

Hegemonic Salaryman Masculinity: Case Study of Transitional Male Gender Roles in Today's Japan

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Abstract : This qualitative study focuses on the lived experience and displacement of young white-collar masculinities in Japan. In recent years, the salaryman lifestyle has undergone significant disruption - increased competition for regular employment, rise in non-regular structurings of labour across public/private sectors, and shifting role expectations within the home. Despite this, related scholarship hints at a continued reinforcement of the traditional male gender role - that the salaryman remains a key benchmark of Japanese masculine identity. For those in structural proximity to these more 'normative' performativities, interest lies their engagement with such narratives - how they make sense of their masculinity in response to stated changes. In light of the historical emphasis on labour and breadwinning logics, notions of respective security or precarity generated as a result remain unclear. Similarly, concern extends to developments within the private sphere - by what means young white-collar men construct ideas of singlehood and companionship according to traditional gender ideologies or more contemporary, flexible readings. The influence of these still-emergent status distinctions on the logics of the social group in question is yet to be explored in depth by gender scholars. This project, therefore, focuses on a salaryman archetype as hegemonic - its transformation amidst these changes and socialising mechanisms that continue to legitimate unequal gender hierarchies. For data collection, a series of ethnographic interviews were held over a period of 12 months with university-educated, white-collar male employees from both Osaka and the Greater Tokyo Area. Findings suggest a modern salaryman ideal reflecting both continuities and shifts within white-collar employment. Whilst receptive to more contemporary workplace practices, the narratives of those interviewed remain imbued with logics supporting patterns of internal hegemony. Regular/non-regular distinction emerged as the foremost variable for both material and discursive patterns of white-collar stratification, with variants of displacement for each social group. Despite the heightened valorisation of stable employment, regular workers articulated various concerns over a model of corporate masculinity seen to be incompatible with recent socioeconomic developments. Likewise, non-regular employees face detachment owing to a still-inflexible perception of their working masculinity as marginalized amidst economic precarity. In seeking to negotiate respective challenges, those interviewed demonstrated an engagement with various concurrent social changes that would often either accommodate, reinforce, or expand upon traditional role behaviours. Few of these narratives offered any notable transgression of said ideal, however, suggesting that within the spectre of white-collar employment in Japan for the near future, any substantive transformation of corporate masculinity remains dependant upon economic developments, less so the agency of those involved.

Keywords : gender ideologies, hegemonic masculinity, Japan, white-collar employment

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