well because we have to consider, you know, you are going to be going out to a client, would you be presentable to a client? so if they do not carry themselves very well or say they are not very dressed up.., it's kind of like, okay, do they not understand or, you know, do they not *care*?” (Senior Manager A– accounting)

Elusive ‘professional demeanour’

The exact nature of professional embodiment and professionalism is elusive and ephemeral, relating to conduct, self-presentation and demeanour:

“The other things that we look at is certainly professional presence, is this person someone that we feel comfortable we could send him [*sic*] out to the client and they would be able to articulate things clearly, they present themselves in a professional way, that they would be able to, you know, show that sort of professional *demeanour*”. (Senior Manager B – accounting)

‘speaking with some kind of impact’ (Senior Manager C – accounting)

Women negotiating ‘professional demeanour’

Women have to negotiate their attire and dress, but also how they manage this elusive ‘professional demeanour’, which encapsulates speech and manner.

Women’s experiences of speaking authoritatively are met negatively as overbearing

“We disagreed with the hiring partner on a candidate and I think we were the two women on the committee and it was interesting because after the fact I sort of heard back from our recruiting manager his reaction... to the way that she was speaking, because she does have this very authoritative manner of speaking, is that she was strident and he couldn’t get past that and listen to what she was saying because she was so strident and he felt attacked” (Associate lawyer A)

“...a very fine line between assertive and shrill”

Cultural expectations of women v. professional behaviour:

“In a courtroom you walk in with the expectation that the man is someone to be trusted and advocating for his client.. but then you also have a concept of how a woman is going to behave and a woman has to be very careful not to step beyond that, so you can't be, you know, super aggressive because then you have stepped out of role, whereas if a man did the same thing, that *is* his role, and they might not presume that you are there as a strong advocate for your client because they don't think of women as advocates, so you have to really establish that by being assertive but not aggressive. So I think there is a very fine line there”. (Partner C – Law Firm)

Negative characterisations of women

Differential sets of embodied for men and women

“If a man had made the same arguments, in the same manner, in the same way as a woman, you know they were just protecting their clients’ interests or whatever, but if a women does it, she is a bitch, So that is one of the things for women, at least in litigation, it is more of a problem for women to be taking strong positions and arguing forcefully and striking that balance. If you do it too much you are a bitch, that is how you would be characterised and you know with some people if you do it at *all* you are a bitch”. (Partner A – Law Firm)

Bodily fit

Use of natural attributes:

“You may have noticed I am extraordinarily tall and I think it has actually served me very well... people think that I am older or more experienced or more confident or sure of myself or whatever it is”. (Associate Lawyer A)

Compensation for ‘lack’ of fit:

“I sort of think that if you go to a meeting and you are the only women in the room you better be the best dressed one there, and if you go to a meeting with clients and you are the accountant you better be dressed one notch above the client”. (Senior Manager D - accounting)

Control of the body

Control of the body and its outward display:

“They want you to appear fit and healthy and you know you cannot be overweight, they encourage you to be healthy... I know there is a group of ladies that meet once a week for like weight watchers club, they help each other take the pounds off, they meet for lunch which I always find is a little odd but supervision I guess.... for the most part they [lawyers] are fairly fit people”. (Associate Lawyer B)

Negative interaction between work and body

Strain on the body:

“I lose enormous amounts of weight starting 2 - 3 weeks before trial because my stomach is just in knots all the time that I just can't bear the thought of eating”.
(Associate Lawyer C)

“The worst part is the stress, I mean I don't look like that anymore, in terms of the photograph they took after I [made partner] you know, so on the whole, you lose some part of yourself”. (Partner D – Law firm)

Theoretical background – symbolic value of body

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (1977, 1984) does not specifically refer to gender, but...

The body has become commodified in modern societies and has become central to the acquisition of status and distinction

Social action is embodied, body is bearer of symbolic power, through *physical capital*, or 'embodied states, as modes of speech, accent, style beauty and so forth'

Interrelationship between the development of the body and people's social location, such that the *context* in which the commodification of embodiment takes place will clearly influence the outcome.

Professional embodiment in professional services firms in accounting and law

Not homogenous as profession but similar processes of professional socialisation

Dominated by concept of client & client interest

The *habitus* of accounting and law – ‘the generation and structuring of representations which can be objectively regulated and regular’

Socialisation processes = ‘structural apprenticeship’

Dialectical relationship between body and context it operates in - culture inscribed on body and body reflects this back

Conclusions

Professional identities may also be gendered due both to gendered stereotypes associated with masculine and feminine bodily forms, and also with professions themselves

Through the commodification process, women may be encouraged more than men to develop their bodies as objects of perception for others

Bodies are subject to controlling rationality in maintaining their embodied characteristics self-presentation such that professionals are positioned as more or less suitable to perform professional work

These issues might equally apply to other forms of embodied identity involving race, disability or class

If only certain forms of embodied identities are regarded as legitimate, there are serious implications for human and physical capital, and for the careers and identities of individuals