



# ADVANCING WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

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*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Rethinking the Impact of Organizational Sponsorship with Lacanian Theory**

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**Sponsoring has been positioned as a powerful intervention for the career advancement of women, with career resilience as a key benefit of sponsorship. In this paper we utilize a psychoanalytic framework namely Lacanian discourse theory, to argue that this may not be the case, and that sponsoring may actually create a diagonally opposite result by creating (ir)resilience in individuals being sponsored. Our theoretical critique is supported by empirical data from qualitative interviews with participants across Europe, as well as an examination of extracts from accounts of sponsoring in published research. Our analysis supports an alternate way of thinking about sponsoring and has implications for human resource practice. We suggest reversing the hierarchical positioning of sponsors and sponsees to counter the (ir)resilience created in a hierarchical sponsoring relationship. The resulting artificially introduced hystericisation will set the scene for radical change and build career resilience in women, both as sponsors and sponsees.**

**Keywords:** Sponsoring, women, career resilience, Lacan, psychoanalysis, Career advancement

### **Introduction**

Women continue to be under-represented in leadership positions, board and executive levels across the globe (Catalyst 2017; Grant Thornton, 2017). Despite greater number of women graduates and women in the workforce, women report not being able to progress in their careers at the same rate as men (Lin, 2016). Research has indicated that gender diversity contributes to better organizational and financial performance, and organizations with a higher number of females in board positions display stronger financial and organizational performance as well as better corporate governance (e.g. Badal & Harter, 2014; Carter & Wagner, 2011; Dawson et al., 2013; Dezsö & Ross, 2012; Joecks et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2015; Pellegrino et al., 2011). However, our concern is with women's career progress and women continuing to face barriers to career progress in organizations at all levels (e.g. Fraser et al., 2015; Sin et al., 2017), and a greater number of women in senior leadership has been reported to positively influence a concern for women's issues more broadly in organizations. Therefore, there is support for increasing women's representation in senior leadership both

from an organizational perspective as well as from the perspective of women's progress.

While several interventions for enabling the advancement of women into senior leadership have been implemented at an organizational level such as mentoring, sponsoring, leadership development and board internships, flexible workplace policies and networking events, mentoring gained the attention of researchers and practitioners in particular. Research has shown that women who are mentored do better in their careers than women who are not (e.g. Headlam-wells, 2004; McKeen & Bujaki, 2008; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). Given that mentoring hasn't resolved the issue of underrepresentation of women in senior management, sponsoring has been proposed to be the answer (Catalyst, 2017; Grant Thornton 2015). According to some, sponsoring could indeed be a key factor in enabling more women into leadership roles (e.g. Foust-Cummings et al., 2011; Hewlett et al., 2010; Travis et al., 2013). Sponsors are said to influence promotion decisions, give access to those in power, and provide other support for women's career progress (e.g. Ehrlich, 2008; Foust-Cummings et al., 2011;

Hewlett et al., 2011; Ibarra et al., 2010; Kambil, 2010; Paddison, 2013). However, the terms mentoring and sponsoring, have often been utilised interchangeably in literature (Bhide & Tootell, 2017), and sponsoring is often a role attributed to mentors in Kram's (1985) widely used model of mentoring in organizations. Mentoring and sponsoring have also been proposed to belong to a range of developmental relationships (Higgins & Kram, 2001) or support relationships (Shapiro et al., 1998) even though there is no consensus on which relationships are more beneficial or meaningful for women's career progress.

Focusing on people's experiences would enable an insight into the meaning derived from relationships such as mentoring or sponsoring, yet such a focus is evident only to a limited extent in the mentoring literature, and to the best of our knowledge lacking in sponsoring literature to date. However, the task of accounting for the experiences of subjects is not a straightforward activity and presents the issue of accurately representing lived experiences (Driver, 2016). Scholars have also argued that there is in fact an absence of the 'real subject' in research thus making the production of knowledge based on participants' experiences a complex endeavor (Hardy et al., 2001; Rhodes, 2009).

One alternative for addressing the struggle to account for the real subject or the subject of the unconscious in research that produces 'knowledge about them and for them', is to utilize psychoanalytical theorizing (Driver, 2016: 731). Psychoanalytical theories have been utilised by researchers to analyse human relations within organizations (Arnaud, 2002; Arnaud & Venhuele, 2003; Driver, 2015; Driver, 2016; Ekman, 2013; San-Vergel et al., 2011; Stein, 2007). Lacanian theory in particular has been looked at from this perspective to analyse several organizational phenomena and constructs (Arnaud, 2012; Bénédicte, 2007; Driver, 2005, 2015; 2017; 2018; Ekman, 2001; Vanheule et al., 2003; Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2004). In this paper, we respond to Driver's (2016) call to utilise Lacanian discourse theory as a psychoanalytical framework for representing the research subject. Specifically, we think through the sponsoring relationship with Lacanian discourse theory and elaborate on the kind of discourse occupied by research subjects. Moving between the four positions of Lacan's discourse theory enables us to represent the research subject reflexively and ethically, and to move towards more empowering positions and relational practices, making it especially relevant for empirical research as well as for human resource practices aiming for women's career progress and gender equity (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

Our method for thinking through sponsoring in this manner is two-fold. First, we analyze data from our own empirical research (interviews conducted with 11 participants across Europe). Second, we re-read examples drawn from the published literature on sponsorship. Through this, we demonstrate evidence of twin discourses operating in the accounts of subjects who were asked to describe their perceptions or experiences of sponsoring. We have labelled these discourses, following

Lacan's discourse theory, the master and the hysteric (Lacan, 2007). We question the benefits of sponsoring in its present form for women given that an examination of data demonstrates that it results in considerable anxiety. We then extend this argument by suggesting that other developmental relationships may reveal previously undiscovered findings when examined through a Lacanian lens. It is through the contradictions inherent within the relationship between these positions that we hope to make a radical contribution – one where developmental relationship could live up to the aspirations many scholars hold for it.

The paper is structured into four sections; we begin by briefly introducing our analytical framework – the relationship between Lacan's discourse of the master and discourse of the hysteric. We then attempt to expose what we have called 'the myth of sponsorship' by critically examining the literature and demonstrate how the present literature is the Master's discourse. This provides a position from which to present an 'other side' of sponsorship that has emerged through the analysis of our data, the final section concludes by considering a practical alternative way to practice sponsorship in organizations that avoids many of the pitfalls our analysis has revealed, and suggesting a similar approach towards other developmental initiatives for women's career advancement.

### **Section 1: A Brief Foray Into Lacanian Discourse Theory**

In this section our intention is to provide a brief discussion of one particular relationship, between two social bonds, central to Lacan's model of discourse (Driver, 2016; Lacan, 1996). This relationship is useful to explain both how sponsorship has been positioned in theory and practice so far and why we contend that this positioning erodes resilience for all women at work (not just those seeking career advancement). That relationship is the tension that exists between what Lacan terms 'the Master's discourse' and the discourse of the hysteric. A Lacanian understanding of discourse centres around the notion that irrespective of the specific words that people speak, the structure of the discourse in play determines which 'social bond' is established between subjects (Fink, 1995; Lacan, 2007; Malone, 2008; Verhaeghe, 1995; Žižek, 2002, 2006). In seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, (Lacan, 1996), Lacan presented four discourses: that of the master, the university, the hysteric and the analyst. These four discourses emphasise particularly the structural relationships that form as a result of engaging in the act of speaking (Bracher et al., 1994; Skold, 2010; Verhaeghe, 1995).

Each discourse has four fixed positions: agent (speaker), other (receiver), product (result of the discourse, what is produced) and the Truth, which is the unconscious driver behind the discourse, something that can never be expressed fully in words (Verhaeghe, 1995). Each discourse also has four mutable positions: S1 (the master signifier), S2 (knowledge), \$ (The Lacanian split subject – split by the gap between The Unconscious and conscious speech), and 'a' (a representative of desire). Each discourse speaks from one of these mutable positions; it is this position (the agent) that 'kicks off' the

discourse so to speak, that sets the structure in motion. When the master signifier is in the position of agent the discourse of the master is enacted, when knowledge is in that position we see the university, when 'a' is in the driver's seat we experience the discourse of the analyst and when the split subject takes over we have the hysteric. The 'flow' of each discourse remains the same – the agent is driven by an unconscious Truth and speaks to the other (the recipient) who also produces something in the unconscious. The product of the discourse and its founding Truth are incapable from interacting – feedback is impossible. This is why each position can be conceptualised as representing both a particular desire and the failure to attain that desire (Verhaeghe, 1995). The agent (the subject speaking) is stuck between these; on the one hand attempting to exercise their desire, and on the other hand failing to do so - which is why the cycle of a social bond keeps repeating.

Perhaps most important, none of these discourses act alone, so to speak. They are all in action in all of our speech, all of the time. The tendency to cherry pick a discourse for analytical purposes for instance as Nobus and Quinn (2005) warn, carries with it a significant rendering of Lacan's theoretical development towards a 'too neat' conclusion. More problematic, it fails to recognise that discourse, in a psychoanalytic frame, is slippery. Put simply - conversations slip between discursive positions, each acting out and being frustrated by a particular desire. It is here, in the movement between discourse (Lacan, 1998: 16), in our case specifically between the master and the hysteric, that we can find something analytically useful for understanding the specific characteristics and ramifications of the frustrated desire of sponsorship. However prior to embarking on this we need to spend a little time looking at the relationship between the master and the hysteric.

The Master's discourse can be conceptualised by imagining a doctor-patient interaction in a medical setting. The patient (other) approaches the doctor (master) with high blood pressure and back pain and is given the diagnosis of a muscle tear (Dickson, 2016). Speaking from the Master's discourse here, the doctor provides a definitive diagnosis to the patient. The patient, however, already knows something about their own condition (how the patient makes sense of this knowledge). In other words, the patient is also a split subject, or the other side, who is not sure of the doctor's diagnosis. Similarly, while the doctor may well be not sure about the diagnosis they can display their 'knowledge-ability' or their 'ability-to-master-knowledge' (mastery) with reference to the medical body of knowledge. Even though the patient is provided a diagnosis they walk away wondering if it may actually be something else other than a muscle tear.

In Lacanian terms, it is the unconscious (Dickson, 2016) of the master (doctor) and other (patient) that creates a split in the master (the doctor who appears to make the diagnosis consciously but is actually not quite sure although this anxiety is partly taken care of by the body of medical knowledge that the doctor depends on), and the emergence of the object of desire for

the patient (the patient walks away with a treatment plan but wonders whether something else is wrong with them). Therefore, this discourse appears commanding (the doctor's diagnosis) but it actually reiterates the subject's search for desire (might it be something else?). One way for the subject to react to a 'prescription' from the master is to question the master.

Lacan's discourse of the hysteric questions the power that is exerted by the master and the status quo, whether that is political, social or cultural (Verhaeghe, 1995). The hysteric questions the master on whether he really has an answer or challenges the master by pointing out that the answer is not really reasonable (Verhaeghe, 1995; Wajcman, 2003). Since the hysteric is also a split subject, they continue the contradiction between the conscious and the unconscious and their position is not to offer the solution – in fact, they do not believe there is necessarily one solution. In this position, their role is to question what is not right or reasonable in the Master's discourse, while simultaneously contradicting themselves and aligning with the master. The hystericised subject is unsure of what she wants but she finds the master lacking in knowledge (Fotaki & Harding, 2013; Parker, 2010; Žižek, 2002).

With the split subject as the agent 'the hysteric (unconsciously) refuses to align with the master signifier, while paradoxically attempting to do exactly that' (Dickson, 2016, p. 137). Ultimately, the hysteric knows that the master can relieve her symptoms, she also knows that the solutions offered are not reasonable or do not fit somehow, yet she is unable to get rid of the master's influence on her life (Desmond, 2009; Dickson, 2015; Lacan, 2007). From a Lacanian perspective, to achieve change, the Master's discourse must be questioned from the hysteric's position in order to pave the way for the mediation of (a) new master signifier(s) to emerge through the analyst's discourse, as the Hysteric's discourse enables the interpretation of words and actions in order to reveal hidden desires (Verhaeghe, 1995).

## Section 2: The Myth of Sponsorship

Ever since Catalyst published their 2011 survey *Sponsoring Women to Success*, sponsorship has been part of the holy grail of women's leadership advancement. In theory, sponsorship is career advocacy provided to a subordinate by a senior-level executive. It is touted as a relationship built on trust, respect, and mutual benefit, but it remains exceedingly rare, especially outside of the US business environment, and is mythical to many. Hewlett et al. (2010) claimed that sponsorship provides a statistical benefit of up to 30 percent for high profile assignments, promotions, and pay raises, yet very few women have sponsors. In fact, men are 46 percent more likely than women to have one. Other researchers have argued that women tend to be over-mentored and under-sponsored and, as a result, they miss out on the positive impact of having a sponsor (Ibarra et al., 2010). Further, that there is direct relationship between a lack of sponsorship opportunities and the absence of women in leadership positions (Hewlett et al., 2010).

The necessary role of intentional workplace relationships is further developed by Fernando and Cohen (2013). They argued that despite the broad consensus amongst scholars that social capital was vital for career advancement, women are often marginalised and excluded from key social groups. Ibarra (1993) contended that women were more likely than their male colleagues to have small social networks, while Durbin and Tomlinson (2014) further noted that women managers are more likely to be part-time than their male counterparts, and therefore their working relationships and experiences are different due to their different working patterns. Into this void, sponsorship enters as a potential solution to the challenges of women's restricted social networks. Women who want access to senior leadership are suggested to engage in self-promotion and ingratiation behaviours to ensure visibility, and organizational sponsorship (King, 2004: 121). However, somewhat in contradiction to this idea, there is some evidence from the literature that sponsorship roles may in fact reinforce the traditional subjugation of women's rights, needs and autonomy at work (Burt, 1998). In Kumra and Vinnicombe's (2010) research, early and mid-career respondents highlighted that importance of pleasing the higher-ups to gain goodwill in order to the climb the organizational hierarchy. Burt, as far back as 1998 spoke of the need for ingratiation with superiors as a means of securing sponsorship for women.

Sponsoring has predominantly appeared in research as a sub-function of mentoring and there is sparse literature, especially prior to Hewlett's (2010) study that examined sponsoring independently. While geographical differences in how sponsoring is perceived have been reported, which may in part be due to varying power distance orientations (Clutterbuck, 2009), there are also reports of sponsorship being hidden and covert (Megginson, 2006; Merrick, 2009). This might be a result of the powerful position of a sponsor which allows sponsors to support the career advancement of their sponsees by acting as a door opener; influencing promotion decisions; and providing exposure and networking opportunities; and providing access to otherwise inaccessible resources (e.g. Ehrich, 2008; Foust-Cummings et al., 2011; Kambil, 2010; Paddison, 2013).

However, this view presupposes that any individual who is not in an influential position is not considered to be able to sponsor, and any individual in an influential position is expected to be able to sponsor. Research indicates that males in senior leadership positions are less likely to sponsor females as they consider them a flight risk (Ibarra et al., 2010). With the majority of senior leadership being male, perhaps there is a need to think differently about sponsoring women. While research suggests there is an inability for sponsoring to happen in any other manner other than on the initiation of senior leadership, it is contradictory, then, that recent popular literature has focussed on women 'leaning in' (Sandberg, 2013) and getting themselves sponsors when it is in fact the actions of sponsors that will determine whether women are sponsored or not. This is, in effect, a continued pattern of patriarchy.

**Positioning current sponsoring literature as the master's discourse.** A Lacanian psychoanalytical framework accounts for the interpersonal dimension between subjects rather than individuals as subjects, and since the subject is represented through language (Stavrakakis, 2008), Lacanian psychoanalysis is an appropriate framework to account for the real subject, and this framework offers a way to understand research through language and discourse (Driver, 2016), which is our preferred approach. We are guided by the linguistic approach to research wherein knowledge is contained within signifiers through language. With this understanding, we propose that the current understanding of sponsoring perpetuates the Master's discourse (Verhaeghe, 1995). In this discourse, the master signifier (S1) in the position of the agent (or the one who is talking) is the sponsor. This agent speaks to S2 (the denominator of knowledge) in the position of the other, in this case the sponsee. The desire in this discourse is for the master signifier to be the undivided subject, and therefore at the position of truth is the divided subject or the human being divided between the conscious and the unconscious (Verhaeghe, 1995). The sponsor is a construct, then, of the sponsee, with S2 (knowledge) in the position of the other, with the sponsee (S2) sustaining the position of the Sponsor (S1). The sponsor is also a divided subject with the hidden truth, the fact that they too are a divided subject or a being of language. The result is the lost object 'a' in the position of the product.

Further, the master signifier (sponsor) is in a commanding position to the knowledge signifier (sponsee), and the use of language is such that knowledge is available for use by the master (Verhaeghe, 1995). In this case, it is the body of knowledge on sponsoring. However, beneath the master signifier is the signifier for the divided subject (\$), indicating that the master actually suppresses the truth – the knowledge of their own inadequacies. Nevertheless, this truth needs to remain hidden and they cannot let it be known, for the fear of losing the power as the master (Verhaeghe, 1995). Finally, beneath the knowledge signifier is the object a or the surplus pleasure or *jouissance*, or the product of this discourse. This emerges from the discourse (unconsciously) for the sponsee and discloses the master's true desire which is to be in a commanding position with respect to society, have knowledge at their disposal and acquire pleasure from being in this position (Olivier, 2009). Thus, the Master's discourse is the discourse of power which does not need validation (Driver, 2016).

In the US-based understanding of sponsoring as the Master's discourse, we see the sponsor, with his/her hidden truth, sustained in a position of power by a sponsee with the resultant product of the discourse having nothing to do with the hidden truth of the sponsor. The sponsor thinks of the sponsee as an object of his/her knowledge, for example their ability to influence the sponsee's promotion from senior manager to board member or CEO, or to get a raise. What is produced in this discourse is the lost object a, surplus pleasure, gained by the master due to the position of being the master signifier. When the sponsor engages in the act of sponsoring as a means of

moving women up the career ladder, we suggest that it is their own surplus pleasure that they are seeking. The sponsee learns something (symbolising knowledge), however, the master is not really concerned with what that is, focussing only on maintaining or growing their own power (Fink, 1995), and enjoying the surplus pleasure (jouissance) that is created in the position of the object. Lacan's four discourses are centred around the impossibility of attaining desire. Since the result of the discourse of the master is the lost object, the desire of the sponsor is never assumed, resulting in repeating the same cycle again.

Sponsoring has been positioned as the means to women's upward mobility and equal status to men, a historical focus of feminism. However, one could argue that this is a feminist phantasy of unconstrained enjoyment, which from a Lacanian perspective, is impossible to attain due to the idiosyncratic nature of jouissance. This would lead to an uncomfortable and polarising position, one that does not understand sponsoring as a feminist phantasy – specifically an exercise in masculine jouissance that does not result in what it suggests it does.

### **The Other Side of Sponsorship**

In the previous section, we presented a critical review of sponsoring literature and utilised Lacan's theory of discourses as a template to argue that the current understanding of sponsoring perpetuates the Master's discourse. In the discussion that follows, we will demonstrate how the examples provided from our data as well as data from the two published studies considered (Fernando and Cohen, 2013; Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010), point towards the emergence of the hysteric by illustrating the unconscious desire to resist the master signifier in these accounts (Dickson, 2015, 2016; Lacan, 2007; Verhaeghe, 1995). Even though the hysteric demands knowledge from the master, there is actually the repeated revelation of its lack because the desire of the hysteric is impossible to realise (Parker, 2005; Verhaeghe, 2001).

**The Master's command.** We begin with Kumra and Vinnicombe's (2010) study, in which they examined the role of impression management and social capital in career advancement by conducting interviews with 19 female consultants in a management consulting company in the UK. The participants determined that sponsorship is critical for career advancement, and speculated on what determines whether an individual has sponsorship. Through selected quotes from this study, we illustrate below the emergence of the hysteric who is unsure about whether the master has the answers to their questions, but is still captivated by the master's command. One respondent states:

'[T]he question I have is less around the promotion process but is around the exposure to opportunities, and this is really where the informal thing kicks in because, although we have formal allocation of these assignments, you need the network and sponsorship to get a track record. You can see other people doing it you suddenly think, How has that

person got there? And you just think, Ah! Well, that is because they have attached themselves to these two or three people, they always work on their jobs, you can see they are always doing the extra stuff in their own spare time, and you just think, This is how it goes....'

'GCF [the formal competence-based promotion system] was supposed to get rid of all of that. If it wasn't written down on paper it wasn't supposed to be acceptable in the progression discussions, but ultimately they sit huddled in a room and they discuss your performance and then they have people's opinions.'

We suggest that you can see the hysteric's plea in the way this respondent questions what leads to promotions, concluding that sponsorship is needed. However, she then goes on to elaborate on how sponsorship is secured, specifically by attaching oneself to other people. She finds this unreasonable but concludes that it is the way things are. Her dual position as agent of the Hysteric's discourse and as recipient of the Master's discourse can be seen as she both identifies sponsorship as critical to career advancement and finds things that lead to people being sponsored. At the end of the first section she articulates the position of the 'other' of the Master's discourse, by saying clearly 'this is how it goes'. What she does know is that the way to progress in the organization is by obtaining the right to be sponsored, through allocating personal time to sponsors' tasks. The divided subject is here both longing for it (as the subject of the master) while also abhorring the idea (as hysteric), yet showing an acceptance of it as the normal.

We see the hysteric responding more forcefully in the second section, the phrase 'but ultimately they sit huddled in a room and they discuss your performance' draws a line through the sponsor Master's potency, calling it out, exposing the impotence as despite what your sponsor says, ultimately they huddle with their conspirators and talk about you – you can almost hear her say 'what are they saying about me?' 'what am I to them, really?'

**Does the Master's have the answers?** We now examine some statements from the accounts of the participants of our qualitative research in 2014, who expressed varied perceptions about different aspects of sponsoring and the functions of a sponsor. We suggest that the quote below from Jason's account illustrates Jason's position as a hysteric:

'I think it tends to be people get handpicked and yes there may well be an element of validating that because that person has been delivering regularly his tasks, but I think on the broader level though the process of making that available needs to be accessible to everyone. I think that would be the point that people particularly in the UK, that's where they might have reservations about sponsoring. The basis for them being chosen and that's the one thing that I suppose people can't answer that question. Even though their manager would not call it sponsoring that's what I would call it but then question would be what's the process of being sponsored?'

In the first statement, Jason identifies that although sponsoring may lead to career progress, it may not be available to everyone. He clarifies that it is not just him, and that other people in the UK would also have doubts about it because the notion itself has deficiencies. However, in the second statement he expresses his frustration in not knowing what it is that actually happens when a person gets sponsored. What he is really saying is: 'I don't know whether I will get sponsored because the process is not transparent and I don't know what that process is'. Jason is an individual who is not willing to let go of the notion that hierarchical sponsoring leads to career advancement. He would like to have access to a sponsor and get sponsorship sometime in his career. However, he displays his resistance to the master's position through his notion of sponsoring not being available to everyone. We argue that this is the dual subject who on one hand can see the folly of the Master's discourse that perpetuates the notion of sponsorship being responsible for career progression, but is unable to not be subject to it.

Jason's statements also indicate a sense of helplessness in not being able to influence the process of sponsoring, since it was not considered transparent. Jason is hysterical from a Lacanian perspective when he begins to question the reasoning behind the solution that the master offers, yet is unable to unlatch himself from the notion of the master as the one with the solution. He is not quite sure of the master's position and is beginning to unconsciously display resistance to the Master's discourse, by refusing to align with the master's command. However, the refusal is verbalized through a desire to occupy the subject position that is being refused, hence this refusal is actually hysterical (Dickson, 2015; Fotaki & Harding, 2013).

Another participant, Katy (Switzerland), felt that sponsoring happened in the background and that it might not be possible for individuals to actively look for sponsors. She talked about this lack of transparency and said: 'I don't know how they decide if they do this for some women while some others they think are stupid, so they would not help them'. She also felt that one could not go and get a sponsor because: 'I don't know whether you can actively look for sponsors if they don't do that by themselves, the sponsor can be a sponsor and actually not say a word, right?'

Katy's frustration is evident in her first statement where she cannot quite understand why some individuals would be privy to sponsoring while others would not because of what the sponsor thinks of them. She also indicates that being valued by the sponsor is a key determinant of whether sponsorship is provided, irrespective of other factors. In her second statement, she emerges as the hysteric when she asks whether it would be possible to get a sponsor at all because it happens in the background and nobody knows 'by who exactly and why'. What Katy appears to want to say is that there is no reasoning behind the manner in which sponsorship occurs, but it just does, and sponsors just go ahead and provide sponsorship to some people, however that she may not be that person.

These statements thus indicate resistance to the Master's discourse in questioning the role of sponsoring, expressing

ambiguity about the process of sponsoring as well as an individual's inability to influence it (or not), and questioning the motivations behind sponsoring and whether those who do not get sponsored are undervalued. These instances indicate the emergence of the hysteric subject challenging the assumption that sponsoring can be available to all women if they want it, and thus unconsciously challenging the master and questioning their ability to provide a solution to their problems (symptoms they exhibit). In this hystericisation, we also illustrated through a quote in Kumra and Vinnicombe's study (2010) where the participant discusses her perception about what determined whether an individual obtained sponsorship. The participant identifies the influence of the sponsorship group as being critical for career advancement, while also identifying likeability as a factor that would make some individuals appeal to that group more than others, and ensure sponsorship: 'I've always thought that a lot of it is definitely likeability. I'm from a bit of the organization where I think a lot of the partners like what I call a "good bloke". Someone who will go out drinking, play snooker, and I can spot a mile off the type of person who's going to appeal to that sponsorship group and 10 to 1 you'll see them in the room and think, That's inevitable'.

There is a sense that this participant finds it unreasonable that an individual may already be in a favourable situation for sponsorship by virtue of appealing to hierarchical sponsoring groups but she also normalises it as something that is inevitable. In other words, she is aware that there are things beyond an individual's control, such as likeability, that may determine who moves up the career ladder but she still finds ways to understand how someone may appeal to those responsible for career progression through sponsoring. Here again we see the dual position of the hysterical subject.

**Why must I do as you say?** Our participants also reported that not all aspects of sponsoring were as they seemed. The primary function of a sponsor according to Brooklyn (Portugal) was providing new opportunities and talking about her work. However, Brooklyn also explained how in a sponsoring relationship a protégé could be put under pressure: 'of course if you have someone that supports you and sponsors you this person also wants something from you or make you feel obliged to give something in return'. Brooklyn's response aligns with the Master's discourse in the way she normalises that a sponsor may naturally want something in return, but she also states that the person may make an individual feel obliged to give something back suggesting a hysteric's resistance to the idea of reciprocity.

Similarly, a sponsor was perceived as someone 'actively promoting the mentee at the right places in the organization and so actively helping a mentee in getting the job' by Katherine (Denmark). However, Katherine also stated that sponsors wanted their sponsees to mirror their own careers without consideration for the sponsees own career goals: 'You risk becoming clones of sponsors because the sponsors may not really understand what you can contribute but they just want you to get the kind of career that they can have.' Here again, Katherine is torn between

the need and benefits of sponsorship as she perceives them and cannot rid herself from the hold of this discourse, while questioning her own position as a sponsee. Her contradictory position indicates a questioning of 'Who am I and what do I want?' and 'who am I (to the sponsor)?'; a hysteric's response.

We now turn to quotes from two participants in Fernando and Cohen's (2013) study to continue with our discussion around hysteric subjects. Fernando and Cohen interviewed 24 female Sri Lankan participants, who explained their perceptions of how career advancement and promotions occurred in organizations. One participant states: 'The editors are like god; one thing I learned is that you don't contradict whatever they say. You just take their word for it and revise your work accordingly. And you don't refuse anything that is handed over to you however busy you are. You just take it up. You have to keep all the big people happy if you want better assignments, your own column, etc. Everything is after all at the discretion of the editor.' (Natasha, 25).

On the surface, Natasha's statement displays a sense of action that could be taken (keeping superiors happy) in order to progress in the workplace. However, underneath, there is a sense of helplessness and at the same time a sense of wanting to disagree and resist the notion of securing a promotion in this manner. By comparing the editors with God, what she wants to say is that sponsors are infallible and the only thing that can be done is obeying their wishes. She justifies this stance by stating that this kind of obedience will determine whether and how junior employees progress in the workplace. She seems to dislike the notion of the editors being god-like and having the power to make decisions about career progress, yet, she reinstates that very notion in what she thinks needs to be done.

Another participant states: 'Your progression is guaranteed if you stick up to the key people; that's the Sri Lankan work model for you!' (Shamila, 32). Her statement does away with all the interventions that are supposed to advance women in workplaces, and how career advancement boils down to ingratiation techniques by individuals. Here again, similar to Natasha, Shamila consciously seems to express that she would need to embrace the model for career progression, and that this would in fact guarantee career advancement. However, it seems unreasonable to her that sticking up to the key people should lead to guaranteed career progress and there is underlying contempt and ridicule in her statement about this being the Sri Lankan work model. We suggest that what she means is that (hopefully) this is 'only' the Sri Lankan work model, displaying hysteric symptoms (Wajcman, 2003). What Natasha and Shamila's accounts indicate overall is the dissent with the manner in which career advancement occurs currently, yet both respondents cannot shake off the notion that this is the way in which it must be done (the master's command): someone must provide hierarchical sponsorship for career advancement to happen.

**I will anyway.** The existing understanding of sponsoring as the Master's discourse points out to a hierarchical model of

sponsoring where an individual in a senior and influential position provides sponsorship for another individual in a junior position by advocating for their promotion or similar. However, the accounts of participants from two studies as well as from our own research reveal how participants identify sponsorship as critical to career advancement, yet also discuss how they think career advancement and sponsorship actually happen, making it likely that a person may or may not receive any sponsorship this way. Ultimately, these statements reveal the emergence of hystericisation among these participants, and the quotes that we have presented illustrate evidence of repulsive reaction to the way that sponsorship is currently conceptualised. Subjects speculate about the various opaque ways in which sponsorship may be available to some people but definitely not to others, and about the impotence generally of a sponsor to achieve career change, yet they also normalise the various underhand ways of gaining sponsorship, as if it does 'help'. We can clearly see the emergence of the Hysteric's discourse in this model – where people subject to it simultaneously see the phantasy behind the Master's discourse but still subject themselves to it (of course they may have no option).

In Lacanian terms, the hystericised subject is one who is aware that the master is also split, but who has not acted upon that awareness and hence continues to be subjected to the discourse of the master (Verhaeghe, 1995). In the discourse of the hysteric, the divided subject is filled with doubt and questions her position in relation to the master (Žižek, 1993, 2002). She is split and torn between what she thinks she is meant to do and her resistance to the master's command. (Žižek, 1993, 2002). Therefore, there is on one hand a display of resistance and protest to the master's command while on the other, there is a sense of meaninglessness because of failing to live up to the master's command. In perceiving sponsoring as hidden, happening in the background, or a sign of incompetency, the participants of our research emerge as hysterics where they start to question their subjective position, yet remain the divided subject, conflicted between what they are supposed to do and the failure to live up to what the master commands.

Despite the resistance however, the hysteric is still captivated by the demands of the Master's discourse (Bracher et al., 1994). The accounts of the participants that we have discussed in this section display subjects who demonstrate resistance to the Master's discourse and question why it must be obeyed, yet they display helplessness and a sense of meaninglessness in identifying how there are certain things actually that determine who secures sponsorship or influences decision makers. The question they seem to raise is: 'why must I act the way you say?' (Lacan, 1993), the status quo. They question the master's claim to have the answer and yet they remain subjected to the discourse of the master.

The ramification of our analysis are substantial, although sponsorship has been touted as building career resilience in women (e.g. Carson & Bedeian, 1994; Heslin & Turban, 2016; London, 1997; Waterman et al., 1994) we argue that it is

actually the opposite. Paradoxically, it creates irresilience (e.g. insecurity, fear, frustration, longing) and develops a lack of trust among individuals. This is evidenced by frequent slippage from the subject of the master to the agent of the hysteric. This is an unintended consequence of the manner in which sponsoring is understood and promoted in organizations, and has direct implications for how effective sponsoring can be for women's careers, given its current understanding. We discuss this further in our conclusion.

## Conclusion

In this concluding section our purpose is two-fold, to summarise the theoretical contribution our paper makes in relation to the development of Lacanian discourse theory in considering gender and organization studies and to discuss some potential practical interventions that have emerged from our critical consideration of the sponsorship literature and our empirical data. The sponsorship literature only understands sponsorship as something that occurs in a unidirectional way in an organization's hierarchy. That is, someone who is higher in the hierarchy acts as a sponsor and someone lower in the same or related hierarchy is sponsored. The assumption that underpins this approach is reasonable in our current logic of patriarchy – those higher have both experience and power, supposedly – and thus can influence in various ways the rise of the person sponsored in the relevant hierarchy. This is perhaps the defining feature of sponsorship over related concepts such as mentoring and coaching, which do not have the same expectation (overt or covert) that comes with sponsorship.

We have theorised this unidirectional relationship, at least as it is represented in the mainly U.S. literature, as best characterised by Lacan's discourse of the Master (Dickson, 2016; Driver, 2016; Fotaki & Harding, 2013; Skold, 2010). Here, the sponsor speaks from the position of authority ( $S_1$ ) and attempts to structure the 'career' ( $S_2$ ) of the sponsee, which results unsurprisingly in the production of an unknown desire (*le petit objet a* in Lacanian terms), which manifests in the speech of the sponsee as an uncomfortable and perplexed irresilience – what am I to my sponsor?, they ask. The dangers of Lacan's Master's discourse are well explained in the organization studies, sociological and psychoanalytic literature, what underpins the Master's attempts to manipulate the future of the sponsee is an unacknowledged lack, a rupture, – they can't guarantee anything. Although they provide assurance and even though they need to appear knowledgeable consciously, the master's assurance is 'underwritten' by an unconscious lack (Dickson, 2016: 136). Our claim is that sponsored women can sense this impotence and are structurally uncomfortable hitching their carriages to (often) impotent men above them in the hierarchy.

So what is an alternative? Here we see potential, as others have (e.g. Fotaki & Harding, 2013, Alakavuklar et al, 2017) in hystericisation, in putting to work the Other's jouissance (Dickson, 2015). We agree with Driver as she suggests that 'more attention can be paid to discursive movement that unsettles either/or thinking allowing for both/and' (2017: 733).

In particularly the discursive movement between Master and Hysteric could be structurally reversed to allow those often positioned as hysterical to be positioned as masterful. One way that this might work in practice in terms of furthering women's career progression is by purposefully reversing the sponsorship relationship. Here the sponsors would be the junior female members of staff, people who often operate closer to the operational work of the organization. They would have as their sponsees more senior female colleagues who have aspirations to move 'up' the organizational hierarchy. Although this might sound impractical, politically impossible and potentially creating significant power imbalances we see it as a solid step towards recognising hystericisation, specifically 'the structural introduction, under artificial conditions, of the Hysteric's discourse' (Lacan, 2007: 33). It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed account of how this might occur in practice, but we think we already have the building blocks in place with methods such as the various 360-degree feedback schemes. Although these would need to be radically rethought with due care to make sense of the complexities of organizational life. Perhaps here we are asking for too much, but consider the argument. One of the findings from our empirical material was this notion that we have termed 'irresilience' in those sponsored. This, we have argued, comes from the impotence of the discourse of the Master creating an unsettling, perhaps uncanny feeling of disconnection and alienation in the sponsored subject. The discourse of the hysteric as a response to the Master speaks from the position of the barred subject, driven by desire, and asks of the master: What am I to you? By asking junior female members of staff to take up the role of sponsor, to fight the corner of the sponsored senior staff without the trappings of the impotent Master, who appears potent only to be unmasked through the progression of the discourse, we think we would begin to see produced  $S_2$ , knowledge. Knowledge of the true function of the organization, of the real power-brokers, the saints and the sinners so to speak.

Organizational 360 degree feedback mechanisms have predominantly been proposed as aids for leadership development and 360 degree feedback has been researched as a tool for the selection and effectiveness of leaders (e.g. Bracken et al., 2016; Harris and Kuhnert, 2007; Markham et al., 2015). Recent empirical studies have also noted the value of 360 surveys about future performance potential in addressing gender bias in promotion processes (Bain & Company, 2017). At the same time however, while some scholars argue that 360 degree assessments are effective for leadership competency assessment (Craig and Hannum, 2006; Toegel and Conger, 2003), we would contend that the 360 feedback fantasizes objectivity within what is inherently a subjective process, for instance women often receive feedback that is different from men due to gender bias and the notion that leadership is associated with men (e.g. Heilman et al., 1995; Metcalfe and Altman, 2001; People matters, 2018). Thus in fact, the 360 feedback often just stands in for the impotent Master, the double bind and double standards that women encounter in organizations (Ibarra et al., 2013).

Our data shows that promotion decisions are thought to happen in the background through closed room discussions between senior leaders. Thus, 360 degree mechanisms in the current format in which they are utilised would not address the anxiety that promotion processes create among female employees. We propose modifications in 360 processes such that women are empowered to select a panel of ‘sponsors’ hierarchically lower who would then ‘sponsor up’ the female sponsee with senior leadership ambitions. The influence of subordinates in evaluating leadership effectiveness through 360 feedback has been recognised through various scholarly studies (e.g. Lance et al., 2006; Tett & Burnett, 2003). Our proposed 360 degree feedback structure further emphasizes the role of followers in the co-construction of leadership (e.g. DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Shamir, 2012). The feedback received on past performance and future potential through the 360 process involving this select panel (including human resource personnel, sponsee chosen sponsors, and senior leadership) would influence career advancement for the sponsee. Such a process is envisaged to enhance transparency and aid in making career advancement processes less anxiety-ridden for women.

Slavoj Žižek has described the hysteric as authentic, but inconsistent (Žižek, 1993). We would likely see this in operation in this reverse sponsorship system, as those junior sponsors would be able to exercise authenticity without the pressure of actually elevating their sponsees, the results would most definitely be inconsistent because the existing power structures would be completely unable to handle the incision into their normal operating procedures. And just imagine the resilience that would emerge in both the sponsor and sponsee as they forge an unlikely bond, the senior sponsee both reliant on and responsible for the junior sponsor. And the junior sponsor seeing and fighting the true organization effects of the insidious nature of patriarchy through the eyes of her senior charge. We see this as having potential for real change through change in the Real, that is the creation of new master signifiers through the emergence of the analyst’s discourse (Driver, 2016; Lacan, 2007) as the traditional hierarchical relationship between the sponsor and sponsee is unstitched.

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