Representations of Work–Life Balance in Online Media in Japan: A Critical Investigation into Contemporary Discourse

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This paper is presented as part of the panel concerned with the exploration of the notion of work–life balance (WLB) in the context of Japan within the framework of anthropology. In recent years, the concept of WLB has been gaining currency both in public and private discourse in Japan. Partially, this has to do with a commitment of the ruling party: to “create a society where women shine by exercising their individuality and talents, each in accordance with her own desires, in the family, region, and workplace” (LDP 2014). The realization of this goal largely depends on the reconstruction of traditional gender roles, and WLB has a potential to play a crucial part in facilitating this process. Apart from state-level policies (such as the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office adoption of “Declaration on Action by a Group of Male Leaders Who Will Create a Society in Which Women Shine,” etc.) this goal is believed to have prompted several initiatives by prefectural administration, aimed at its achievement. For instance, the governors of Yamaguchi, Miyazaki, and Saga prefectures publicized an online video wherein they engaged in household chores while wearing pregnancy bellies, while Hokkaido has launched a campaign to promote corporate culture with child-care-sensitive managers at center. In these examples the distant goal of having a society where women “shine” is perceived as being achievable through men’s first-hand understanding of traditional women’s domains, such as bearing and rearing children; simultaneously it promotes a gentler image of men, distinct from the long-standing image of hardworking males physically absent from their familial homes; as such, these campaigns importantly highlight that WLB is an issue for both genders. The aforementioned initiatives are undoubtedly a step to reconstructing gender roles; however, many findings from earlier (Roberts 1994) to the most recent (Aronsson 2015) anthropological works show that when it comes to real life, household chores and childcare still fall largely on women. At the same time, Nakatani argues that while policies “to encourage men’s sharing of domestic responsibilities” have begun to see light, the general economic “climate is far from favorable for such governmental initiatives” (2006: 104–105).

In this study, methodologically rooted in critical discourse analysis (CDA), cyberethnography, and narrative inquiry, I explore online commercials and short films (hereinafter “texts”), both product and non-product oriented, to address the representations of men’s and women’s gendered identities where these representations serve to produce or reproduce the WLB discourse. The texts were determined through a search using preset keywords, such as working fathers/mothers, men/women at work, or WLB. While some texts have been broadcast on TV, I am particularly interested in the versions available online, as this allows not only the texts themselves to be incorporated into the discussion, but also the accompanying commentary by the viewers (such as can be found on video-sharing websites). Further, contributing to the multidimensional approach adopted in this study, the results include the outcomes of offline group discussions facilitated by the author and focusing on the very same texts. To extract from these texts and critically address the discourse(s) pertaining to WLB, I mainly draw on CDA, since it aims at “deconstructing ideologies and power through systematic and reductable investigation of semiotic data” (Wodak and Meyer 2016) and is effective in, among others, “giving voices to the voiceless” and “exposing power abuse” (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 449). The fact that the studied texts are often product-oriented online videos yields them power due to the persuasive techniques adopted in advertising, thus multiplying the effects of the discourse(s) they convey. Through preliminary analysis, it has become clear that a dominating WLB discourse enacted through these texts is one where harmony is presented as reached not through men’s equal participation in the family domain and increased leisure, hence work–life balance, for women, but through a series of often unexpected “heroic deeds” by men that lead to much-needed moments of catharsis but fail to bring forward the reconstitution of gender roles that could ultimately make a more balanced WLB for both genders possible.

References:

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