

Remaking a “Failed” Masculinity: Working-Class Young Men, Breadwinning, and Morality in Contemporary Russia

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Much of the sociological work examining the changing fortunes of working-class young men has emphasized their newly precarious position as well as the “hollowed out” nature of their class subjectivities. By contrast, and echoing work on the adaptability of hegemonic forms of masculinity, this article points to the ongoing salience of working-class masculinities, drawing on longitudinal research with young men in Russia’s Ul’yanovsk region between 2004 and 2013. It examines how young men are able to shift from a position of marginality to one of a complicit, breadwinning masculinity by bringing to bear a variety of social, cultural, bodily, and institutional resources rooted in their class, gender, and ethnic location. This journey also reflects young men’s negotiation of dialogical, moral selves, central to which is their acquired ability to reflect upon different ways of being a man by appealing to wider moral currents within Russian society.

Introduction

The contradictions and crisis tendencies that characterize any gender order ensure that hegemonic masculinities are always in a state of transformation and adaptation in order to legitimize men’s continued dominance over women and subordinate men (Connell 1995). Thus, as exemplars of hegemonic masculinity and strategies of gender relations in many Western countries have shifted away from overt dominance toward more conciliatory and companionate models (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 846), the ideological construct of men as “breadwinners” and the primary importance men attach to waged work have remained largely unchallenged (Cornwall 2016; Lindisfarne and Neale 2016). While the masculinity of dominant men has

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thus been regarded as adaptive in responding to changing economic contexts and social mores (Aboim 2010; Bridges and Pascoe 2014), lower-educated, more subordinate men have been seen as incapable of dealing with the challenges they have faced. Such challenges have been especially steep for working-class young men, whose pathways into respectable forms of masculinity rooted in manual labor have been blocked by processes of deindustrialization and precariatization (McDowell 2019). This marginalization at the material level has been further embedded culturally, as neoliberal discourses insisting on a self-improvement agenda pathologize working-class young men as surplus to the requirements of capital in “knowledge economies” and out-of-place in multicultural, liberal societies (Walker and Roberts 2018). The literature addressing the responses of working-class young men to their changing prospects—mostly situated within the sociologies of youth, work, and education—has at times pointed to their adoption of forms of protest (Bourgeois, 1995) and victimhood (Pilkington 2016), much like the working-class communities they come from (Hochschild 2018). More commonly, working-class young men have been shown to acquiesce to the demands of neoliberalism somehow to reinvent themselves through new forms of employment and education, but, ultimately, to lack the resources necessary to do so (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2014; McDowell 2019; Reay 2001; Silva 2012). Rejecting the need for change, or able only to construct “unmarketable selves” (Andersson and Beckman 2018), working-class young men thus shift from a position of “complicity” with male dominance—as beneficiaries of the wider subordination of women to men in the public and private spheres (Aboim 2010)—to one in which they are marked by their failure to live up to the normative expectations of masculinity.

Although a welcome corrective to the pathologizing myths of neoliberal self-authorship, suggestions that working-class young men have become “the newly disadvantaged” (McDowell 2019) risk engaging in another form of myth-making. While it is important to acknowledge the clear change in fortunes that knowledge economies have brought for young men growing up in deindustrializing neighborhoods, the suggestion that the advantages previously carried by working-class young men have all but evaporated is misleading. Indeed, amidst dead-end training programs and churning between insecure jobs, those studies that have charted young men’s transitions to adulthood beyond entry to the labor market have generally been able to identify, but have not explored systematically, many cases of apparently redundant young men finding their ways into “decent” jobs and, thereafter, achieving other markers of adult status. Gunter and Watt’s (2009, 521) study of young people in East London, for example, highlights a “residue of traditional male manual jobs . . . for those . . . immersed in the right social networks,” indicating how young white men access opportunities in the construction industry that young women and black men appear excluded from. Silva’s (2012, 513) study of working-class young people “coming up short” in the United States

points to a similar pattern, whereby whiteness and masculinity underpin the success of a group of young men who secure public sector jobs that then enable transitions into family life. The data from these and other studies (Roberts 2018 for example) suggest that, even amidst widespread precariatization, forms of capital rooted in working-class masculinities have not disappeared and are likely to have currency in a wide range not only of blue-collar jobs, but also of emergent forms of work in the service sector (Day 2016; Pettinger 2005; Winlow 2001).

The lack of attention to the dynamics of more successful outcomes amongst working-class young men—focusing not on the resources that they possess, but on those that they lack—stems from the dominance of theoretical approaches that are themselves reflective of neoliberal demands for an upwardly mobile subject (Walkerdine 2003). In particular, the widespread adoption of Bourdieu's economic metaphor model of value accrual (Sayer 2005) across these sociologies, alongside the influence of theories pointing to processes of individualization, tend toward the disqualification of forms of capital that do not contribute to the "acquisitive self" (Skeggs 2011). This shortcoming is further apparent due to the lack of attention paid to young men's class subjectivities and moral sentiments (Sayer 2005). Such "values beyond market value" have been explored in relation to experiences of poverty (MacKenzie 2015) and the lives of young women (Skeggs 1998) and older men (Lamont 2000; Loveday 2014), all of which suggest the ongoing centrality of lay normativity and moral sentiment in the ways class position is negotiated. These studies, and recent work in relational sociology (Abbott 2020; Crossley 2011) and the sociology of morality (Sayer 2005), illuminate the ways social actors may simultaneously appeal to dominant, moral values while resisting the "dominant symbolic," thereby guarding their own self-worth and dignity despite faring poorly on traditional markers of success. By contrast, in the literature on young men, class subjectivities are regarded as either obliterated or irrelevant. In Silva's (2012, 505) account, for example, echoing claims about the individualization of social inequality (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), young men blame themselves for the loss of traditional markers of adulthood and develop inwardly directed selves preoccupied with emotional and psychic repair. Alternatively, following Bourdieu's "interest- and power-based model of social life" (Sayer 2005, 42), where working-class young men appear to resist dominant notions of success by positing a more egalitarian sensibility in relation to education and work, they are dismissed as simply "loving the inevitable" (e.g. Stahl 2014). Where class subjectivities have been identified and taken more seriously—as operating along differential circuits of valorization (Loveday 2014)—they have appeared as a form of nostalgia (Nayak 2006), or as an expression of despair in the face of new worlds of work and consumption (Charlesworth 1999; Jimenez and Walkerdine 2012). In pointing to something beyond either acquiescent or protest responses, these accounts suggest that we look more closely at the resources and forms of "capital"

working-class young men draw upon, and the claims to recognition these underpin, in negotiating the making of masculinity in new times.

Masculinity and Post-Socialism: Working-Class Young Men in Russia

The present article explores transitions to adulthood amongst working-class young men in post-Soviet Russia, where the dislocations between normative expectations of men and opportunities to realize them have been especially stark. In contrast to the growing subtlety and fragmentation in representations of hegemonic masculinity observed in the global North (Aboim 2010), Russia, like many other transitional societies (Edström et al. 2019) has seen a narrowing in popular gender ideologies in recent decades. Even under state socialism the Soviet model of gender roles was perceived to have produced a “reverse gender order” (Radhakrishnan and Solari 2015), with the “over-emancipation” of women and apparent emasculation of men seen as constituting a central component of social decline. In response, the post-Soviet period has been characterized by a process of re-traditionalization, with the Parsonian nuclear family acting both as a guiding symbol of social stability and a justification for the retreat of the state (Chernova 2019). As elsewhere, lower-educated men have been among the losers in the new market environment, faced with a gulf between breadwinning expectations—which remain central to constructions of fatherhood across the social spectrum (Lipasova 2017)—and economic realities. Utrata (2015), for example, points to a “silent gender revolution” in which single motherhood has become normalized, as growing numbers of Russian men—seen as irresponsible, drunk, weak, and ultimately superfluous—drift into divorce and absent fatherhood. As well as apparently failing at breadwinning, working-class men are also positioned as losers in Russia’s new symbolic economy, which, as in other post-socialist societies, has shifted toward the values of individual autonomy, choice, and self-determination characteristic of Western neoliberalism (Makovicky 2014). These values are best exemplified in contemporary representations of hegemonic masculinity, with men approximating a variant of what Connell and Wood (2005) describe as a “transnational business masculinity” holding cultural sway. Such men not only succeed as breadwinners, but do so by conquering the new public spaces of commerce and politics, and display their success through consumption and other forms of work on the self (Chernova 2002). By contrast, working-class men are positioned as abject, dependent on and unable to extract themselves from the backward, first modernity economy and spaces of the Soviet past (Walker 2018).

The image of workers as superfluous losers is one that resonated strongly in the narratives of the young men whose lives are explored in this article. First interviewed when they were preparing to graduate from vocational

training colleges in the Ul'yanovsk region in 2004, the young men were highly ambivalent about the low-wage, low-prestige jobs available to them at their colleges' "base enterprises." What was encapsulated in the young men's experiences was an extreme version of the shift from disciplinary to neoliberal forms of governmentality (Fraser 2003) that is characteristic both of post-socialist and post-Fordist transition. Following their parents into training colleges attached to factories in their local neighborhoods, the young men continued to be enculturated into the total institution of the (post-)Soviet enterprise (Morris 2016), and spoke of a sense of inheritance in relation to manual skill (Cohen 1997), as well as an attachment to place (Williams 1973). In making transitions into work, however, the enterprise could no longer offer them any of the forms of welfare their parents had enjoyed, as jobs for life and nonmonetary benefits such as medical care, access to holiday resorts, and—crucially—an apartment were replaced by low-paid jobs giving them little chance of succeeding in the new market environment. In this context, the young men in this and a later study in St. Petersburg (Walker 2018) developed a range of strategies to escape "transitions to nowhere," prominent among which was to look to the new service sector and market of higher education. As in the Western literature, such responses were aspirational, responding to neoliberal demands for self-reinvention and the pursuit of social mobility, but ultimately, they were acquiescent and unachievable given the resources of social and cultural capital the young men possessed. Consequently, self-blame for making wrong choices earlier in life reflected the hollowing out or "zombification" of class resources and identities characteristic of the individualization of social inequality (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). What is especially notable in this, as in the Western literature, is the gulf between, on one hand, the individualized and despondent accounts of younger men trying to fathom how to become a man now that the old pathways had gone, and on the other hand, the ability of older working-class men to bring to bear the resources available to them both materially and symbolically. In research from Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, a number of accounts have presented examples of older working-class men who have avoided the pitfalls of masculinity highlighted by Utrata (2015) and have found both means of getting by and forms of value in manual and other types of labor that, as Lamont finds, provide sources of dignity and self-worth (Morris 2016; Morrison 2014; Schwartz 2020; Vanke 2014; Walker 2016). This gulf begs the question: if it is made at all, how is a blue-collar, breadwinning masculinity remade as working-class young men make transitions to adulthood?

The present article draws on longitudinal research conducted between 2010 and 2013 to explore the journey made by a group of the young men after their first interviews in 2004. As will be seen, this journey is marked by shifts in the young men's orientations toward and performances of different versions of masculinity, as they realize and bring to bear a variety of social, cultural, bodily, and institutional resources rooted in their class, gender, and

ethnic location through their early twenties. These resources enable the men to move from the marginalized and aspirational positions they occupied at the beginning of transitions to adulthood to one that in many cases approximated a complicit, breadwinning masculinity six to nine years later. In addition, the young men's journey reflects their ability to realize the resources available to them not only at the material level, but also subjectively, as they move toward a position of critique and resistance in relation to dominant constructions of successful masculinity through the negotiation of dialogical, moral selves. Central to this negotiation of selfhood is, first, the normative construct of men as breadwinners, which is internalized by the young men, and it is failure potentially to live up to this that stands behind the sense of shame and despondency they experience upon leaving college, as well as their attempts at self-reinvention through social mobility. Second, the young men's negotiation of selfhood is later marked by an acquired ability to reflect upon different ways of being a man by appealing to wider moral sentiments, or what [Honneth \(1995\)](#) calls "moral logics," that dovetail with their own sensibilities and class resources, thereby safeguarding their own self-worth and dignity. They are able to do this because, although behavioral expectations of them as breadwinners are normative and therefore unquestioned, wider questions of "how to live" ([Sayer 2005](#)) are necessarily subject to reflective dialogue with multiple "generalized others" ([Abbott 2020](#); [May 2016](#)) and, ultimately, to moral critique. In this way, the article illustrates how, by shoring up a blue-collar, breadwinning masculinity, working-class men continue to possess resources unavailable to women and other men that enable them to adapt to crisis tendencies in a way that echoes research on hegemonic masculinities (e.g. [Bridges and Pascoe 2014](#)). It also builds on research on changing orientations toward masculinity, which has mostly focused on areas such as crime ([Carlsson 2013](#)) and aging ([Mann, Tarrant, and Leeson 2016](#)), where changes associated with the life course result in reassessments of men's goals and priorities as well as their location within hierarchies of masculinities. Finally, the study contributes to the growing turn to morality in the sociology of class ([Loveday 2014](#); [MacKenzie 2015](#); [Sayer 2005](#); [Skeggs 2011](#)) and in work on class and post-socialism in particular ([Morris 2016](#); [Morrison 2014](#); [Schwartz 2020](#); [Vanke 2014](#); [Walker 2011, 2016](#)).

Data and Methods¹

The original research was conducted in 2004–2005 in Ul'yanovsk, which is a developed industrial region spanning what [Zubarevich \(2014\)](#) refers to as the "second Russia" of large-scale industrial towns and the "third Russia" of smaller towns and rural areas dependent on single industries. It was therefore an ideal location in which to explore the impact of the social and economic dislocations of Russia's transition from state socialism to capitalism on

working-class youth. The research involved biographical interviews with ninety-five young men and women who were studying in or had graduated from eight different vocational colleges situated in urban and rural locations across the region, and illuminated processes of social stratification along the lines of gender, class, and spatial location, as well as young people's subjectivities and identity work around these. The research attempted to create a long view on these processes by comparing the experiences of young people embarking on transitions with those who had left education several years earlier. As [Thomson and Holland \(2003\)](#) argue, however, longitudinal rather than "snapshot" research is much better equipped to render visible the continuity and change of the social processes and outcomes that have always been of central interest to sociologists of youth. In particular, since the original study echoed the wider literature in highlighting not only the barriers to upward mobility, but also the threat of downward mobility to working-class young men, it was ripe for further investigation.

In 2004–2005, forty-two of the young men involved had agreed to be contacted again in the future, and provided parental addresses and telephone numbers. In 2010 and 2013, thirty-one of these were relocated, some by telephone as they were living in other cities. After some abortive attempts at interviews via mobile phones, it was decided only to reinterview those who could be met in person in Ul'yanovsk, with twenty of the original respondents agreeing to do so. At the time of their first interview, all of these respondents had been seventeen or eighteen years old, and were twenty-three or twenty-four in 2010. As outlined in detail in [Walker \(2011\)](#), all respondents were from backgrounds in which parents worked in manual or routine nonmanual employment, and were from a range of white Russian ethnicities (e.g. Chuvash and Tatar are included in Russian conceptions of whiteness, while Chechen and other Caucasian ethnicities are excluded; see [Zakharov 2015](#)). Follow-up interviews were biographical and explored the young men's experiences and plans in the spheres of education, employment, military service, housing, leisure, relationships, and family. Interviews were conducted by the author, and began with a recap of what respondents had said in 2004–2005 that most found amusing. Following [Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody \(2001\)](#), respondents were then asked an open question about what had happened since, which in most cases led them to set out what they perceived as the most important developments in their lives (birth of children, marriage, etc.). This not only provided a platform for the interview, but also helped to diffuse the unequal power relations that may have existed in the first interview along the lines of age, since many respondents had caught up with and even overtaken the author in terms of life stage transitions. The fact that interviews were carried out in cafés and workplaces rather than educational institutions further helped in this respect. As in the first interviews ([Walker 2012](#)), the author's nationality (U.K.) blurred unequal relations of power along class lines, and, along with

sharing the same gender, facilitated discussions about masculinity and the cultural specificity of the respondents' lives.

Given the format of the second interviews, data from first and second interviews were woven together as respondents and researcher reflected back on instances of continuity and change in respondents' lives and subjectivities. With regard to analysis, while the first interviews were dominated by discussions of educational experiences and prospective strategies to achieve social mobility, the second interviews focused more heavily on employment, family, and housing transitions, such that the thematic analysis took on a new shape, albeit always viewed through the lens of the respondents' earlier experiences. In addition to the data from face-to-face interviews and from field notes, the research employs digital ethnography, as several of the young men were active users of the Russian social media site *vkontakte.ru*. As in Western countries, the popularity of social media amongst young people in Russia make it a space "in which the persona is enacted and made visible . . . through a chronicle of mediated, transitional experiences: birthdays, graduations, the beginning (and end) of relationships, first jobs, travel, and so on" (Robards 2014). In this way, perspectives on the lives of some respondents extended beyond the fieldwork visits of 2010 and 2013 up to the time of writing.

Negotiating the Demands of Masculinity

Neo-conservatism in relation to gender roles in Russia has been fostered both at the cultural and the policy levels, bolstered especially by a heavy pro-natalist emphasis in welfare spending and the outright promotion of the traditional family unit, which is to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of the state from areas beyond support for mothers and infants (Chernova 2019). The normative construction of men as breadwinners and women as mothers is reflected in survey data indicating that support for the dual-earner/dual-career model becoming more popular elsewhere in Europe is particularly low in Russia (Aboim 2010, 98). At the same time, high levels of female employment indicate that most families manage the tensions of the gender order along the same lines that they had under state socialism, with women experiencing a double burden of work and primary responsibility for domestic and caring labor, underpinned by the largely unquestioned belief that these are women's natural responsibilities (Kay 2006). With regard to breadwinning, Meshcherkina (2002) points to the importance of social class in shaping men's attitudes toward their role, finding middle-class men to be more wedded to the idea that they should be dominant, sole breadwinners (the "strong male breadwinner model" (Aboim 2010, 98)), while working-class men were more pragmatic. Despite this, however, both Lipasova (2017) and Utrata (2015) find that men across the social spectrum set themselves a low bar in relation to caring and other domestic duties, while even those who are open to a

more involved domestic role see waged work as their primary responsibility. Thus, while some men strive to approximate the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, others achieve complicity simply by not questioning hegemonic norms surrounding the inequities of the existing gender division of labor, and by living up to the expectation that their primary focus will be on breadwinning.

During the original research the respondents were too young to be thinking directly about breadwinning, but concerns about their capacity to earn a decent wage were clearly evident. The young men were unanimous in their negative view of the jobs available to them in base enterprises, and unsurprisingly, few willingly signed up for what were clearly stigmatized and marginal positions, considered only suitable for people reaching the end of their working lives. In his second interview, Ildus frames his brief time at the Mechanical Factory more directly in terms of its incompatibility with breadwinning expectations:

No, I tried working at the factory . . . Ha! Two weeks I managed . . . It's like a prison, all day you sit there at the machines . . . [even though] there was no work to do . . . an hour's like a whole day. . . In your whole life, you're not going to earn anything if you live off the factory . . . You can't survive on that money, especially if you have a family, and especially if you don't have a flat yet. No, you couldn't survive. (Ildus, 24)

As Ildus suggests, the young men's housing situation—whether they had inherited an apartment from a grandparent, or would receive significant help from parents, or, in the worst case, would have to negotiate the “housing question” alone—was fundamental to the problem they faced. During the Soviet period, it was predominantly the male wage that carried with it the right to an apartment from one's enterprise (Morris 2016), and the expectation that men take primary responsibility for resolving the housing question has continued. This was underlined by the fact that in both the first and second interviews, housing, and specifically home-ownership, dominated the thoughts of many of the young men, and had become an urgent question for the four respondents who were now, or expecting soon to be, fathers:

The most important thing is to get our own place to live—that's the main priority. It's more complicated in Russia, and I think for that reason we grow up earlier . . . I don't think it's right just to rent . . . say after my daughter's born and the landlord wants the flat back and kicks you out. You need your own place. (Marat, 24)

Others were further away from such life stage transitions but still keenly aware that they did not measure up to expectations of men. Dima related his feelings about how his ex-girlfriend had left him ostensibly because of his low earnings:

Yeh we broke up two years ago. We were going out for three and a half years, then, with work, I got fired, and . . . basically had no money, and she was a well-off girl, so she wanted someone with money . . . you start to understand that it's all money, cars . . . if you turn up in a car, girls just look at you completely differently, you can see it in their eyes straight away. (Dima, 23)

Given the impossibility of meeting expectations of them on factory wages, it is not surprising that so many of the respondents in their first interviews were setting out ambitious plans to bypass the marginal masculinity on offer for something more aspirational, and, as outlined elsewhere (Walker 2011, 2018), it was dominant roles as “directors” or as professionals in the new service sector that most attracted them. By the second interview, however, only one of the twenty respondents was holding on to the prospect of achieving masculinity through this kind of social mobility. As will be discussed further below, this was primarily because the respondents developed a more critical awareness of the fact that, while transitions into factory jobs were problematic, the pathways to adulthood advertised by the new higher education market were potentially even more so. At the same time as growing more critical of aspirational strategies for social mobility, however, the rest of the respondents realized that there were other pathways to a breadwinning, adult masculinity that were more readily available to them and that required forms of capital they actually possessed. These pathways provided a repertoire of strategies employed by the respondents at different times in their late teens and early twenties.

Entrepreneurial masculinities in the new economy

One strand of the Western literature on working-class masculinities has focused on the problems posed to young men by the forms of aesthetic and emotional labor central to employment in new service economies (see Nixon 2018). However, much less attention has been paid to the advantages potentially held by young men in service sector employment, not least compared with young women. Enlightening in this respect is Hochschild's (1983) and Adkins' (1995) work on emotional and aesthetic labor, respectively, which emphasizes the invisibility, and thus lower exchange value, of female performativity. This is reflected in the contemporary retail sector, in which women dominate the workforce but are concentrated in customer-facing checkout jobs and where goods are cheap (see Pettinger 2005). Men, by contrast, have historically been able to dominate retail management structures and, reflecting associations between masculinity and technical knowledge and skill, are more likely to work in areas where goods are expensive (Bradley 1989). Meanwhile, young men who find themselves in low-paid, entry-level service work have lower levels of job satisfaction than their female counterparts, making them “ungrateful” rather than “grateful slaves” (Warren and Lyonette 2020), and thus less likely to settle for such positions. The emergent “gig economy” of

transportation and delivery work is also strongly gendered in favor of men, valuing as it does masculine-coded forms of embodiment such as speed, endurance, and geographical orientation skills (Day 2016), while masculine physical strength is in high demand across night-time economies (Winlow 2001).

The advantages of masculine embodiment in service sector work were further apparent amongst a number of respondents in the present research who, while not aspiring to the dominant masculinities noted above, were nevertheless pursuing some level of social mobility through new forms of employment. Viktor, for example, embraced the opportunities seemingly held out by the new economy, valorizing office work for its apparent ease compared with the heavy labor and low pay of factory jobs:

CW: Didn't people used to be proud to be workers?

V: They did. But not anymore. Now it's all money (*vse dengi*). We don't want to work with our hands, tire ourselves out and get paid peanuts. Nowadays it's easier to sit in an office, have a word here, have a think about this and that, and get paid twice as much. (Viktor, 25)

Having originally trained as a welder in a college connected to the Ul'yanovsk Automobile Factory (UAZ), at the time of his second interview Viktor was combining a production-line job with part-time university study, but was actively looking to break into car sales and, reflecting the dominance of informal relations in the Russian labor market (Gerber and Mayorova 2010), felt that he could find a way in through personal contacts. Viktor's social media posts from our first interview in 2004 through to the late 2010s document his transition from teenage car enthusiast to successful car salesman, as well as celebrating the fruits of his labor such as cars, clothes, and foreign holidays. As well as in his social capital, the key to Viktor's success lay not in placing his hopes solely in the promises held out by higher education, but in combining university study with the embodied skills and knowledge of a young man who, like many working-class young men in Russia as elsewhere in the world, had obsessed about cars since a young age.

Masculine-coded skills and knowledge were also central to the fledgling business activities of two respondents who already in their early twenties had taken an entrepreneurial path. First, Ildus, who had described his time at the Mechanical Factory as being "like a prison," and had subsequently had a range of jobs drawing on the qualities Day (2016) notes—dispatcher, taxi driver, truck driver's mate—before purchasing a delivery van with his brother, which they used to transport merchandize between other businesses. They planned to open a market stall selling car accessories if they could acquire enough start-up capital, having borrowed the money for the van from their next-door neighbors. Second, Sanyok, who had originally trained to work at UAZ with Viktor, and who now ran a mobile phone repair workshop, again with his

elder brother. Sanyok had got a job in a phone shop after leaving college instead of going to UAZ:

So, I started to work there and then learned myself. I think you have to do that, realize yourself. So I opened my own repair shop . . . At first I needed some cash to open up, but it wasn't really that complicated . . . I was just working, studying, saving up, getting the equipment together . . . Then a bit more cash for furniture, advertising, getting my IP, that was it. (Sanyok, 24)

Again, masculine-coded skills and qualities were central to Sanyok's strategy, including the willingness to take on the risks of entrepreneurship—to "realize oneself"—in the first place, while social capital in the form of kinship relations was key for both in that they were able to share these risks. At the same time, and reflecting the centrality of breadwinning concerns, while they had embarked on their entrepreneurial paths in order to avoid what they regarded as certain poverty in factory jobs, both Ildus and Sanyok had doubts about the stability of the incomes they would be able to achieve as they moved into adulthood. Both were thus highly committed to working hard for a few years to establish a "base" for their lives:

I haven't even been out for more than a year. It's just that period—if you don't start now, then you'll have nothing in the future. Now's just that time when you have to put up with it, five years maybe, five years of hard work and see what happens. (Ildus, 24)

Another classmate of Viktor and Sanyok, Valera, was already married and had a child on the way by our second interview, and had ventured into service sector work for a second income. Valera had stayed on at his college to train as an instructor, a deal which included a funded university place in teacher education, but had gone on to work at UAZ having obtained a supervisory role there. Since he earned only slightly more than the basic €200 (10,000R) the factory offered most workers, Valera needed a larger income, and had been working as an insurance sales representative during his lunchtimes and evenings, selling life and injury cover to his colleagues at the factory:

I did an exam and some training on working with people, and got a licence—that's it, I'm an insurance agent! . . . I do it in my free time . . . when it's lunchtime and people are sitting around . . . I know all of the information so I can just tell people, or at breaktimes, 10–15 minutes, or after work . . . I get about 500R (€10) per person . . . it's not that much but maybe in a month, 2000, 3000, 5000R. (Valera, 24)

Valera thus grafted a service sector strategy onto his position working in a large industrial enterprise, exploiting the social capital available to him within rather than beyond the factory. His case of straddling the old and new

economies epitomized what [Stenning et al. \(2010\)](#) call “domesticating” neoliberalism, at once working to ensure the well-being of his own fledgling family and becoming a part of the neoliberalizing processes replacing the old socialist welfare model of which his factory had been a part.

Military and State Sector Masculinities

While the school-to-factory transition had virtually collapsed by the time the original research took place in 2004, another component of the old Soviet transition to adulthood—conscription into the armed forces—remained fully operational, and played a central role in shaping the young men’s futures. Reflecting their aspirational plans linked to higher education at the time, many of them regarded the prospect of serving in the army as “two years lost,” echoing the sentiments of young men interviewed by [Kay \(2006\)](#) and [Yusupova \(2018\)](#). According to these accounts, military service—often framed as “paying one’s debt to the motherland”—appears increasingly anachronistic given the demands of the market economy, and although men are generally supportive of the army as an institution, few wish to give their time to it. While more privileged young men largely avoid service through bribery or simply enrolling in higher education before the conscription age of eighteen years, the young men in the present research were in a different position in that they were eighteen at the point of graduation from vocational colleges—as one college director put it, “vocational colleges (*profuchilishcha*) feed the army.” Nevertheless, on returning, every respondent who had served was largely positive about the experience, and this positivity stemmed predominantly from their feeling that military service had enhanced rather than impaired their employment opportunities.

Some of the most obvious ways in which military service benefited the respondents lay in the immediate skills and forms of bodily capital it engendered, literally “making men” of them. Many of the young men spoke of being able to work twice as fast or tackle much larger physical tasks than they had before service, while the ability to operate automatic weapons was a prerequisite for the security guard jobs many of them took for a while on returning. These dynamics epitomize what [Connell \(1995\)](#) describes as the primary forms of masculine embodiment: the desire for force through the occupation of space, and the desire for skill to operate on space. Military service also provided those who signed up as contract soldiers some start-up capital:

Most of our lads signed contracts. I mean it’s mostly village lads who don’t want to go home as they’ve nothing to go back to . . . there’s no jobs, nothing . . . The money was alright, it was enough. I bought a car when I came home! (Aleksandr, 24)

Beyond masculine embodiment and rites of passage, however, the clearest benefits that military service provided the young men, not least because many

of them had little to go back to, was in facilitating privileged routes into a wide range of civil service careers that would underpin their breadwinner status. Compared with Western European countries, constructions of masculinity in Russia have historically placed a greater emphasis on service than on individual self-development and entrepreneurialism (Clements 2002, 12), reflecting the more statist modes of governmentality characterizing both the tsarist autocracy and Soviet state socialism. The need to create obedient and cooperative subjects out of men—however much they fought to carve out spaces of autonomy through sexuality and homosociality (Friedman and Healey 2002)—is especially well-illustrated in the treatment of army recruits, who during the Soviet period benefited from privileged access to party membership, educational opportunities, housing, and training and connections facilitating both military and civilian careers (Shrand 2002, 204).

The experiences of the young men in the present research illustrate that this latter practice has survived fully intact. All of the young men who had served had been approached toward the end of their two years about plans upon going home, and had been offered a pathway into a “service” (*sluzheb-naya*) career, be it in the police, prison service, tax collection, firefighting, or some other branch. Dima, for example, had been in the prison service for four years already:

They called me, invited me. That’s the system: someone comes out of the army, and the recruitment office (*voenkomat*) says such-and-such has come out, phones around all the organizations, and then one phones you up, invites you. There’s loads of commissions. You do some tests, sign a contract—you’re good. (Aleksei, 23)

Although such careers were very low-paid during the earlier transition years, the imperative to rebuild the Russian state has meant that successive Putin administrations have made a point of improving pay conditions across the civil service, such that Dima had no intention of leaving. While some turned them down—Ilgiz, for example, refused an offer to join the police as he did not want to “gather up drunks on the street” all his life—for others civil service careers were clearly an important lifeline in a difficult labor market. Ivan, for example, had been involved in an entrepreneurial strategy selling products from the cement factory in Novoul’yanovsk prior to conscription, but accepted an invitation to join the revenue services on returning:

At the moment it’s really bad there, at the factory. I mean everywhere it’s difficult with work at the moment. It suits me better to serve. (Ivan, 24)

Clearly, military service can have a negative and even catastrophic impact on young men’s prospects in civilian life, as documented in accounts of struggles faced by veterans of the Chechen wars (Oushakine 2009). Nevertheless, for

those who made it home in one piece psychologically and physically, army service was a crucial element in the construction of a masculine identity rooted in wage-earning, and offered a route out of rather than a barrier to engagement with the market economy. As such, while the young men in [Yusupova's \(2018\)](#) research were complicit with the role of the army only as a symbol of male dominance, for working-class young men military service constituted in many cases the primary practical route into a complicit masculinity, and illustrates the ongoing centrality of statist alongside neoliberal forms of governmentality in Russia.

Working-Class Young Men as Manual Laborers and Reflexive Moral Subjects

Alongside entrepreneurship, service sector work, and careers in service to the state, the young men's efforts to establish themselves as wage earners and potential breadwinners were also underpinned by a range of forms of manual labor beyond the factory jobs they were offered on leaving college. These included jobs in both the formal and informal sectors and acted as either their main occupation or supplementary earnings. Like all of the opportunities they were engaged in, the respondents' bodily and social capital as working-class young men were central in shaping access to these forms of work, as was their whiteness. As [Zakharov \(2015\)](#) argues, migrant workers from central Asia generally occupy different segments of the labor market to Russians, mostly doing so-called "dirty jobs" (*gryaznie raboty*) that then become racialized as non-White. At the same time, manual labor and "hard work" served as a platform for the construction of a lay normativity that underpinned the expression of values "beyond market value" ([Skeggs 2011](#)), and that the young men were able to articulate as their working lives progressed.

Amongst the most popular means of earning wages far in excess of what was on offer in the old factories was the practice of upgrading the interiors of Soviet-style apartments to a "European standard," widely known as *Evroremont* (Euro-renovation). This form of construction work was always situated outside of the formal economy, and involved skills such as tiling and decorating that were straightforward enough for those who were connected to a crew to be able to pick up. Ruslan, for example, had trained to work in his local concrete sleeper factory, but after returning from the army and working as a security guard for a year, had gone into *Evroremont* with his father:

R: It's under the threshold so it's unofficial, we don't pay any taxes. It works through acquaintances, everyone just recommends you to the next

CW: And the wages, are they better than in security?

R: Of course! There it was 14,000 a month, now I'm on 14,000 a week.
(Ruslan, 24)

Working on building sites in Moscow or St. Petersburg was another lucrative alternative and had been pursued by several respondents absent from Ul'yanovsk during the second fieldwork, while those who chose to stay generally felt the risks and inconveniences outweighed the potential benefits, even if they had the necessary contacts:

Yeh loads go to Moscow for the higher wages ... Like, I get 16,000, there I'd get 80,000. Some get ripped off, work for a month then get nothing ... I've got friends who've gone and stayed there, one phoned me up and said he was on 80,000. My neighbour came back recently, transports cars, and asked if I wanted to go back with him ... But no, I don't think I could live there, it's just not my thing ... I've got roots here. (Denis, 23)

For those who remained, not all factories were as unattractive as the base enterprises of their colleges. Sasha, for example, had worked on a market stall before going back to the manufacturing sector, and got a job at a newly opened branch of major Russian national *Tekhnokol* through his in-laws:

We make roofing systems. It's a decent factory, solid. Both of my in-laws work there, they just went up, had a word, and they took me on. I get paid three times as much as the last place, maybe even four. There aren't any other places in Ul'yanovsk with those wages. (Sasha, 25)

All of these forms of employment were physically demanding and involved a commitment to long hours working amongst other hardships, be it the twelve-hour shifts Sasha worked at *Tekhnokol*, living in digs in other cities for weeks at a time, or spending evenings and weekends in freezing conditions insulating overground hot water pipes across the Ul'yanovsk region. As well as thus underpinning their efforts to transform bodily and social capital into material capital, manual labor also underpinned a narrative of hard work that enabled some of the respondents to mobilize a form of symbolic capital as working-class men. As noted above, the individualizing pressures the young men faced on leaving college had made them incapable of this at our first interviews, when so many were fixated by the symbolic capital of the new, dominant masculinities of the service economy. Now, like Lamont's American and French respondents, young men such as Ilgiz were able to use this narrative to position themselves above a range of masculine others, both "those below" and "those above":

Basically young people don't want to work in factories, in the professions they trained for ... they want to work where it's warm and clean. But doing these ordinary trades, where it's noisy, and you have to switch your brain on, and it's heavy, physical work, just no way. They're lazy ... I don't know why they even studied. We had lads at our college, what they did for three years I've no idea. We had gang

members who got kicked out . . . I managed to hold on to the end, had some discipline . . . Everyone wants to get higher education now . . . to be managers, accountants, technicians . . .

CW: Not to work with their hands?

R: Yeh, just not to work with their hands. There are no young people in factories now, it's all just drugs and alcohol. "Dad, mum, give me some money for the club, for alcohol." They don't even know about work . . .

CW: Would higher education help them?

R: I doubt it. People who get higher education still need experience, and no one will give them that. It's pointless. Like, my girlfriend, she finished university, can't find a job, or at least not one that pays more than pennies. (Ilgiz, 24)

Ilgiz's belief that hard work was the only way to achieve anything indicated that he was already confident of his ability to fulfil normative expectations of him. He had moved beyond this expectation toward his own lay normativity regarding the legitimacy or otherwise of ways of becoming a man, condemning both the gang members and the naïve "social climbers" he had passed on the way. His rejection of these two sides of post-Soviet Russian society—disorder and lawlessness, on one hand, and the deceptive market economy, on the other—reflects not only what he needs to do to get on, but also a moral position and process of moral boundary drawing arrived at through dialogical reflection on multiple ways of being. As Sayer argues, such moral evaluations and critiques are central to social life, and are based on genuine commitments and values: "[they] are not merely for power or status but are about how to live" (2005, 3). In Ilgiz's case, this moral position was underlined by two experiences in which he was betrayed by men in positions of power: first, on leaving college, his teachers threatened to withhold his certificates if he did not go to work at his base enterprise, and second, his subsequent employers, a small factory renovating train carriages, would not reemploy him when he returned from military service (as was his right) until he threatened them with legal action. Ilgiz's lay normative sentiments, then, are rooted in his valorization of honesty and hard work, and in the first instance stem from his class location. However, his ability to mobilize these moral sentiments as a claim for recognition is dependent on the fact that, while flying in the face of those pursuing "easy lives," they strongly resonate with wider cultural values located across Russian society regarding the moral decline and inversion of moral decency that has characterized economic and civic life in the post-Soviet period (Morris 2016; Ries 2002). It is precisely because the normative principles underlying Ilgiz's narrative have an inter-subjective basis—an appeal both within and beyond one's immediate class—that they provide him with the possibility

of recognition, and thus dignity and self-respect (Lamont 2000; Sayer 2005). Other respondents indicated the ongoing significance of older forms of recognition surrounding work which, despite claims that “it’s all about money now,” have not in fact been obliterated. Valera, for example, was keen to realize himself in the marketplace both through his work in the insurance sector and at the car factory, but at the same time was proud that he was featured on the “honor board” (*doska pocheta*), an old Soviet institution which, as Morrison (2014) notes, retains meaning for workers beyond mere nostalgia:

If you’ve fulfilled your plan, there you go, ten thousand roubles . . . You’re the best in the year, another prize. They put you on the honor board—they reward you, show appreciation. (Valera, 24)

Such respondents, then, were moving toward those older working-class men who have found both means of getting by in the old and new economies, and forms of value in manual labor and in normative principles that often run counter to dominant neoliberal logics (Morris 2016; Morrison 2014; Schwartz 2020; Vanke 2014; Walker 2016).

Conclusion

One of the central claims and rationales of the sociology of youth has always been that young people’s experiences and identities are indicative of social change (MacDonald 2011). At the same time, the primary methodological tools employed in studies of young people’s lives—close-up ethnographic studies over a short period of time—almost always produce a form of “snapshot” research, an image frozen in time that leads us to often radical conclusions about the end of work, of class, of patriarchy, of homophobia, or some other sociological ending (Crow 2005). The study that was this article’s starting point, encountering young men who were living through the dismantling of an entire way of life, was also pulled in this direction, concluding that the dismemberment of identity engendered by individualizing processes was itself a new and irresistible form of social inequality (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In revisiting them, it became clear that the forms of agency and subjectivity apparently made redundant by neoliberal transformation had deeper roots in the material and moral economies of post-socialist society, and remained at the young men’s disposal, such that they were able to realize and bring to bear a variety of social, cultural, bodily, and institutional resources rooted in their class, gender, and ethnic location in remaking a “failed” masculinity. Unlike the school-to-factory transitions previously fostered by the vocational education system, this now took place through a diverse range of employment across the industrial, service, state sector, and informal economies. Underpinning this diversity, however, was a unifying ability to use the resources emerging from their class, gender, and ethnic location not only to

earn a living, but also to shore up a sense of dignity in doing so, whether that be through a commitment to hard work or an avoidance of it.

The aim here is not to celebrate the ability of relatively marginalized young men to re-animate the breadwinner role, and nor is it to downplay the enormous difficulties they would undoubtedly face in continuing to live up to it in a low-wage economy characterized by endemic precarity (Morris 2016). Rather, the research presented here can help us further to illuminate the adaptive capacities of masculinity as a configuration of practice that is bound up with, and reproductive of, sets of power relations both between men and women and among men. The ability of hegemonic masculinity to adapt to changing economic contexts and social mores has been evidenced extensively (in the literature on hybridization (Bridges and Pascoe 2014) and pluralization (Aboim 2010)), illuminating the various strategies adopted by powerful men to deal with and even benefit from the crisis tendencies that continually threaten to destabilize patriarchy (Connell 1995). Working-class men have come to be seen as incapable of adapting to these changing demands either by refusing to change or not possessing the resources to do so successfully, and as such shift from a position of complicity with hegemonic norms to one of marginality. As has been illustrated here, however, by bringing to bear a variety of social, cultural, bodily, and institutional resources rooted in their class, gender, and ethnic location, young men who had received a “worthless dowry” (Morris 2016) on entering adulthood were able to rebuild a position of complicity by shoring up different versions of a blue-collar masculinity. This transformation came about as a result of the reflexive process through which the young men engaged with different forms of work and education, and in turn, oriented and reoriented themselves toward different versions of masculinity along the way. In particular, while the centrality of waged work to masculinity was clearly unquestioned for the young men, their changing orientations toward the moral economy allowed some of them to question another dimension of the dominant symbolic—the neoliberal demand for upward mobility—that has systematically positioned them and the working class as a whole as lacking in value.

Note

1. All names have been altered to protect respondents' identities.

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