Acculturation and Remasculation

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Despite emerging research on marketplace-enabled masculinities, it is unclear how masculinities are reconstituted through consumption in the context of transnational mobility. A hermeneutic study of 14 skilled migrant men reveals three remasculation strategies: status-based hypermasculinity, localized hypermasculinity, and flexible masculinity. These represent a re-inscription and revision of pre-migration gender regimes.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Despite a recent wave of scholarly interest on masculinities and the marketplace (Bettany et al. 2010; Holt and Thompson 2004; Moisio, Arnould, and Gentry 2013), there has been limited attention on how the marketplace-enabled construction of masculinities intersects with the dynamics of transnational mobility. While consumer acculturation theorists have contributed important insights regarding the intersections between gender and mobility, studies in this area have been predominantly drawn on the perspectives of female migrants (Chytkova 2011; Kjeldgaard and Nielsen 2010; Üstüner and Holt 2007) and second generation migrants (Lindridge, Hogg, and Shah 2004; Takhar et al. 2010). Furthermore, theorists in the broader social sciences have tended to focus on the experiences of low capital migrant men (Datta et al. 2009; George 2005), thereby privileging the narrative of migrant emasculation.

To redress these current asymmetries, this paper seeks to understand masculinities from the perspective of skilled first generation migrant men. In particular, beyond the well-established accounts of migrant emasculation (Kalra 2009), how do skilled migrant men use marketplace resources to perform remasculation? In the context of challenges to masculine gender identities in migration, to what extent do the remasculation practices of skilled migrant men facilitate the re-inscription or revision of pre-migration gender regimes?

Our exploration of these questions is informed by the concepts of gender regimes and remasculation. Gender regimes refer to “an amalgam of practices, values and meanings” which cumulatively produce idealized standards of masculinity and femininity (Hopkins and Noble 2009, 813). Gender regimes are contextualized social performances (Hibbins and Pease 2009), which intersect with other identity constructs and wider sociocultural forces (Collins 1994). While they may produce power asymmetries (Connell 2005), they are also subject to challenge and change (Datta et al. 2009). The gender regime of pater familias, in which manhood is strongly associated with having paid work, providing for a family, and being head of the family (Connell 1998; Datta et al. 2009; Elmhirst 2007; Herbert 2008; Lupton 2000; Pessar and Mahler 2003; Thai 2012), is often challenged in migration, leading to experiences of emasculation. In order to cope, migrant men have been theorized to employ various remasculation strategies which include hypermasculine strategies (McKay 2007; Osella and Osella 2000), protest masculinity (Broude 1990), local hegemonic masculinity (Hibbins and Pease 2009), and flexible masculinity (Chua and Fujino 1999).

To empirically explore how skilled migrant men use marketplace resources to perform remasculation strategies through consumption practices, we conducted a hermeneutic analysis (Thompson 1997) of depth interviews with 14 skilled migrant men who had migrated from Southeast Asia to New Zealand. To enrich and deepen the consumer narratives, visual and reflexive methods were deployed. First, each participant was asked to select objects and photographs which represent their experiences of migration (Zaltman and Coulter 1995) and use drawings to represent their social networks and social identities (Bagnoli 2009). Second, each participant was interviewed twice in line with open narrative reflexivity (Thompson, Stern, and Arnould 1998). In their second interview, participants were presented with the researchers’ emerging interpretations and provided an opportunity to correct, qualify, or further deepen their initial responses.

Participants conveyed common experiences of emasculation resulting from reductions in occupational status, discourses of gender egalitarianism in New Zealand, and gender role reconfigurations in the household. In order to cope with these changes, participants deployed three remasculation strategies: status-based hypermasculinity, in which participants used marketplace resources to cast themselves in the role of the successful professional migrant and abundant provider; localized hypermasculinity, referring to appropriations of new regimes of masculinity from the local cultural context, and flexible masculinity, involving the reframing of gender regimes in favor of domesticity. Marketplace resources, such as symbolic objects and practical knowledge of key consumption practices, were essential to successful performances of remasculation. These performances further involved a range of audiences spanning both the culture of origin and the culture of residence. While status-based hypermasculinity largely represents a reassertion of pre-migration gender regimes, localized hypermasculinity and flexible masculinity represent an expansion and reframing.

By contributing a transnational dimension to the academic discourse on masculinities and the marketplace, this paper extends previous studies which have largely focused on masculinity within a single consumer culture (Holt and Thompson 2004; Moisio et al. 2013). This paper also extends emerging research on masculinities and acculturation (Lindridge and Hogg 2006; Takhar et al. 2010) by augmenting existing perspectives of female migrants and second generation immigrants with the perspective of skilled first generation migrant men. In particular, our study uncovers a wide range of remasculation strategies which show how pre-migration regimes of manhood are both reproduced and reworked in acculturation.

However, the extent to which gender regimes shift must not be overstated. Despite the availability of alternative modes of masculinity, the skilled migrant men in this study largely adopted status-based hypermasculinity as a dominant remasculation strategy. This pattern underlines how myopic constructions of masculinity in terms of professional status and wage-earning power (Connell 1998) continue to delimit possibilities for identity reconstruction in the context of transnational mobility. In the end, “while men may move themselves with relative ease across the globe, shifting their own masculinities proves rather more difficult” (Donaldson and Howson 2009, 217).

REFERENCES


