

# Choosing Not To Be Old? Masks, Bodies and Identity Management in Later Life

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper critically assesses an increasing use of mask motifs to examine questions of identity in later life. Two approaches are subjected to detailed analysis, both of which propose distinctive answers to the challenge to identity management emerging from high or post modernity. First, consideration is given to a postmodern ‘mask of ageing’ (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989), key elements of which include consumer culture and the ageing body. Secondly, psychodynamic conceptions of masquerade and the use of personae are examined, whereby discussion centres on expanded personal potential in the second half of life and protection against a hostile social environment. A developmental model of social masking is proposed. Whilst there are superficial similarities in the use of masking, these traditions are shown to have radically different ideas concerning the core contradictions of an ageing identity. Implications for identity management and the status of body, midlifestyle and authenticity in later life, plus the need for subtlety in research methodology, are drawn out.

**KEY WORDS** – Mask of ageing, masquerade, persona, impression management, postmodernity, analytic psychology, body, identity.

## **Introduction**

Masquerade and hidden identity are increasingly being used to examine the relationship between social, personal and bodily potential in later life. As a key to this development, a mask motif has been employed to interpret the management of an ageing self in an uncertain world. The nature of this uncertainty, brought about, in part, by the erosion of traditional role expectations and the advent of a consumerist culture, contains elements that are simultaneously threatening and encouraging to experiments with identity in later life. On the one hand, increased lifestyle choice and bodily malleability hold out the promise

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of a flexible and ageless identity. On the other, the discovery of greater personal potential might need to be protected from a hostile and fragmentary social environment.

Use of a mask motif in social gerontology has broadly followed one of two theoretical traditions. First, Featherstone and Hepworth (1989, 1991) have employed a postmodern analysis of age in formulating their 'mask of ageing' hypothesis. Secondly, conceptions of masquerade (Woodward 1991) or persona (Biggs 1993) have been drawn from a psychodynamic perspective. Each approach indicates that presentation of an ageing identity is subject to flux and multiple possibility. However, the two traditions place distinctive nuances on the nature of the mask and the core contradictions facing identity management in later life.

For Featherstone and Hepworth (1989), the question of masking arises from diverse lifestyle choices made available through consumer culture and with the increasing malleability of the body as a surface for the expression of identity statements. The mask of ageing arises as an ageing body becomes increasingly unresponsive to consumer opportunities and as others attribute negative qualities to physical signs of ageing. The mask is conceived as inflexible, inhibiting participation in positive elements of postmodernity as it becomes increasingly difficult to see a youthful self behind it. A dominant theme, then, is one of antagonism between potential expression in later life and an ageing body.

Woodward's commentary on masquerade (1991), builds upon the work of the psychoanalyst Riviere (1929). Emphasis is placed on the active creation of a social façade in order to obscure social and physical manifestations of age. Woodward is particularly concerned with the degree of success associated with masking and the paradoxical nature of simultaneously drawing attention to signs of age through attempts to hide them. However, whilst continuing to explore themes of continuity between women across generations and psychoanalytic bias against older age, Woodward (1995) has not expanded on the mask motif in this context. By drawing on a Jungian tradition, Biggs (1993) has also examined the relationship between what is hidden and what is manifest. Here the mask, or persona, becomes both a bridge between internal psychological and external social realities and an element of social conformity. This perspective emphasises the increased possibilities for self-actualisation that come with age. The persona is seen as both a source of inauthenticity and as a means of protecting the expanded self from external attack. As with Woodward, personae become part of a masquerade, yet in contrast to the other authors,

Biggs gives a more positive and protective nuance. He offers a possibility that later life involves a more machiavellian use of masking phenomena than Featherstone and Hepworth's reading would suggest.

These different uses of a masking motif, inviting superficial agreement on the condition of impression management in later life, may give rise to significant differences in how identity problems might arise, their causes and relation to the ageing process. These differences extend to the salience of the body, the value given to masking phenomena and the nature of what is hidden. It is these distinctive interpretations that will be examined in greater detail below. Before addressing them in depth, however, it is necessary briefly to review wider social trends that might inform impression management and threats to identity that occur under conditions of high or post modernity.

### **Postmodernity and social identity**

Whilst there is continuing debate as to whether the identification of postmodernity is evidence of a break with previous conditions or a continuation of social forces in a new guise (Smart 1993), few writers have disputed the presence of fragmentation and uncertainty in contemporary social experience. Enthusiasts for these trends, who arguably include Featherstone (1991) and Bauman (1992), tend to emphasise the fluidity of identity choice that arises with postmodernity, whereas more cautious interpretations highlight threats to ontological security. For example, Giddens (1991) indicates that selfhood has become subject to increasing existential tension. This tension includes the absence of clear guidelines for conveying people through the lifecourse and increased flexibility required in the negotiation of lifestyle and self-presentation. The maintenance of identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour, sustaining a coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narrative. 'It is,' says the psychotherapist, Frosh, 'an environment in which human relationships are possible, but are always being undercut and destroyed. An environment in which personal integrity means something as a potentiality, but is always in danger of being fragmented by forces beyond our control' (Frosh 1989: 8).

The increased complexity of sustaining a coherent sense of identity under such conditions can be briefly illustrated by comparison with the work of an earlier generation of theorists exemplified by Goffman (1961, 1962). The Goffmanesque landscape of impression management

is essentially one in which different interchanges are entered into in order to sustain commonly understood complementary roles, thereby saving face and avoiding embarrassing *faux pas*. The morphology is relatively static; progress, buoyed up by such supportive interchanges, is predictable and linear. Whilst Goffman was occasionally critical of the hypocrisy and exclusivity of such an order (Williams 1987), he saw impression management as essential in sustaining a common sanity with regard to place. That is, it is a means of anchoring the subject by reference to a stable social environment (Travers 1995). Under conditions of post or high modernity, the impressions that one might choose to convey, the ground on which one might have to convey them and the meaning attributed to this image by others, are all more uncertain. Furthermore, a change of focus has occurred whereby questions of identity seem to have been forced back into a predominantly personal reflective process of multiple self-reference, rather than an external dialogue with stable social expectations of various sorts. Featherstone (1983, 1991) notes that an emphasis on lifestyle and consumer culture has led to:

a profusion of information and a proliferation of images which cannot be ultimately stabilised, or hierarchised into a system which correlates to fixed social divisions, ... (and) ... would further suggest the irrelevance of social divisions and ultimately the end of the social as a significant reference point (Featherstone 1991: 83).

An implication of this position would be that, given access to consumer culture, social actors can adopt any number of identities that may no longer be directly connected to their material life circumstances. This analysis indicates an escape from the notion of falseness of identity examined by Marcuse (1964), Lomas (1973) and Kellner (1983). Instead, any number of 'floating signifiers' can be used to build an identity, any one of which may be valid under certain conditions. Bauman (1995) has argued that these changes point up quite different questions around identity management:

If the modern 'problem of identity' was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open. In the case of identity, as in other cases, the catchword of modernity was 'creation'; the catchword of postmodernity is 'recycling' (Bauman, 1995: 81).

The debate on ageing and identity in later life also is being moved away from an examination of threats to the self occasioned by changes in age-status. In its place, ageing is increasingly seen to be a matter of lifestyle choice, including forms of masquerade that might be repeatedly recycled in order to ensure continued social inclusion. This new

statement of the problem would seem to question the continued relevance of signs of ageing in positioning older people in society, as signs may no longer signify anything greater than what social actors want them to. To search for genuineness in age-related identities might become a meaningless question, if each identity becomes as synthetic as its neighbour. It is, however, simultaneously difficult to choose not to become old, and it is in the light of this contradiction that a masking motif is often employed.

### **Consumerism, body and ‘the mask of ageing’**

In their article ‘Ageing and old age: reflections on the postmodern lifecourse’, Featherstone and Hepworth note that postmodern change has led to a ‘blurring of what appeared previously to be relatively clearly marked stages and the experiences and characteristic behaviour which were associated with those stages’ (1989: 144). These trends include a focus on the fluidity of social images and expectations with respect to an ageing identity. Key to these new possibilities would be the relationship between body and identity and, most notably, a rejection of deterministic narratives in favour of viewing the elder as a consumer of more youthful lifestyle choices. ‘Midlife-styles’ have been extended into later phases of ageing (Featherstone and Hepworth 1982; Conrad 1992) through, for example, the targeting of older consumers by advertising agencies (Sawchuk 1995) and the culture fostered by some retirement communities (Kastenbaum 1993). Even the body, which Butler (1987) suggested was an undeniable sign of age, permitting ageist attitudes, is malleable under postmodern conditions. Falk for example proposes that:

Natural in this context does not refer to human body as an anthropological constant preceding the social; it simply refers to human body as a material object (form and surface) to be intentionally elaborated... The body has a double role, as a visual gestalt, which is the raw material to be worked upon, and as the performer of the action. (Falk 1995: 95–96)

In later life, Featherstone and Wernick suggest that it is now possible to ‘recode the body itself’ as biomedical and information technology make available ‘the capacity to alter not just the meaning, but the very material infrastructure of the body. Bodies can be reshaped, remade, fused with machines, empowered through technological devices and extensions’ (1995: 3). The ageing body is thereby seen as slipping ‘under the guard of discourse’ itself, and presenting a challenge to language as the key to social control and to diversity. So, just as consumerism promises an escape from deterministic and age-related expectations of lifestyle and behaviour, so a focus on the body becomes

a key to understanding both images of ageing and identity management. On first reading, both factors seem to suggest an increase in the possibilities for identity choice in later life.

It is also here, however, that the project of maintaining multiple options for identity hits the buffers of ageing as a physical process. Having overwhelmed (at least theoretically) the forces of language, we meet the forces of bodily finitude, for whilst the postmodern 'self' is capable of infinite expression, the body needs to be progressively managed if this possibility is not to be lost. As age increases this contradiction, social actors discover discontinuity between the mask of ageing, as found in an increasingly unattractive and unresponsive body, and their inner selves. The bodily signs of ageing are characterised as 'a mask which cannot be removed: any connection they may have with the individual's personal sense of identity is the result of the ways other people react to changes in facial appearance and the social category they imply' (Featherstone and Hepworth 1990: 255).

Thus, the mask of ageing is presented as being the central problematic focus for an ageing identity. Hepworth positions this contradiction in terms of inner youthfulness and bodily age:

At the heart of the difficulty of explaining what it's like to be old lies the awareness of an experiential difference between the physical processes of ageing, as reflected in outward appearance, and the inner or subjective 'real self' which paradoxically remains young (1991: 93).

'With ageing', Turner (1995) comments, 'the outer body can be interpreted as a betrayal of the youthfulness of the inner body' (p. 257). The problem lies in the fact that the body is the symbol that external observers take to signify personal identity, and, as identity consists of an accretion of social discourses and attributions, the body as symbol negatively influences any sense of selfhood. Thus, 'The self is only a looking glass self and as such is only accessible to us through the eyes of others' (Hepworth 1991: 96). In order to re-establish multiple possibility, something has to be done about that thing that 'conceals the enduring and more youthful self' (Featherstone and Hepworth 1990: 257), in other words the ageing body. Extended midlife, cosmetic surgery and virtual reality become strategies for coping with, or perhaps denying, that growing contradiction.

The mask motif and the problem of ageing, then, is couched in terms of a tension between the ageing body and a youthful 'inner' self. The body, whilst it is malleable, can still provide access to a variety of consumer identities. However, as ageing gathers pace, it is increasingly

difficult to 're-cycle' the body and it becomes a cage which both entraps itself and denies access to that world of choice. An endgame emerges with older people being at war with themselves, an internalised battle between the psyche and the body. Ageing, as a mask, thus becomes a nightmare for the postmodern dream in which denaturalised and depsychologised identities undermine Cartesian distinctions between mind and body. Ageing reverses these libertarian possibilities in producing a contradiction between the fixedness of the body and the fluidity of social images.

### **The uses of persona**

Whereas the mask of ageing is seen as an increasingly fixed and oppressive cage, personae are essentially social phenomena, coping strategies to maintain identity, depending on different material, including bodily contexts. In analytic psychology, the convention of the persona (the mask, as worn in classical theatre) is used to describe accommodations to the social world. The social mask it describes is a means to acceptable self presentation in interpersonal contexts. It is not primarily physical, although a habitual wearing of a certain mask may shape the contours of the face and body. From this perspective the sum of Goffman's work could be thought of as an exploration of the persona. However, rather than being the sum of attributes through which a sense of otherness can be deduced, the persona is simply a device through which an active agent looks out at and negotiates with the world, to protect and to deceive.

To understand the nature of this concept it is necessary to view it as a development in Jungian thinking, of which analytic psychology is the psychotherapeutic practice. Biggs (1993) has noted that Jung was not overly concerned with the persona, perceiving it as a diversion from a true understanding of the individual self:

The persona is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough, a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual. (Jung 1967, 8: 303).

He also states that: 'Fundamentally, the persona is nothing real, it is a compromise between individual and society as to what man should appear to be' (Jung 1967, 7: 158).

Thus, whilst the persona acts as a bridge between the social and the personal, it has, until recently, remained conceptually underdeveloped. Jung's handling of persona questions seems somewhat flippant. He

caricatures professionals who become over-identified with their work-identity, 'the professor with his textbook, the tenor with his voice'. An underlying message does, however, retain contemporary relevance and has been taken up by Jungians, such as Andrew Samuels (1984, 1993). This message is that adopting a rigid persona is undertaken at significant cost to personal development, most notably through an inability to own aspects of the personality that might conflict with the social mask, and the projection of unacceptable parts of the self onto others.

Neo-Jungian development of the persona has expanded on two themes. First, the persona is now seen to hold positive qualities that facilitate social interaction. Freida Fordham notes, for example, that 'it simplifies our contacts by indicating what we may expect from other people and on the whole makes them pleasanter, as good clothes improve ugly bodies' (1956: 49). As Samuels *et al.* say, 'there is an inevitability and ubiquity to persona... involving all the compromises appropriate to living in a community' (1986: 107).

The persona is, then, a necessary part of social life: it oils the wheels, makes life more predictable, and protects the self and others from less acceptable or 'ugly' parts of people's personalities that might get in the way of day to day social exchanges. However, it is also possible to detect a hint of melancholy about this state of affairs. It is 'inevitable' that the true self cannot be fully expressed in a social world that is constantly demanding compromises if the smooth running of social expectation is not to be undermined. The social world is taken as a given, reflecting, one suspects, the internal focus of the psychotherapeutic enterprise. For whilst these authors, especially Samuels (1993), welcome the extension of analytic psychology to broader social concerns, little consideration is given to the social construction of social space, to why some characteristics of individuals are accepted and others not, except through the mechanism of the individual repression of inconvenient beliefs and attitudes.

A second development continues the theme of social accommodation as problematic. This train of thought expands upon Jung's original observation that the persona is essentially restrictive to genuine communication. Particular attention is paid to the over-identification of social actors with their personae, such that they mistake the mask for genuine personal identity.

The ego, when it is identified with the persona, is capable only of external orientation. It is blind to internal events and hence unable to respond to them... It follows that it is possible to remain unconscious of one's persona. (Samuels *et al.* 1986: 93).



So, if a social actor only performs through the employment of a particular social mask, and thus only receives feedback from others through that assumed identity, the mask can become fixed, welded to consciousness so completely that one becomes unaware of other potential avenues for self-expression and even that one is wearing a mask at all. Furthermore, as the psyche is a dynamic force, pressures from the inside do not go away, they simply leak out in unpredictable and, if projected onto others, unrecognised ways. Whilst the persona is activated in a restrictive manner here, it is important to note that the problem is not located in a struggle between body and self, but between self and other.

This analysis of the social mask emphasises the presentation of appropriate identities which simultaneously protect the self from external attack and exact the price of conformity, thus restricting the expression of potential for both self and other. Problems arise where a rigid over-identification with the mask renders it invisible to the wearer and where over-defined social expectations maintain mask-wearing to the exclusion of more creative personal expression. In terms of agency, social masking is determinedly internally driven; one is, theoretically speaking, looking out through the mask, which is at root self-constructed.

### **Social masking and lifecourse development**

A discussion of intergenerational mask-wearing leads on to the question of whether identification with the persona is more salient in different phases of the lifecourse, and if so, whether use and flexibility vary depending upon who, in generational terms, is interacting with whom.

Consideration of the role of social masks across the lifecourse is closely related to the question of identity. Erikson (1982) characterises this as being central to the successful resolution of conflicts during adolescence. Finding through repeated experiment a preferred identity, a fact that fits, is seen as the gateway to the adult world. Failure to do so leaves identity diffuse and unstable. The adolescent is seen as being able to adopt and cast off different social masks which protect an immature, tender and elusive self. This process results, according to Elkind (1974), from increased cognitive abilities that facilitate perception of alternatives to concrete realities. For the first time, the individual can distinguish, firstly between appearances and intentions and, secondly, between a multiplicity of choices that social interaction requires in terms of self-presentation. As a result, adolescence is marked

by moods and enthusiasms, embarrassment and narcissism, as various personae are worn, slip and are replaced.

It is also possible to find the signature of the persona scrawled across writings on midlife (Guttman 1988; Jacques 1965), a time that Jung himself has identified as a period of conflict between those tectonic plates of psychic geography, the first and second halves of adult life. The self is again presented with a choice of identities; however, rather than being driven by external pressure to find an appropriate role, as was the case in adolescence, the mid-lifer discovers internal dissatisfaction with an identity that fits all too well. In the struggle to achieve, to carve out a place in the social world, to conform to the dominant values of society and culture, which is, according to Jung, the rightful passage of the first half of life, a variety of potentials have been suppressed. However, as midlife gains momentum, the building of a conforming identity, at considerable effort and psychic investment, is increasingly seen as a cost:

Passion now changes her face and is called duty; I want becomes an inexorable I must, and the turnings of the pathway that once brought surprise and discovery become dulled by custom (Jung, 1967; 4: 331).

Reading Jung, it is possible to discern a series of responses to this dilemma, which come in and out of focus as the problem of identity is brought to a fresh resolution. Initially, identity in the first half of life is unquestioningly maintained as being 'eternally valid'. As dissatisfaction arises, the mid-lifer may cling to these existing certainties, attempting to perpetuate them in the face of disconfirmation from the psyche, bodily feedback and social expectations. Finally, alternative potential becomes expressed, a more complete self is allowed into consciousness and a new, more rounded, identity is found. The persona becomes an option, distanced from the core self and increasingly malleable. Jung uses the concept of individuation to explain the development of a more complete identity in the second half of life. As individuation occurs, parts of the self that have been suppressed in the first half become manifest in the second. It is now possible for people to 'devote serious attention to themselves' as psychologically distinct beings, and to divest themselves of the 'false wrappings' of social conformity. The process of individuation is thereby both a discovery of new possibilities and an expansion of a continuous self in new contexts. This would lead to the conclusion that as social actors mature, the use made of social masking varies, from a rigid signifier of adopted roles to either a more flexible use of the mask itself or the distanced use of multiple masking and in some cases the absence of masking altogether.

During adolescence, then, it would appear that there is considerable distance between the ego, 'the real me' as available to consciousness, and the masks adopted. Each mask is, however, inflexible, you either have it or you don't; in order to adapt, you cast off a mask and find another. The glue, so to speak, is weak whilst the alternatives are many. But once a snug mask is found, it becomes adult identity. Thus, during the first half of adult life, the glue gets stronger and stronger until this outer layer is indistinguishable from the self and one is in danger of becoming one's mask. At the same time the mask becomes more flexible with use, the tricks of social exchange more practised, the mask can be turned to many different situations, manipulated almost as if it were not a mask at all, just a plastic, and agreeably thicker, skin. Apprehension of the costs of mid-life, however, increases the mask as an irritant to the ego. It is less comfortable to wear and fails to cover adequately; the glue has become hard with age, but may be too painful to tear off. As Samuels (1985) points out, removal brings with it the fear that the ego, previously protected, will disintegrate. Thus, an initial period, during which the individual becomes aware of this tension, may be marked by increased adherence to the mask and projection of unwanted personal attributes onto others, a period that would be dangerous to persons exhibiting the characteristics that are presently being denied in the self (Biggs 1989). It is only through the build up of contradictions between the inner and outer worlds that distance is achieved and new identities adopted. Eventually, psychological energy previously held in check by social conformity is expressed, Jungians would argue, in a more fulfilling and holistic personality.

### **Social masking in later life**

It is proposed within analytic psychology that the persona restricts the process of individuation throughout the first half of life and is then effectively shed as individuation gathers pace. This underplays two elements of the masking process. First, as Brooke (1991) has pointed out, it is not simply that more parts of the self come available to consciousness as individuals mature, the awareness of personal identity also becomes more symbolic. In other words, the conscious ego is increasingly capable of reflexivity, and becomes aware of these differing aspects of the self and, by degrees, can influence their relative dominance at any one time. Secondly, an exclusive focus on individuation fails to recognise the protective role of the persona,

emphasising instead its inhibiting function. The social mask, in other words, not only restricts self-expression, it also protects parts of the self that are vulnerable to social forms of attack. Once it is recognised that later life is also a period in which significant social constraints are placed on self-expression, the importance of a continued role for social masking as protection becomes more clear. In effect, the psychodynamic of later life includes two contradictory processes. On the one hand, elders have the capacity to express a broader and more integrated sense of self in more flexible and symbolic ways, but on the other this holistic self must be protected from an inimical social environment.

Central to this understanding is the role of intergenerational disparities in power, reinforced by an increasingly unfavourable political economy and ageist social attitudes during the second half of life. A new use may, then, be found for the persona. Rather than remaining a fixed expression with which the subject over-identifies, it can become a self-conscious conceit covering the development of a revitalised inner life. The ironic conflict that Biggs (1993) notes between a withdrawal of psychological inhibition and an increase in negative social coercion experienced by second halfers, is negotiated through a simultaneously protective and deceptive use of social masking in intergenerational settings.

The observation of Woodward (1991) that masquerade in later life both involves concealment and pretence and expresses the ageing condition, emphasises the reflexivity of masking in this context. It is a thing that is played with, something which, whilst obscuring signs of ageing, is also drawing attention to the fact that a deceit is taking place. In other words, the mask is not the same as the person underneath. It 'tells a certain truth of its own'. Woodward also links masking and external attacks on the self: 'In a culture which so devalues age, masquerade with respect to the ageing body is first and foremost a denial of age, an effort to erase or efface age and to put on youth' (1991: 148).

This mask also reflects the 'cry of protest' at not feeling old, reported by Thompson *et al.* (1991). It protects against hostile and gerontised environments that cause pain and fear and is related to a 'call for the recognition of human individuality and resourcefulness at any age' (Thompson *et al.* 1991: 250).

Insight into the use of a social mask in situations where power is in the balance, also comes from an unexpected, yet revealing, source. Alistair McAlpine became a close adviser to Margaret Thatcher following a career in commerce and politics. Following her

downfall, he wrote a parody of Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1962) from the viewpoint of the adviser or, as he calls it, *The Servant*.

To carry out his role', McAlpine advises 'the Servant will need a myth – by which I mean the sum of a variety of personae which the Servant assumes. The myth is how the servant disguises himself whilst moving among his contemporaries, it is the façade behind which the Servant hides from those who would know him well (McAlpine 1992: 5).

It is important, however, not to confuse these personae for the real self. Their purpose in situations where power and identity are at stake is to allow the Servant freedom of manoeuvre by cloaking any real intentions:

The Servant deals in controlled confusion. He allows people to believe their own inventions about his life and background... The Servant does not deal with men as they are but as they think they are. He, on the other hand, has carefully and knowingly constructed a myth of himself. Because it is constructed with great care, the servant can distinguish between the truth and the myth (McAlpine 1992: 16–18).

McAlpine presents himself as an elder statesman, a practised player in the game of power. The circumstances described, however, show many of the characteristics available to second half of life psychology: being greater than the sum of parts others take one to be, an ability to symbolise and distance oneself from social convention, an awareness of the need for self-protection which is knowingly contrived. These qualities are based on long experience of social masking during preceding life phases. The implication is, perhaps, that we should not attempt to locate second-halfers through the convention of dependency, nor as youths trapped in ageing bodies, but as amateur machiavellis.

### Concluding comments

In the preceding analysis of the mask of ageing and postmodern positioning of identity management in later life, attention has been drawn to the primacy of the body in older age, the question of youth as a characteristic of what is hidden behind the bodily mask, and the question of access to a multiplicity of identities occasioned by consumerist lifestyles. Explorations based on the persona as social masquerade have evoked an alternative reading of identity management in which the body is not seen as central to questions of self-identity. Rather, primacy is given to a contradiction between an expanded personal consciousness and an increasingly restrictive social

environment. The social mask is seen as a reflexive tool which can be used to mediate this contradiction.

Is it, then, possible to choose not to age, if that means a rejection of stereotypes and the adoption of strategies that preserve an authentic and adaptive self-identity? The answers that the two notions of masking give to this question are distinctive and suggest different solutions to this rather precocious proposition. They are, however, a key to determining how ageing identities might be preserved within an environment of high or post modernity. At root the problem would seem to centre on three themes: the nature of what is being hidden by masking, the role of the social environment in which masking takes place, and the importance of the body as a focus for conflict in identity management.

First, what is hidden, and its positive or negative contribution to the maintenance of identity, is considered. The 'mask of ageing' hypothesis posits a youthful self trapped inside an ageing mask. The persona hypothesis suggests a matured inner identity wearing a mask that can evoke a more youthful façade. In other words, the positions of youth and age are reversed in the two approaches. The question of maintaining a continuous or changed identity would thus be answered quite differently depending on the position being adopted. For the 'mask of ageing', continuity would imply sustaining a youthfulness which stabilises at some point in adulthood. Thenceforth it would need to be maintained in a position of optimum identity choice. For the 'persona', youthfulness in the context of a maturing self becomes a diversion. Continuity would consist of an interplay between a sustained yet simultaneously ageing self and different existential choices arising throughout that process of ageing. At some point in the first model, identity becomes ahistorical, whilst in the second a balance is negotiated between personal history and current circumstances.

Secondly, there is disagreement as to the nature of the social environment and the potential it makes available. The ageing mask, it is argued, intrudes between the youthful self and a consumer culture that offers considerable flexibility of identity. Consumer culture is, on the whole, conceived of as a positive factor in the equation of later life. The persona model, by contrast, conceives the social world as a source of attack either through pressure to conform or as the site of actively hostile attitudes toward mature identity. Here, it is the masquerade that allows flexibility and freedom of manoeuvre. This difference reflects a divergence of emphasis on the nature of high or post modernity. Persona is conceived both as a symptom of modernity and a protection against the fragmentary forces at work in post modernity.

The social world is thus portrayed as threatening. This contrasts with consumer culture where it is the mask that is the threat and the social environment an Aladdin's cave for identity.

A third difference of theoretical and practical importance concerns the role of the body in later life. Analytic psychology pays little attention to bodily surfaces, focusing on the direct interaction of internal psychological processes and the social environment as the key to identity. Bodily change may trigger certain questions for identity, but largely as an intimation of ageing rather than encompassing the focal existential problem of ageing in itself. This is not the case with a postmodern position which tends to merge considerations of body and self and eschew dualism of this type. It is thus the psyche that is an undisputed motor for change in the former, whilst the situation for the latter is much more diffuse.

When this observation is added to the preceding discussion on the nature of the hidden and the value of the social, a number of interesting questions arise. Is, for example, late life an aberrant case for postmodernity in which a false and confusing split between body and identity requires interpolation? The answer to choosing not to age then becomes one of healing this unpalatable rift through bodily modification of various sorts or engaging in virtual realities whereby the body becomes irrelevant. This resolution of the contradiction between choice and bodily age rejects the competing existential task of accepting bodily limitations and insisting on a finite and core personal identity. This tension is, ironically, less of a conceptual problem for a psychodynamic approach, even though mind-body dualism is much more pronounced in such a model. This is because the underlying process of individuation, the acceptance as well as expression of personal potential and its limits, would eventually accept the ageing body as integral to self-experience, even though it begins from a position underplaying its importance.

These interpretations of the mask motif place mid-lifestylism and the nature of authenticity in later life at the centre of conceptual and pragmatic questions on the nature of age and identity. Adherence to a 'mask of ageing' interpretive framework has tended to co-exist with a fascination with extended midlife, largely because it promises a continued, and reflexive, engagement with consumer culture as a solution to the 'mask of ageing' problem. This viewpoint justifies mid-lifestyles as an adaptive response to the challenge of an ageing body. Repeatedly recycled, identity seems to float somewhere between the desire of the subject and the images of consumption. The consumer choices made would, hopefully, take into account the changing nature



of the body, but seem to leave the question of a core identity in flux. The position of the second theoretical stream is somewhat different. Here, one is reminded of Jung's (1967) observation that the individual who attempts to maintain the priorities of one life-phase into another is, in reality, suffering from an age-related neurotic illness. Mid-lifestylism would thus be seen as a problem rather than a solution to the challenge of later life because it constitutes a hanging on to an illusion and an avoidance of different existential questions that have to be asked in the second half of life. At best, it could be a façade, as embodied in the protective persona, but it should not be confused with an authentic response to the challenge of a long life. What emerges from the 'persona' hypothesis is that there is no palatable answer to the question of choosing not to age, except to come to terms with finitude and limitation. These questions are, however, culturally difficult to digest. One must either seek the company of like-minded people, usually age-peers, or ponder them from behind a protective façade. Anything else is simply a form of self-delusion resting on values derived from a different, and inappropriate, part of the lifecourse. Once this position is placed in the context of a generally hostile cultural climate which has itself to be negotiated, an answer to the problem of identity management in later life may not be found in shell suits and the cosmetics counter but in reading Machavelli's *The Prince*.

A final observation that can be made is that, whilst the mask motif has been developed conceptually, empirical investigation is considerably less advanced. The different conclusions of the two models identified in this paper have not been subject to direct empirical testing to date. Relationships between hidden parts of the self, disguise and desired impressions pose a challenge to methodologies that rely exclusively on the observation of behaviour or the immediate validation of subjective self-description. Masquerade lies somewhere in between the observable, the desirable and the authentic and might be lost in the coarse grain of traditional empirical approaches. Future research might usefully expand upon the investigation of layers of meaning as exemplified in the early work of researchers such as Laing and Esterson (1970) or Willener *et al.* (1976) who have used video self-observation to elicit a reflexive reporting of the strategies and meanings that viewers can perceive in their own behaviours. Considerable advances have also been made in the close reading of social interaction and the 'qualitative small scale research into life-worlds' as exemplified in the work of King and Chamberlayne (1993) and Bornat and Middleton (1993). A combination of self-observation and such qualitative methodologies might be expanded to deepen our understanding of masking



phenomena. The detail of how this might be done would, however, be the subject of another paper.

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