



The arena of the professional body: Sport, autonomy and ambition in professional service firms



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interplay of sport, the professional body and the self in professional service firms. We draw on qualitative data collected at two large international management consulting firms to show how individuals use sport to construct and enact themselves as autonomous and ambitious professionals, as well as to escape from frustrations arising in their everyday work life. We develop how this turn to sport can be viewed as an attempt to deal with the conflicting discourses of autonomy and ambition prevalent in professional service firms. In so doing, the paper seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the significance of the professional body for understanding the management and control regimes of professional service firms.

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1. Introduction

Management and organization research has grown increasingly aware of the importance of the body as an area of inquiry (e.g., Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Hancock et al., 2000; Hassard, Holliday, & Willmott, 2000; Hope, 2011; Wolkowitz, 2002, 2006). Studies of gender have particularly emphasized the significance of actors' bodies for understanding the inner workings of disciplinary power at work (e.g., Brewis & Sinclair, 2000; Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008; Bryant & Jaworski, 2011; Driver, 2008; Kerfoot, 2000; Thanem & Knights, 2012; Trethewey, 2001). Especially in the context of discourses of professionalism, research has highlighted how managerial control often operates not simply by targeting employees' cognitions and identities, but also and essentially through the professional body (Ashcraft, 2008; Grey, 1998; McDowell & Court, 1994; Michel, 2011; Riach & Cutcher, 2014; Trethewey, 1999; Tyler & Abbott, 1998). Following this literature, the professional body appears to be a key arena in which individuals can construct and enact themselves as professionals along the lines of organizationally promoted discourses.

The present article seeks to contribute to these ongoing efforts to illuminate the arena of the professional body by drawing

attention to the significance of sport – as a bodily practice – in professional service firms. This research interest is triggered by two qualitative empirical studies conducted independently at two large internationally operating professional service firms where sport played a surprisingly prominent and visible role. This prompted us to ask the exploratory question: Why and how does sport matter in professional service firms? In particular, how does sport relate to the formation of the professional self in such firms?

By showing how sport can significantly play into the construction and enactment of the professional self, the article seeks to add to extant research on organizational control and the professional body (e.g., Grey, 1998; Michel, 2011; Trethewey, 1999; Waring & Waring, 2009). Specifically, we show that scrutinizing sport adds insights into the understanding of the professional body as it serves to address and deal with the key tension between the discourses of 'ambition' and 'autonomy' prevalent in professional service firms (see Alvesson, 2000; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009).

We develop our argument by first discussing the extant literature on professional service work and the professional body as well as research on sport that points to its significance in professional service firms. Following a discussion of methods, we introduce the two companies we empirically investigated as typical professional service firms. In the empirical analysis we show in what ways sport gains importance in professionals' lives both at and beyond work, as well as how sport activities are supported and promoted by the firms themselves. We then analyze the significance of sport as a way for professional service workers

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to discipline their bodies in line with the discourse of professionalism as well as to escape from the frustrations arising in their high-pressure work environments. The discussion develops how the significance of sport in professional service firms relates to its apparent aptness for dealing with the tensions entailed in the discourses of professional ambition and autonomy. We conclude by pointing out implications for further research on the professional body, sport and the self in professional service work and beyond.

2. The professional body between autonomy and ambition

A central tension in professional work concerns the discourses of 'autonomy' and 'ambition' (e.g., [Alvesson, 2000](#); [Ekman, 2012](#); [Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009](#); [Michel, 2011](#)). Following [Kärreman and Alvesson \(2009\)](#), the discourse of 'autonomy' captures the ways in which professional service work requires the exercise of independent judgment and discretion. That is, part and parcel of being a professional is the display of expertise, which implies and requires high levels of personal autonomy ([Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007](#); [Ekman, 2012](#)). However, professional service work is also inherently ambiguous as there are no clear-cut and directly observable criteria for evaluating quality and impact ([Alvesson, 2000](#)). As a result, there is a constant need for professional workers to perform a negotiated and socially recognized presentation of the self, namely that of the knowledgeable expert serving the client ([Anderson-Gough, Grey, & Robson, 2000](#); [Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009](#)).

This implicates a specific kind of disciplinary regime prevalent in professional work. In professional service firms, the central question of control shifts from how to directly control behaviors and practices to how to "ensure that employees realize the full fruits of their own expertise and ingenuity for the purposes of the organization" ([Sewell, 2005: 687](#)). The latter involves more subtle forms of control that aim at aligning the individual and his or her sense of self with the professional service firm (e.g., [Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007a](#); [Anderson-Gough, Grey, & Robson, 2001](#); [Bergström, Hasselbladh, & Kärreman, 2009](#); [Brown & Lewis, 2011](#); [Costas & Grey, 2014](#); [Covaleski, Dirsmitz, Heian, & Samuel, 1998](#); [Grey, 1994](#); [Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004](#); [Thornborrow & Brown, 2009](#); [Whittle, 2005](#)).

In particular, the work of [Foucault, 1977, 1980, 1982](#) has informed research on the ways in which discourses of professionalism can produce disciplinary effects on the self. Following [Foucault \(1982\)](#), one way disciplinary power operates involves the production of subjectivity through discourses that define how individuals should be. In the context of this paper, this operates as a key mechanism of the subtler form of control prevalent in professional service firms. In particular, Foucault also draws attention to ways in which social practices, such as surveillance systems (e.g., the panopticon), normalize and domesticate bodies ([Foucault, 1977](#); [Lash, 1984](#); [Shilling, 1991](#)). Hence, through the lens of Foucault, the significance of the discourse of professionalism lies in the ways in which it produces and disciplines the conduct of selfhood and therefore the professional body (see also [Fournier, 1999](#)). Thus, "being a professional" ([Grey, 1998](#)) requires individuals to conform not only to certain ways of being and behaving, but also dressing, speaking and looking ([Brewis & Sinclair, 2000](#); [Driver, 2008](#)).

At the same time, professionalism involves a defined set of expectations of how to develop and progress as a professional ([Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007a](#); [Costas & Grey, 2014](#); [Grey, 1994](#); [Thornborrow & Brown, 2009](#)). Following [Kärreman and Alvesson \(2009\)](#), this concerns the discourse of 'ambition' that is prevalent in professional service work. It is most evident in the ways in which the professional career is constructed, namely as a particular

project of the self ([Grey, 1994](#)), which implies a future orientation through which disciplinary power is exercised ([Costas & Grey, 2014](#)). In professional service work environments the notion of the career is often translated into displaying the right kind of ambitions; that is, aspirations of developing competence and expertise, a willingness to work hard for achieving future success, and skillfully performing and displaying the expected professional identity.

By evoking the Foucauldian framework, many studies of professional service work have drawn attention to how the professional body plays a significant role here ([Ashcraft, 2007](#); [Meier Sørensen & Villadsen, 2015](#); [Michel, 2011](#); [Trethewey, 1999](#)): "The body is (. . .) the surface onto which (. . .) culture is inscribed and the vehicle for its reproduction through enabling the interiorization of ethical values that guide behavior in situations of face-to-face interaction" ([Bell & King, 2010: 430](#)). Thus, the 'right' kind of professional norms and values are not only a matter of cognition, but are essentially inscribed and expressed through the professional body, for instance regarding visual appearance, posture, voice, and scent (see also [Meriläinen, Tienari, & Valtonen, 2015](#); [Mirchandani, 2015](#)). As research has pointed out, this may produce certain regulatory and discriminatory effects. In the context of professional identity, the presentation of what is regarded as a male professional body, i.e., the ideal of a desexualized, rational and disciplined body is dominant (e.g., [Acker, 1990](#); [Ashcraft, 2008](#); [McDowell & Court, 1994](#); [Trethewey, 1999](#)). Although masculine subjects also experience ambivalences and uncertainty in relation to their bodies ([Kerfoot, 2000](#); [Prichard, 2000](#)), the image of the professional body is particularly constraining and marginalizing for women ([Ashcraft et al., 2009](#); [Brewis & Sinclair, 2000](#); [McDowell & Court, 1994](#); [Bryant & Jaworski, 2011](#)). The female body is constructed as weak, overflowing, uncontrollable and "excess(ively) sexual" ([Trethewey, 1999: 445](#)), thus not professional. Women are therefore particularly concerned with displaying a fit professional body as an indication of discipline, endurance and control ([Trethewey, 1999](#); [McDowell & Court, 1994](#); [Tyler & Abbott, 1998](#)).

Moreover, studies have also drawn attention to the ways in which certain bodily performances serve to display professional competence and expertise ([Ashcraft, 2005, 2013](#); [Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007](#)). In the latter sense, the professional body is not only a site for the exercise of disciplinary power, but also one for performance and play (see also [Kachtan & Wasserman, 2015](#)).

Drawing on this literature, in this paper we focus on how the professional body matters in terms of the discourses of autonomy and ambition in professional service firms. For instance, speaking and standing up in a certain pose and therefore engaging in a certain bodily performance is required to be perceived as an autonomous expert (e.g., [Kenny & Bell, 2011](#); [Meriläinen et al., 2015](#)). At the same time, being ambitious is proven through effortlessly disciplining the professional body and putting it to use in ways that makes one a candidate for development and promotion (e.g., [Trethewey, 1999](#); [Waring & Waring, 2009](#)). A recent ethnography of investment bankers by [Michel \(2011\)](#) provides specific insights into how the professional body can relate to both the discourse of autonomy and the one of ambition. [Michel \(2011\)](#) demonstrates how professional service workers experience their bodies both as "objects" and as "subjects." On the one hand bankers seek to discipline their bodies, relating to them as "objects" in line with the discourse of ambition (i.e., presenting themselves as hard-working and successful despite fatigue and sickness; engaging in sport activities at night in order to loose weight and maintain professional appearance). On the other hand, such disciplining efforts are always at risk of failing as bodily breakdowns may occur, thus putting a limit to the ambition discourse (i.e., health problems due to sleep deprivation). Following [Michel](#), such breakdowns of the professional body facilitate a shift in

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