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Contemporary Masquerade: Work-Life Balance and Modern Tragedies of (Mis)Perceived/(Mis)Placed Social Agency

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Abstract

Within contemporary life, women struggle within discourses of stay-at-home mothering and working mother in terms of the detriment to a child's development. Although contemporary research tends to isolate work-life balance as a separate set of conflicting discourses to study, I suggest that this isolation is misleading. Work-life balance encompasses every aspect of a woman's speaking being or conscious home, social, caring and working experiences. Considering work-life as allencompassing allows for interesting interpretations when framing women's work-life experiences within the confines of a language that seeks to dissect them into discrete parts. Furthermore, conflict surrounding work and life is not new and provide a cornerstone of traditional psychoanalytic theories of human development. Within this paper, I consider contemporary discourses of work-life balance, within the context of Riviere's psychoanalytical concept of masquerade and Lacanian psychoanalysis that rereads Freud's original works as a theory of discourse.

Keywords: Masquerade, Psychoanalysis, Worklife balance, Lacan, Soler.

Within contemporary society, according to Soler (2006), women now have more freedom to pursue their own goals. Gender equality is gaining momentum and full achievement seems assured. For Soler, stay at home mothering is no longer in vogue and promiscuity is apparently a common and acceptable behaviour for women, now that they have the agency or choice to pursue their own self actualisation/satisfaction. Guided by the assumptions of Lacan's psychoanalytic theories of discourse, Soler resurrects Riviere's (1929/2008) classic psychoanalytic narrative of masquerade to suggest that in contemporary society, from their increased position of power and freedom, women, enact a subterfuge that satisfies their desires. Through discourses of heterosexuality, man may desire woman, but woman does not desire man as such: she desires to be desired. In other words, she just wants to be loved. By manipulating situations that require anger and strategically manoeuvring reconciliation, she satisfies both him and herself by ensuring that they re-enact the requirements of their different desires. Yet, Soler may be premature in insisting that women have acquired the agency to perform such an active and manipulating role in contemporary life. In this paper, I will revisit Riviere's original concept of masquerade and discuss how it plays out in contemporary society within tragedies of work-life balance.

Within contemporary discourses of mothering and caring, it appears that speaking work-life as two separate constructs that require 'balance' ensures that some sort of 'act' becomes inevitable for the 'two' concepts to be negotiated in tandem. Such an act resembles or can be described as more of a tightrope walk across an (un)articulable void from the private to the public domain. I suggest that inevitably this balancing act, due to the restrictions of language structure, ensures a false sense of agency for the one tottering above the void, hyphen or 'continuum' that (dis)connects the two domains. The 'woman-agent' therefore becomes part of a masquerade as a caricature of woman, or in other words, woman as an 'object' rather than a subject of her own experience (Irigaray, 1985). Riviere's (1929/2008) classic interpretation of masquerade suggests that the linguistic void between public and private domains is not a contemporary anomaly: the problematic of what lays beyond the hyphen is far older than current interest in women's work-life balance.

Womanliness as Masquerade

Riviere (1929/2008) theoretically developed the concept of masquerade through a clinical case study described in her article *Womanliness as Masquerade*. Within this article, Riviere suggests that there is a normative masquerade played out by women on a daily basis. Her case study reveals a confident professional woman who is an exemplary mother, cook, entertainer, housekeeper,

wife and lover. Yet within her professional life, this woman experiences bouts of performance anxiety in relation to her predominantly male professional colleagues. The case study in question introduces a not so normative woman, a professional woman, who is 'outed' by her angst. Riviere diagnoses the woman as a particular type of homosexual in that she wishes to attain masculinity and her homosexuality is a condition of which she herself is unaware.

The woman's anxiety/homosexuality manifests as shameless flirting with the audience after each public performance. For Riviere (1929/2008), an ardent follower and English translator of Freudian developmental theory (Freud & Jones, 1993), the woman's performance anxiety stemmed from a failed detachment from the father. Within Freudian theory, normal development ensues when the daughter realises that the father is an unobtainable love object and returns to the mother for training in domestic chores and wifely duties (Freud, 1977; Irigaray, 1985). Riviere's implicitly homosexual woman therefore, still desires to please and possess the father, transferring this attachment to her male audience, causing her to be anxious if she fails to impress them. She does not experience the same kind of anxiety in relation to the performance of her duties as wife and mother: within execution of these duties, she is exemplary (Riviere (1929/2008).

It would be easy to be beguiled into thinking here, given the strong influence of Freud in Riviere's (1929/2008) work, that Riviere's masquerade (both the feigned interest and the performance anxiety) is brought on in its entirety by a father fixation. Yet according to Riviere, this is not the case. For Riviere, the mask, or the exemplary femininity displayed by her case study is merely a ruse and this 'ruse' or masquerade is a product of normal development. It is the woman's anxiety that reveals there is something amiss with the woman who is the focus of Riviere's case study and not the feigned interest in exemplary family life. This 'interest' in itself, represents the normative masquerade/mask/object. The woman that the mask represents is unreachable and unspeakable unless anxiety reveals her presence.

Masquerade as a Product of Language

Within a poststructuralist return to Freud, Lacan takes up this classical and well-critiqued theme of masquerade in a discursive interpretation of the limitations of man's gaze (Heath, 1986; Soler, 2006). The masquerade and the mask become a product of language and as such, are inextricably inter-woven, produced through Freud's developmental framework, inclusive of the Oedipus complex. For Lacan (1999) then, Freudian theories of human development, such as the Oedipus complex, highlighted here as a basis for implicit homosexuality, play out within language structure.

According to Lacan (1949/2006), the Oedipus complex enacts the splitting of the subject and takes place as a product of entrance into the speaking world. Through this splitting, communication becomes further hindered by a reflected dialogue with the self/Other. Within Lacanian theory, inspired by Freud's musings on the structure of the unconscious in a letter to Fliess (Freud & Fliess, 1985), language offers limited and (pre)structured options within which to inscribe perception and memory. We interpret or determine our experiences through articulating them. In other words, what we see or feel in the moment is determined on utterance, constricting interpretation to available discursive options (Lacan, 1988). An example that Lacan uses comes from Freudian writings. 'A baby does not know it is hungry until it cries out'. So we might add to this example, a woman does not exist until she becomes labelled as a product of his gaze (Lacan, 1999) and is duly diagnosed with penis envy (Irigaray, 1985).

The Hyphen between Work and Life

Language therefore is conceptualised as an intricate system that inscribes consciousness and our inscribed understanding of life is diverse and forever changing. Contemporary western language structures are steeped in religious, philosophical and scientific discourses that advocate for individuality, singular Gods and specular objectivity (Irigaray, 1985; Smith, 2007). Furthermore, contemporary discourse has evolved from a collection of ancient languages that once accommodated multiple Gods, and collective and interactive mythical entities (Larson, 2001; Lyons, 1997). For example, within Ancient Greek language, there is/was such a thing as a middle voice that is no longer accessible in contemporary language systems. Contemporary languages offer only two voices, active and passive (Barber, 1975; Roland, 1994). It is through grammatical intimation that agency is afforded within a language that has somehow managed to eliminate the middle ground where encounter takes place. Yet paradoxically, it is the middle ground that we expect women to traverse, the appearing 'ground between work and life' and this appears to be the ground on which woman's normative masquerade plays out.

Oedipus

Although Riviere (1929/2008) developed her case study in the 1920s, Collette Soler (2006) explains how Riviere and Lacan's masquerade is still applicable in contemporary western society. With Lacan's linguistic reading of Freud, the woman that exists within language is merely man's mirror image of himself, a reflection of his own desires. She becomes a figment of his scopic drive produced through a linguistically restricted gaze, an articulated mirror image of the Other and a reminder of His own lack (Lacan, 1949/2006). In other words, the mask is a product of (his) metaphorical castration and anamorphosis brought about by a pre-structured (and increasingly restricted) order of grammar and syntax (Irigaray, 1985). So in effect, he inevitably (re)produces the mask/object/Other and indeed the masquerade. Therefore, he unknowingly and repeatedly writes the script that reproduces her in his mirror image.

Obviously, impotency is a key theme here, yet what linguistic castration does is paradoxically assign agency to masculinity. As soon as he submits to language, perception, memory and castration, he is also assigned as active and through the linguistic rules of dichotomy, a given since there is no (longer) middle voice, creates his mirror image as a passive projection (Cixous, 1986). Effectively, what language does is create the illusion of agency within a language structure that paradoxically denies it. Both men and women experience inscribed loss, yet women lose more than that. Her 'being' depends on his interpretation of her. Her existence in language depends upon her taking up her position within the discourses of masquerade.

Contemporary Masquerade

Within her interpretation of Lacan's views of women, Soler (2006) suggests that in contemporary times, circumstances require a more topical approach to the theoretical ponderings of Lacan and his views on women. Soler argues that a contemporary shift into the work force represents a fundamental change in the values of human kind and an undermining of traditional patriarchy. She

calls on her own clinical experience to present a case study that represents what she considers a contemporary masquerade that assigns agency to women through the intricacies of manipulative bargaining.

Soler's (2006) masquerading woman feigns ineptitude. Her husband provides her with a financial allowance and she habitually overspends. On budget balancing day, she confesses and he gets angry. She cries and they make up. For Soler, the woman manipulates her husband in a deliberate act to accomplish her desires, which differ to his. He plays an unsuspecting, if not masochistic role in 'her' masquerade. Soler draws this conclusion from the fact that the woman's financial abilities and situation are not exactly what she makes them out to be. She has always had her own money: he is unaware of this. She keeps this from him to facilitate the charade. The woman then inherits a small fortune. Now that the husband is aware of his wife's financial independence and competence, he feels he is no longer a necessary part of her (his) existence. Before his awareness, this tragic script played out to satisfy his and her different desires. Awareness of her financial independence disrupts his gaze (Soler, 2006).

A Work-Life Tragedy

One might think that this theoretical portrayal of man/woman relations is somewhat tragic; each individually vying for different desires that virtually do not include each other. Yet I suggest that the real tragedy in the script stems from an illusion of agency born from linguistic framing of woman as an active participant in a masquerade that she has absolutely no input into scripting. The illusion of agency allows for blame, a blame attached to the portrayal of women as creators of their own misfortunes. In other words, she does not actually exist as subject, yet she still features in the list of credits and is usually designated the role of villain. She can be a bad mother, a bad wife, a bad member of the community all with the twist of grammatical emphasis as Soler demonstrates by assigning agency to the 'object' of her case study by describing her as 'scheming and manipulative' even though her role is (pre)scripted through discourse (Lacan, 1953/2006; Soler, 2006).

Interestingly enough, if we return to the origins of masquerade, his projections of the perfect woman, we are reminded that through the musings of Riviere (1929/2008), we find a woman who is

linguistically designated as a disinterested mother and wife, although her corresponding behaviours show absolutely no signs of neglect in her duties whatsoever. In fact, the disinterested mother has resurfaced (or been rearticulated) in contemporary times as the professional working mother who favours self-actualisation over the interests of the child (Bailey, 2000; de Marneffe, 2004; Lupton & Schmied, 2002). Let us not forget also, that Riviere's 'normative' masquerading woman must be a woman extraordinaire, who not only performs her domestic duties perfectly, but can also foot it with the men at a professional level without showing any signs of anxiety that is of course, given the identity of its discursive underpinnings, perpetuated by penis envy.

Work-Life Balance Available Discourses

The disinterested mother is one of two traditional psychoanalytic discourses that have re-established themselves within modern tragedies of work-life balance played out within the hyphen that separates work and life. The intensive mother is the other predominant script available within contemporary masquerade; taking the role of the smothering, over-powering mother who sits at the opposite pole and exists in a state of frenzied anxiety, devouring the child in an effort to satisfy her desire for the father, his corresponding anatomy and the paradoxical powerful impotence that it possesses (Soler, 2006). In contemporary times, intensive mothering discourses advocate for full-time mothering as self-fulfilling in itself and ultimately necessary for the normative development of the child (Kahu & Morgan, 2007). Yet Soler warns that the extreme 'intensive' mother is obsessive, virtually devouring and stifling the child into passive submission.

The working mother articulates hands-off mothering as necessary for the normative development of the child (Hays, 1996). She advocates quality time instead of quantity and suggests that childcare socialises and educates the child (Barnett, 2005; Bianchi, 2000; Galinsky, 2005; Johnson & Swanson, 2007). Again, the extreme of the disinterested mother is damaging for the child, although apparently the better of two extreme options, given that the neglect is not physical and perhaps even undetectable. This mother is of course Riviere's (1929/2008) disinterested mother who wishes to win the

father's desire through her own selfish means. Between the two extremes lies what appears to be a middle ground if we did not know that such a space was discursively misleading. This Symbolic middle ground represents moderation, a sensitive and thoughtful blending of two extremes or mothering without the anxieties created by abnormally traversing the psychoanalytic stages of development. This ground is represented by the discourses of work-life balance and what I suggest to be the scripted antics of the normative masquerading woman. Therefore, within the bounds of work-life balance, contemporary masquerade becomes his contemporary projection, a tragedy scripted as an infill for the void left through the constrictions of articulation. This is a sadly lacking substitute for the disappearance of middle voice, along with the recognition of women as existing outside of phallic discourse and mirror imagery.

Work-life balance discourses allow for women to both participate and compete in the public domain and to also spend time with their families and keep their households intact. Yet the increased participation of women in the workforce takes place amidst a debate as to whether increased economic inclusion within the public domain suggests an increasing likelihood of agency. It is undeniable that the boundaries between the public and private domains have somehow shifted. Women are not just exercising newly found freedoms; within the theoretical confines of masquerade, they are participating as projected shadows called into the work force through economic necessity and exist as just that.

Agency (Subject/Object)

It is widely recognised that there is a predominance of women employed in the service industry (Connolly & Gregory, 2008). Employment within these industries is increasingly becoming contractual, part-time and continues to be poorly paid (Connolly & Gregory, 2008; Fine, 2007). This is hardly a sign of agency, a passive acceptance of available employment through economic necessity. Yet when framed differently within Soler's 'contemporary masquerade' women become active participants in their own destruction. Soler (2006) suggests that feminists are responsible for the necessity for woman's participation in the workforce, actively campaigning for the right to equality and therefore contributing to the demise of the nuclear family. In times of economic hardship

and rising unemployment, the assignment of activity and its corresponding agency is rising to new heights. I recently witnessed an unemployed man interviewed on a New Zealand television current affairs programme Close Up suggesting that women are predominantly employed in early childcare facilities, dominating the industry (Sainsbury, 2012)!

Therefore, with some grammatical manipulation that assigns a false sense of agency, women can actively infiltrate work places traditionally allocated to women and continue to insist on low status, underpaid and unstable employment. Within the framework of his projected masquerade, they can articulate reduced working hours as beneficial for work-life balance and spend more time at home manipulating their partners and devouring their children, in moderation of course. Through Riviere's (1929/2008) masquerade, as interpreted by Soler (2006), modern discourses of worklife balance see women disinterestedly foster domestic bliss as well as marital harmony and the satisfaction of their desires by feigning ineptitude and enraging their spouses. Amidst the frenzied activity whipped up through sentence structure, contemporary masquerade simultaneously and paradoxically emphasises woman's inextricable ties to masculinity by turning mothers into good or bad 'parents' and women into carers (O'Conner, 2007).

Indeed, within the confines of woman's 'active' traditional role of caring, a feminist ethics of care now features predominantly in mainstream academic medical and business writing (Borgerson, 2007; Burton & Dunn, 1996; Simola, 2003). Within this writing, care as an ethical equitable attribute of women 'assigns an impossible agency' and does not sit too far adrift from the bizarre framing of women as actively seeking to dominate the service industries.

The Paradox of Care Ethics

A feminist ethics of care, originally developed from Carol Gilligan's (1982) reworking of Kohlberg's theories of moral development, is in itself a product that has risen from an interesting mixture of Rawl's philosophical liberalism and indeed, Kohlberg's subscription to Piaget and psychoanalysis (Berkowitz, 2006; Henry, 2001; Litowitz, 2005; Musschenga, 2009; Okin, 1989). Instead of ascribing to Kohlberg's thesis that women were morally inferior, Gilligan suggests

that their/our powers of reasoning are different, yet equitable, suggesting that women are active participants within discourses of care theory. Therefore, while 'activity' assigns agency and equity, a problem here becomes repeatedly emphasised. We have already established that this agency is a bogus agency inscribed by discourses that reproduce women as mirror images of men, and assigns the responsibilities such an agency brings. Agency becomes an unsubstantiated assumption within a language that produces women as objects and inferior reflections of men, and a dichotomy between care and justice. This places women in a position that suggests responsibility when in fact, they are increasingly being inscribed as extensions or inclusions which supplies yet another example of how the tragedy of masquerade plays out within contemporary society.

Agency/Essence/Consciousness

So what is agency? What is it that woman is assigned yet does not have? Man has long been trying to determine what makes him superior to the animal kingdom. Within psychoanalytical, philosophical and scientific discourses, man has pursued the 'nature' or 'essence' of humanity (Irigaray, 1985). In other words, he has tried to define human consciousness. Through Lacan's (1953/2006) reinterpretation of Freud, consciousness is born through encounter and this encounter, through the entrance into language is set up as an encounter with the split self. If language is indeed phallic, as Lacan suggests, then essence becomes assigned to him and she, as his reflection becomes endowed with a shadow of his essence or agency. Her agency, which is his agency, can be reconstructed within a modest restructuring of a sentence taking place through a language deceptively (de)void of any middle ground.

Under this assumption, the public, or the arena of justice inscribed by Gilligan (1982) becomes the playground of a phallic economy and her 'care' and those who aspire to administer it, become participatory dichotomous shadows, twisted by discourse from the objects they undoubtedly are to impotent agents upon which to ascribe blame as the tragedy of work-life balance repeatedly unfolds. Within a contemporary care ethics, care and justice meld to produce moderation or the combined 'strengths' of the two (Held, 2008; Tronto, 2006, 2008). Yet language disallows relationship, middle ground, or modulations and therefore only masquerade can ensue, securing

care as a saleable commodity within a phallic economy as well as providing her with low status casual employment within the confines of worklife balance/ hyphen/mask.

Masquerade and the Tragedy of Work-Life Balance

Indeed, within the confines of contemporary masquerade, modern (post-feminist/neoliberal) western working woman faces the challenge of being both active and passive on a daily basis and within a continuum of consuming obsession and total disinterest, while still positioned as 'object' within phallic discourse (and thus desiring to be desired, to be object of his desire). Meanwhile, Riviere's (1929/2008) classic masquerade, despite protestations to the contrary from Soler (2006), continues unscathed from the time it was penned. The professional woman is still subject to 'telltale' bouts of performance anxiety, given that her audience, through enforced deficit, projection and assimilation, still predominantly consist of men, regardless of biology.

The only difference is that through Soler and Lacan, work-life balance becomes explicitly identified as his balancing act, enacting contemporary economic policy requirements without freedom, an invisible and undetectable restriction enforced through language. Confusion ensues between what appears to be equal opportunity in the workplace/public/active domain as well as what Soler (2006) suggests is a breaking down of family life and its corresponding values. How does a woman with no agency or voice fare in a society that expects her to masquerade in particular ways? Again, we can grammatically frame the contemporary woman as an eager participant within a society that expects her to actively participate in a productive manner and have many sexual partners. Alternatively, we might think of her as a passive object/commodity in a society that frames her as an active participant, expected to participate whether she wants to or not and burdened with the stigmas of promiscuity and mother blame.

When considering the latter, a woman's choice becomes strictly limited within a phallic economy (Irigaray, 1985). What Freud (1977) describes as the 'play' between the sexes and what Riviere (1929/2008), Lacan (1999) and Soler (2006) articulate as 'masquerade', becomes a form of consciousness over an unspoken existence,

or in other words, a silence. This 'silence' is concealed by a (pre)scripted farce of conflicting and 'empowering' discourses. It is important that we always remember the structural restrictions, the masquerade producing properties of grammar and syntax and how they dictate, consciousness, essence, agency, and normality. Ultimately, it is imperative to consider how language simultaneously constitutes the feminine and marginalises women, before it is even possible to conceive of freedom.

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