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WOMEN LEADERS AND GENDER STEREOTYPING IN THE UK PRESS

A Poststructuralist Approach

Judith Baxter

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"Responding to an increasing concern and need for a deeper and nuanced understanding of gendered leadership issues, this timely and welcome book offers an unprecedented critical scrutiny of various types of stereotypes and biased assumptions underlying the gendered representation of women leaders across a purposefully selected range of UK press. Through an integrated framework of incisive multi-level theoretical approaches, Baxter goes beyond the mere identification and description of gender stereotypes to engage in widening and deepening the scope of the investigation with insightful deconstructions and reconstructions of compelling up-to-date news media examples."

—Cornelia Ilie, *Malmo University, Sweden*

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Judith Baxter
Birmingham, UK

To Brian for all your inspiration and support

PREFACE

Despite their resounding achievements in so many professional spheres, women leaders face gender discrimination on a daily basis through the ways in which they are represented or 'discursively constructed' in British national newspapers. At times, women are demonised through explicit gender stereotyping, and at other times, the discrimination is barely noticeable, but implied through subtle innuendo, humour, hinted assumptions and even patronising forms of praise. In many cases, the use of gender stereotyping sends out the message to readers that women are unsuitable for leadership.

    This book has four aims. The first is to explore the extent to which constructions of women leaders from different professions are (or are not) gendered in articles from three national UK newspapers, printed and online, that cross the political spectrum—*The Sunday Times, The Guardian* and *The Daily Mail*. As part of this aim, I consider whether or not women leaders are generally deemed to be suitable for leadership. As these newspapers are ones to which I have regular access, they do not represent the readership and politics of *all* British newspapers, but they do offer a range in terms of their political orientation, readership, editorial policies and semiotic format (The Paperboy 2017). The second aim is to analyse constructions of women leaders in articles across the feminist agenda spectrum, that is, according to their implied orientation towards the feminist movement. For example, there are articles that are hostile to women and/or anti-feminist, those that are apparently gender-neutral and those that are female friendly and/or pro-feminist.

The purpose behind this analysis is to argue that certain types of text openly demonise women leaders, whereas others *conceal* or *repackage* gendered assumptions in either gender-neutral or modernist feminist ways. The third aim of this book is to explore the use of three distinct critical perspectives in order to analyse and evaluate their respective, discrete and overlapping contributions to analysing potentially gendered newspaper texts. The final aim is to consider the future potential of the third critical perspective that offers a postsructuralist, 'reflexive' approach to analysing newspaper texts. The approach builds on principles of feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA), which were originally designed to analyse spoken interactions (Baxter 2003). The reflexive approach combines familiar deconstructionist strategies (e.g. Barthes 1973; Derrida 1967) that encourage readers to read a text 'against the grain', with supplementary 'reconstructive' strategies that help readers to reassemble the text to produce more positive and diverse insights. Overall, the book will develop a clear, step-by-step methodology for discourse analysts to explore how and why newspapers portray women leaders in the ways they do, and to enable students of leadership, language and gender, and media studies to re-read such articles with more agency and empowerment.

University of Aston   Judith Baxter
Birmingham, UK

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The Gendering of Women Leaders in UK Newspapers

Abstract This chapter sets out the central argument of the book: that newspapers often construct senior women in essentialist, reductive and/ or sexualised ways despite women's increasing success in education and many careers. These media representations are potentially damaging to aspiring women as they send out messages that they are not suitable for leadership in a male world. Even newspapers with a feminist orientation may revert to a modernist, essentialist view of representing women leaders that does not always help their cause. Readers can play a significant part in deconstructing these representations so that possible 'damage' is mitigated. I introduce the three critical perspectives of the book: the framework of women leader stereotypes; the feminist agenda spectrum; and the poststructuralist, 'reflexive' perspective.

Keywords Gendered discourses · Stereotyping · Women leaders Leadership · Feminist poststructuralism

INTRODUCTION

Gina Miller was the businesswoman who forced the UK government to seek a vote from the Houses of Parliament before invoking 'Article 50' to take the country out of the European Union ('Brexit'). After the extraordinary win of this British citizen against the might of government, Miller endured much censure in national newspapers and elsewhere. She said of this:

> Everything about you is criticised, and it's simply not the same for men. That's why we have such a huge problem with [the representation of] women in the media. Why would you put yourself up in that situation to be targeted so ruthlessly?

(Gina Miller quoted in *The Guardian*, Addley 2017)

Despite significant career progress by women leaders in the professions, many British national newspapers continue to construct senior women in gendered, stereotyped and/or essentialised ways. These media representations are potentially damaging to both aspiring and established women leaders because they send out messages that women are unsuitable for leadership in a predominantly male professional world. Furthermore, such representations may actually deter women from leading or participating in public actions, political campaigns or risky enterprises that attract media attention. Newspaper constructions of prominent women vary from being overtly critical, contemptuous or abusive, to conveying their messages in more subtle, oblique and hidden ways. Because women remain in a tiny minority in senior positions, they stand out as different, and this difference attracts news media attention, often negative. This was the experience of Gina Miller (quoted above). Not only did she suffer gendered and racial abuse in articles by the news media, but also the effect was magnified by public feedback published on social media (Addley 2017; J. Sunderland 2017; Tolhurst 2017). However, the research in this book shows that, more commonly, the press' awareness of the equal treatment of women, enshrined in British law (HMSO 2010), encourages blatant or residual, gendered assumptions about women to be suppressed. The purpose of this book is to enable scholars of gender, language and leadership to bring such assumptions to the surface through various forms of discourse analysis, so that they can aid the feminist quest to give space to women leaders' voices where they have been silenced.

This book examines how the British national press construct and represent women leaders and other prominent women in three professional spheres: politics, business, and the entertainment media. I explore the extent to which constructions of women leaders are gendered, stereotyped and at times, sexualised in three newspapers that cross the political spectrum and with different readerships: *The Daily Mail, The Sunday Times* and *The Guardian*. I bring gendered assumptions to the surface within all three newspapers where these are suppressed, disguised or

silenced. Some readers may query my inclusion of the third newspaper, *The Guardian,* which generally adopts a liberal feminist stance (News UK 2017) and can be rarely accused of denigrating women. This inclusion is not because I wish to make a critical comparison between those papers that tend to undermine women leaders and those that support and celebrate them. Rather, I argue that *The Guardian* can offer reductive constructions of women leaders according to a liberal feminist stance that does not always help women leaders' cause. This stance is predicated on 'essentialist' assumptions about gender that include: binary gendered categories, a universal female nature, and conceptualizing the status of women as victims within patriarchal discourse when the picture is often far more complex. Essentialised assumptions about the social categories of women and men often lead to gender stereotyping of their assumed characteristics (Coates 2004), which in turn may encourage readers to mock or demonise the news subject.

This book adopts the *feminist poststructuralist* position that newspaper articles do not consistently construct women in negative or restricted ways, but rather, they offer spaces for multiple and contested meanings (Davies and Harré 1990; Walkerdine 2002; Weedon 1997). So, even articles that explicitly vilify women leaders provide gaps, ambiguities and contradictions in the text to offer scholars space to make alternative readings. I propose three separate, critical perspectives that will enable scholars to bring buried assumptions to the surface, and thus, to read gendered texts 'against the grain'. Each critical perspective provides methods to 'deconstruct' the surface text and produce multifaceted, more empowering constructions of women's plural identities (Derrida 1967). The tri-perspectival approach supports the feminist poststructuralist position that multiple, contrasting 'windows' on a text can provide a richer range of textual meanings and insights (Baxter 2003). They provide a kaleidoscope of diverging ways of viewing, reading, analysing and critiquing newspaper texts that simultaneously supplement yet contest each other (Cooper 1989). All three perspectives should help feminist scholars to progress from the standard approach of critiquing newspaper articles as 'sexist' to delivering multiple, positively charged readings of texts. The proposed approach should not only offer the reader more agency as they deconstruct and reconstruct such articles, but also provide fresh insights about the women leader subjects themselves.

In this chapter, I present the theoretical and conceptual framework of the book, and its key aims. I also discuss my strategic use of the term

'women', why I consider it justified as a provisional, strategic measure, and introduce my argument that challenging binary categories is a significant requirement of feminist deconstructive readings.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, I first discuss the core concepts of importance to this book: namely, women's leadership, gender, gendered discourses and the relationship between these concepts. I move on to discuss how the news media in general, and newspapers in particular utilise these concepts to construct and represent women leaders, and how these constructions work to shape our perceptions of women leaders. Throughout the book, I refer to the ways women leaders are presented in newspaper articles as 'constructions'. This is because these are active, textual formations that convince the reader to accept a given version of reality. Alternatively, I use the term 'representation(s)' more specifically to mean 'characterised according to a given stereotype' (see Chaps. 2 and 4). Finally, I introduce three critical perspectives that will be used to compare how the three UK newspapers vary in their constructions of women in senior positions (henceforth, 'senior women'). The first is Kanter's leadership stereotypes model; the second is what I term the 'feminist agenda spectrum'; and the third is a new 'reflexive' approach adapted from the principles of Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA). These three perspectives are explained more fully in the following chapters.

Women and Leadership (B)

We are living in unprecedented times when more women have been appointed in positions of senior leadership in politics, business the mass media and many other professions around the globe. Yet women leaders still remain in an overall small minority. Politically, a number of women have become heads of state and heads of government. At the beginning of 2017, elected heads of government included Angela Merkel (Germany), Theresa May (UK), Sheikh Hasina (Bangladesh), Erna Solberg (Norway), Saara Kuugongelwa (Namibia) and Beata Szydlo (Poland). Many more women are heads of state or governor generals around the world. Hilary Clinton narrowly missed becoming the first female President of the USA in 2016, even though she received more individual votes. Regardless, there are still only ten heads of state

out of 198 (UN Women 2017). This pattern is also reflected in other professions such as business and the media. In Britain, the percentage of women on FTSE 100 boards has steadily increased to 26, and to 20.4% on FTSE 250 boards (Sealy et al. 2016). In the USA, women hold 19.9% of Board seats and 25.1% of senior executive roles (Catalyst 2016). In British journalism, the number of women present in the work-force is now 45%, and 65% of new entrants to the profession are women. However, at the 2016 British Press Awards, which is an index of how many women are recognised as top journalists, just 20 women were included in a shortlist of 114 journalists (Jackson 2016).

In recent years, there has been a surge of research across many aca-demic fields examining women's increasing inclusion in the ranks of pow-erholders, yet also investigating the reasons why they continue to face barriers to achieving these senior positions (e.g. Adams 2016; Brescoll 2016; Eagly and Heilmann 2016; Hoyt and Murphy 2016). Most of this research is about women leaders in real work contexts, rather than about how women leaders are constructed and represented in the media. However, this research does provide reasons for the lack of senior women across the professions, which help to explain the kinds of media construc-tions and representations that this book explores. According to Eagly and Heilman (2016), who reviewed 74 articles on gender and leadership, there are multiple reasons postulated about why women do not ascend to leadership roles at the same rate as men. The authors see that the *main* obstacle is gender discrimination and prejudice. In business circles, this is sometimes termed 'unconscious bias': the way we make incred-ibly quick decisions about people on the basis of their gender, race or class based on our own experience and backgrounds (Equality Challenge Unit 2017). Eagly and Heilman (2016) argue that this discrimination flows from the definition of leadership primarily in culturally masculine terms that disfavour women. This leads to various forms of stereotyp-ing in workplaces and the media, both of which construct male lead-ers and masculine professional practices as the androcentric norm with female leaders as the exception. Expectations of gender stereotypes not only affect who people see as 'fitting' the preconceived notion of a leader, but they also affect women leaders in their daily working lives. Hoyt and Murphy (2016: 387) propose that senior women often find themselves in a double bind: highly 'communal' women are criticised for being weak, deficient leaders and highly 'agentic' women experience backlash for not being feminine enough. This leads, the authors say, to