Gender Stereotypes and Assumptions: Popular Culture Constructions of Women Leaders

Professor Sharon Mavin

Conference Stream: Gendered Issue in HRD

Full Refereed Paper

Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University, UK

Sharon.mavin@northumbria.ac.uk

10th International Conference

HRD Development Research and Practice Across Europe,

HRD: Complexity and Imperfection in Practice

Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University, UK 10-12th June 2009

Key Words: Women, Leadership, Gendered Stereotypes, Assumptions, Media Constructions

Introduction

In order to develop themselves and prepare for a senior leader role, women need awareness that their ‘performance’ as ‘leaders’ is often perceived and presented differently to that of men. Such perceptions are based on gender or sex-role stereotypes of what is [in]appropriate behaviour for men and women leaders. Indeed “...a woman leader is not viewed as androgynous or undifferentiated from her male counterparts. She is viewed as a woman who is a leader,” (Adler, 1999: 259). Leader development programmes and management education have a responsibility to engage in consciousness-raising with men and women in order to challenge established gender stereotypes and social order. ‘Senior leader’ is understood here as an individual in a role at, or near the top, of an organisation, who holds power and authority, significant decision-making power and resources, develops strategy and vision for the future, sets and achieves objectives and who holds responsibility and accountability for ‘leading’ others.

The paper draws upon social role theory (Eagly, 1987: Eagly et al, 2000) and Eagly and Carli’s (2007, 2008) agentic and communal leadership framework, to outline gendered assumptions which underpin gender leader stereotypes. Through a gender analysis of popular culture, the paper highlights everyday media constructions of women leaders, which perpetuate and reaffirm traditional leader gender stereotypes; which explicitly ‘message’ the leader role as a non-role for women, and/or, which question women’s suitability for a leader role.
An aim is to explore the strength (endurance, sustainability) of traditional gender stereotypes in popular media constructing women as leaders. To date there has been a lack of organisational analysis drawing upon cultural studies and it is acknowledged that this is a recent area of inquiry (Rhodes and Parker, 2008). However, an aim of the paper is to investigate that which lies in the nexus between popular culture and organisational life (Rhodes and Parker, 2008) to enable further understandings of how gender stereotypes actively construct stereotypes and perceptions of leaders. The paper therefore applies a gender analysis to examine popular media, recognising that discussion and dramatisation of working relations is ubiquitous in forms of mass-mediated popular culture, whether it be television, radio, popular music, the cinema or the printed media (Rhodes and Parker, 2008:629).

A further aim of the paper is to inform leader development and management education by identifying examples of gendered constructions of women leaders within popular culture which can in turn be engaged within learning and development activities e.g. following Mavin and Bryans (2002:247) where analysis of an episode of Ally McBeal raised awareness of gender themes in a Business School setting. Examples in the following paper can facilitate discussions which raise men and women’s awareness of the gendered constructions of leaders; can refocus leader constructions in leader development and enable Business Schools to take a gender-aware approach to leadership education (Mavin, Bryans and Waring, 2004).

Social Role Theory, Femininity(ies) and Masculinity(ies)

Powell, Butterfield and Bartol (2008:157) provide a theoretical basis to explain how men and women are perceived differently as leaders. Social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al, 2000) suggests that individuals form expectations for the social roles of others based on gender roles, or consensual beliefs about the traits that are characteristic of, and appropriate for, women and men. Gender roles are both descriptive, consisting of beliefs about the psychological traits that are characteristic of each sex, named as ‘gender stereotypes’ (Deaux and Kite, 1993), and are prescriptive, consisting of beliefs about the psychological traits that are appropriate for each sex (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Powell et al. (2008:157) argue that according to traditional gender roles, males are especially high in ‘masculine’ traits that are task-oriented or agentic, whereas females are especially high in ‘feminine’ traits that are interpersonally oriented or communal (Bem, 1974; Deaux and Kite, 1993; Eagly et al, 2000). Translating this into an organisational leader situation, people form perceptions and expectations about how the leader role should be performed. The leader role is perceived as those behaviours and traits most closely associated with men, thus leaving women perceived as less adequate for leader roles. Socially constructed gendered roles and gender-role schemas (Efthim, Kenny and Mahalik, 2001) are now generally accepted as identity resources that people draw upon in everyday lives.
Due Billing and Alvesson (2000) question notions of masculinity and femininity, recognizing these categories are gendered, grounded within culture and not by biological necessity – they are not one’s sex. Masculinity and femininity are not fixed but constantly changing; culturally and historically dependent on the meanings we ascribe to them. They are forms of subjectivities (orientations in thinking, feeling and valuing), that recognize that “men as well as women are capable of acting in what may be labelled masculine and feminine ways, based on instrumentality as well as feelings, dependent on the situation” (Due Billing and Alvesson, 2000:152). Positioning masculine and feminine as polar opposites traps men and women in gendered sex-role stereotypes and perpetuates the same. However, research exploring the experiences of women in senior leader roles, highlights how some women are comfortable with their ‘natural’ masculinities and how others adapt within a ‘masculine’ context and so can adopt masculinities (Maddock, 1999; Maier, 1999; Mavin, 2008; Wacjman, 1998). Women comfortable with masculinities can be seen to jolt or challenge, norm assumptions. There is evidence that the cultural association of power and authority with masculinity makes it difficult for women to hold positions of power because of the contradiction between their gender identity and the masculinity of power (Charles and Davies, 2000:545).

Hilton and von Hippel (1996) addressed the stability and malleability of stereotypes, which ‘represent’ the descriptive component of social roles, arguing that stereotypes tend to be stable over time and it is easier to maintain a stereotype of a group than to change it. Rothbart (1981) argues however, that stereotypes can also be dynamic, adapting on new information about changing characteristics of group members over time. Eagly and Diekman (2003) extend social role theory and argue that the role behaviour of men and women shape the stereotype assigned to them e.g. perceptions and beliefs about the behaviours and traits possessed by men and women may change in response to perceived change in behaviour elicited by their life circumstances (Powell et al., 2008:158). Powell et al., (2008) argue that as women and men are preparing for leader roles in more similar numbers, and as women have reached greater representation in middle management roles, then stereotypes assigned to them have become less differentiated. In this sense leader stereotypes may ‘stretch’ beyond traditional boundaries but are they less differentiated? This paper presents an analysis of examples of popular media representations of women in leader roles with the aims of highlighting ‘movement’ in traditional gender stereotypes to a less differentiated form.

Gendered Leadership

The leader role is not a neutral process or concept, but is marked by gender-bias (Schnurr, 2008). Management and leadership has traditionally implied maleness, with the model of manager and leader as male, carrying with it qualities that women are assumed to lack (Hearn, 1994).
Leadership is associated with masculinity (Hearn and Parkin, 1988) and as Schnurr (2008:301) argues, “women in leadership positions often face particular challenges in their performance of leadership; since leadership is an inherently masculine concept (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Sinclair 1998)”. “There is extensive research examining men and women’s management and leadership abilities, demonstrating how women are judged less competent and less appropriate for leadership positions than men, (Schein; 1973; Ferrario, 1991; Eagly and Karau, 2002),” (Powell, Butterfield and Bartol, 2008:156). Indeed, women face greater barriers to entering leader roles than men (Powell et al., 2008). “In recognising women leaders as women, we know that they become more visible and enjoy a broader scope to their visibility than do their male counterparts” (Adler, 1999: 259) and women who succeed in these roles find their competence and performance devalued (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Schnurr (2008) argues that women’s performance as leaders is often viewed as something ‘other’ than leadership. To further explore women as the ‘Other’ leader we should make explicit the gendered assumptions and mental associations which underpin perceptions of men and women leaders; assumptions which guide our responses, behaviours and our interpersonal relations in everyday lives.

A Framework of Gendered Leadership Associations

Drawing upon Eagly and Carli’s (2007:7) framework of gendered communal and agentic associations about men and women leaders highlights how leaders can be perceived differently in organisations. Agentic qualities and behaviours are associated with effective leadership, while communal qualities and behaviours are associated with non-leadership. Agentic behaviour is sex-role stereotyped to men and communal behaviour sex-role stereotyped to women. Within their framework Eagly and Carli (2007) argue that women are associated with communal qualities which convey a concern for the compassionate treatment of others; being especially affectionate, helpful, friendly, kind and sympathetic interpersonally sensitive, gentle and soft spoken. Men are associated with agentic qualities conveying assertion and control; being especially aggressive, ambitious, dominant self-confident and forceful, self-reliant and individualistic. These associations about agency and communion form the basis of gender stereotypes (Eagly and Carli, 2008:86) which we used as the basis of perceptions of men and women leaders. While Duehr and Bono (2006) and Sczesny, Bosak, Neff and Schyns (2004) argue that a shift in stereotypes is taking place, becoming less differentiated and less clearly associated with men (Powell et al., 2008), Eagly and Carli’s position is that mental associations about leaders do not cancel out associations about men and women; gender spills over into job role expectations; gender stereotypes come to mind automatically, triggered by mere classification of a person as female or male.
Communal feminine behaviours or non-leadership behaviours, sex-stereotyped to women are not yet valued or seemingly expected in senior leader positions, despite the “so called female leadership advantage” (Schnurr, 2008:301) where new ways of leading are perceived to be more akin to women’s ways of leading e.g. relational, emotional intelligence connections. The enduring strength of gender stereotypes and culturally masculine qualities associated with men in leadership, is shown through Business School students continuing to identify numerous (senior) leader behaviours as masculine, e.g. delegating, disciplining, strategic decision making, problem solving, while recognising and rewarding, communicating, informing and supporting (accepted as middle management strengths) are identified feminine (Eagly and Carli, 2008:90). Agentic masculine leader behaviours are still the expected norm at the top of hierarchies.

For a woman to navigate to a senior leader role she needs to demonstrate credible leadership behaviours. That these credible (accepted) leader behaviours are agentic and associated with masculinity and men, poses a number of dilemmas. Communal behaviour will not gain women entry to power and if a woman displays agentic masculine leader behaviours she no longer ‘fits’ the prevailing gender stereotype of woman. Women are expected to conform to feminine, communal behaviours and non-leadership. When they do not, we may experience a jolt of assumptions. Women who demonstrate agentic masculine behaviour do not conform to expectations of a woman; they do not conform to communal feminine stereotypes and will not meet the expectations of other men or women. For women leaders a key dilemma is whether they should be feminine or ‘business like’; babes or bitches.

It is no surprise that people are more resistant to women’s leadership influence and suspect, because successful powerful women do not fit established stereotypes, they are ‘not likeable’ or ‘nice’. To succeed as leaders, women need to demonstrate masculinity and suppress femininity. To be accepted and ‘liked’ by others they need to conform to the established communal, feminine stereotype and stay out of powerful positions.

What happens when women leaders fail to match up to feminine, communal, non-leadership stereotypes? The jolt of assumptions resulting from women’s senior position and agentic behaviours manifests in peoples’ negative perceptions of, and behaviours towards, them (see figure1). When women leaders display authoritative leadership stereotypically associated with masculinity, they tend to be associated with negative attributes such as bitter, quarrelsome and selfish (Schnurr, 2008:301). Senior ‘agentic’ women are perceived as ‘more male than the men,’ the ‘only bra in the room,’ battle-axes, bitches and are highly visible and scrutinised. The use of such gendered labels describing woman’s behaviour is often constructed as a means of re-categorising a woman who challenges the established gender order; rejecting women leaders as a norm and reinforcing them as ‘abnormal,’ while associations between men and leadership remain a societal norm and status quo gender stereotypes prevail.
Becoming conscious of everyday jolts of assumptions and explicitly challenging and confronting gender leader stereotypes should be central to leadership development programmes and management education. One way of achieving this is to challenge and make visible how gendered stereotypes and perceptions of women leaders are represented in popular culture; in ways that communicate and reaffirm the message that women are unsuitable for leader positions.
Research Approach: Analysis of Popular Culture

Debates concerning organisations and popular culture began to be taken seriously by Hassard and Holliday (1998), Parker (1998; 2002) and Rhodes (2001; 2004). While such analyses and relationships with organisation remains an under developed area of inquiry, Rhodes and Parker (2008:632) argue “there is a specific need to examine forms of popular culture which are explicitly concerned with work – that is those which contain within them images of organisations and organizing themselves... What we find in these representations is a likeness of organisations suffused with a creative rendition of their location in culture - much of this culture is focused on satirising or condemning the office, the boss, the factory and so on”.

Rehn (2008) notes that while most people accept that leadership takes place in the everyday world, there remains reluctance to treat it as a cultural expression and argues, that far more people get their knowledge about business and management from popular culture than do so by reading business literature; “popular culture is infinitely more powerful as a conduit for business-related messages and as an arena for the dissemination of business knowledge than ‘the serious channels’” (Rehn, 2008:773).

An aim of this paper is to examine women’s representation within popular media by focusing on textual analysis of specific examples from newspapers, film and television. If we accept representation as an ‘ordering mode’ that can reveal to us the complexities of our social world (Ellis, 2008), then a critique of this nature within popular culture may offer understandings of how media communicates and messages the ‘rightful place’ of women in organisations; how the media portrays femininity and masculinity and perpetuates gender stereotypes.

How popular media represents women leaders is a powerful construction of what is acceptable and unacceptable in society. Rather than discounting the need to challenge media and popular culture as ‘lowbrow’ (Rehn, 2008), research has an opportunity to recognise the power of, and to critique and analyse discourses perpetuated by popular media. The gendered expectations of men and women’s leader behaviours can be scrutinised in popular media messaging. After Hancock (2008) and Ellis (2008), this paper offers a critical reading of examples of popular media (films, television and written media) by sifting through texts in relation to their portrayal of women perceived to display agentic behaviours, and the construction of woman as leader in particular.

By paying close attention to particular characters’ portrayals, important representations of social order emerge (Ellis, 2008:710). Illustrative examples of gendered media constructions of women are included from Friends, ER and the film The Devil Wears Prada, as popular media in respect of their portrayal of organisational and leader relations and practices (Hancock, 2008).
Following Ellis (2008) and Schroeder and Zwick (2004:22), fictional representations are important since they do not just express notions of phenomena like ‘leader’ rather they help to form perceptions of, and help construct, leaders. The approach also included textual analysis of newspaper articles constructing Hillary Clinton and UK women political leaders. Each example was chosen for its relative popularity, mass circulation and the extent to which it illustrates themes concerning ‘powerful’ leaders (Hancock, 2008). Analysis of popular media is a credible approach to exploring gender stereotypes of women leaders, because, as Taussig, (1993:47) argues, “when we consider social science representations of ‘real’ work alongside fictional representations, we find the creative possibility to connect with culture as a means of understanding actual and possible organisations” and, as Czarniawska and Rhodes, (2006) argue, popular culture re-presents and shapes the actual behaviour of people, not least in workplaces.”

Gendered Media Constructions of Women Leaders

Hancock (2008:689) argues that it may appear to be verging on the perverse to consider the TV sitcom, comedy or drama series as genre ripe for organisational analysis, however, since its inception the TV sitcom has sought mass appeal, frequently drawing on a host of social stereotypes in order not only to provoke mirth but to function as a panacea for everyday drudgery. Commentary follows on the TV sitcom-comedy series *Friends* and sitcom-drama *ER* in relation to how gender stereotypes are reaffirmed and perpetuated through popular media.

**Friends: Monica a famously ‘competitive’ woman**

While ‘competitive’ remains a positively agentic description for men, there is less societal comfort with women who display ‘competitive’ behaviours. Competitive women challenge the gender stereotype of agentic leader behaviour and jolt assumptions of how women are ‘expected’ to behave. This message is reinforced in the popular media where competitive women are almost always portrayed as *mean* at worst or a little *crazy* at best (Barash, 2006). One example is a famous ‘competitive’ woman in popular media, Monica from the TV comedy series *Friends*. 

![Friends](https://via.placeholder.com/150)
Friends is an American situation comedy created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman, which premiered on NBC, September 22, 1994. The series revolves around a group of friends in Manhattan, New York City, who occasionally live together, sharing living expenses. After ten seasons, the series finale was heavily promoted by NBC, and viewing parties were organized around the U.S. The finale, first aired on May 6, 2004, was watched by 52.5 million American viewers, making it the fourth most-watched series finale in television history (Wikipedia, 2009).

Friends received positive reviews throughout its run, and became one of the most popular sitcoms of its time. The series won many awards and was nominated for 63 Emmy Awards, consistently ranking in the top ten in the final primetime ratings.

Friends has made a large cultural impact. The Central Perk coffee house that featured prominently has inspired various imitations worldwide. Repeats of the series continue to air worldwide, and all seasons have been released on DVD. Following the finale, the spin-off series Joey was created, while rumors of a feature film continue to circulate (Wikipedia, 2009).

Rhodes and Westwood (2008) and Hancock (2008) argue that the sitcom-comedy-drama provides a space for the exploration of the politics and difference within the workplace. Analysing Monica as a competitive woman; her competitiveness is constructed as ‘completely personal’, linked to her compulsiveness, a little nuts (Barash, 2006) and OCD. When Monica achieves her ambition of head chef in her own kitchen, she is constructed and portrayed as such an ‘ineffectual leader and manager’ of her team that she has to ‘bring in’ her friend Joey and pretend to sack him in order to ‘scare’ her team into accepting her authority (Barash, 2006). While Chandler, Joey and Ross, (men characters) go for interviews and promotions, Monica, the competitive friend, returns to the apartment and continued to struggle for work, eventually focusing on marriage to Chandler, infertility treatments and adopting a baby. Monica’s competitiveness never achieves in career terms and she focuses on family. Here, like Czarniawska and Gustavsson’s (2008:668) argument when analysing Stepford Wives The Book, popular media lets us know that men will not lightly accept women’s liberation – especially their liberation from family and household duties, including sexual services.
Despite *ER* containing numerous strong women characters and considering issues of disability and sexuality, the constructions of senior women in leader positions remains ‘messy’. For example (see figure 3.), Dr. Kerry Weaver, reaches the position of Chief of Staff but is constructed and portrayed as the prototypical ‘bitchy’ female boss who everyone fears and dislikes – the Queen Bee (Abramson, 1975; Staines, Travis and Jayerante, 1973). And while having excellent relationships with colleagues in the E.R. and being committed to her career, when Dr. Susan Lewis is promoted, she is constructed as continually struggling to establish authority over her ‘friends’ in her *ER* department (Barash, 2006). The messy message conveyed through these women characters, who are very different in leader behaviour and approach, is that women in senior leader positions struggle between being ‘nice’ (communal) and therefore ineffectual, or being ‘strident’ (agentic) and therefore disliked. Either way, neither of these women characters sustained their senior leader roles in the *ER*.

Hancock (2008:701) argues that as artefacts, sitcoms, (comedy and drama series) point us to the character of the time and place within which they were conceived and performed, reflecting the fact that any cultural product is for good or ill, deeply indebted to the place in history within which it was formed. As such it provides an insight not only into enduring hopes and aspirations, but also the tensions and contradictions of its particular age.

---

1 *ER* is an Emmy Award-winning American medical drama series created by the late novelist Michael Crichton, aired on NBC September 1994 to April 2009. Set in the emergency room of fictional County General Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, it was produced by Constant c Productions, Amblin Entertainment and Warner Bros. It ran for 15 seasons, becoming the longest-running medical drama in American primetime television history. It won 22 Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Drama Series (1996), and 123 Emmy nominations, the most in TV history. *ER* is the longest-running American primetime medical drama of all time; its final episode aired on April 2, 2009 with a two-hour episode preceded by a one-hour retrospective special (Wikipedia, 2009).
Dr. Kerry Weaver is “ambitious and accomplished as Chief of Staff, despite her physical disability. After many years she comes out as a lesbian to her staff and eventually leaves the E.R. to become a medical reporter” (NBC, 2009).

One of two substantive changes to Crichton’s novel from 1974 was that Susan Lewis’ character was made a woman. “Dr. Lewis adopts her sister’s child but loses custody, returns to marry a nurse during a drunken Vegas weekend and gives birth to baby Cosmo” (NBS, 2009).

Ultimately the underpinning of organisationally produced TV series like *Friends* and *ER* as representations of societal and organisational life, leaves us, from a gendered analysis perspective, feeling both optimistic and pessimistic (Parker, 2006: Ellis, 2008:719). They are optimistic in relation to women actually achieving powerful leader positions in *ER* and pessimistic in relation to the unnatural ‘fit’ of women to the established structure, order of organisation and to senior leader roles.

As Hancock (2008: 698) argues, within sitcoms (and similar), the characters and events across shows are frequently of a largely standardised variety and the very structure that makes them possible serves to undermine any opportunity for a portrayal of progressive or radical change, when at the end of every episode the status quo must be restored. Here, the gender stereotypes of women either turning into men to achieve elite leader roles e.g. Dr. Kerry Weaver, or being rejected by the status quo as ‘unfit’ for leader roles e.g. Monica and Dr. Susan Lewis, highlight how traditional gender stereotypes are perhaps ‘stretching’ (to incorporate women in leader positions at all) but also reaffirming and sustaining the status quo.
The Devil Doesn’t Always Wear Prada!

Figure 4. The Devil Wears Prada

The Devil Wears Prada is a 2006 comedy-drama film, a loose screen adaptation of Lauren Weisberger’s 2003 novel of the same name. Miranda Priestly as the central character of the film is an immensely powerful fashion magazine editor; highly successful, intelligent, beautiful, thin, a Mother, married and who ‘has it all’ by occupying the elite leader role. However, Miranda is constructed as the demanding Queen of Queen Bees and ‘hell on heels’ for her younger, beautiful, intelligent, ambitious, woman assistant, Andy Sachs.

Many women (and men) have been seduced by the film The Devil Wears Prada (see figure 4.) and a television series is now under development. After Ellis (2008) the film was examined for depictions of organisational selves (Alvesson et al., 2008), specifically in relation to Andy Sachs the young woman college student and Miranda Priestly the powerful magazine editor.

By paying close attention to particular characters’ portrayals this can highlight important representations of social order (Ellis, 2008:710). After Ellis (2008), in relation to The Devil Wears Prada, the use of contrast as a cultural structure is particularly interesting in terms of the portrayals of Miranda (the powerful older woman editor) and Andy (the ambitious young assistant). The film integrates a number of gender stereotypes and sexist constructions; the outdated and sexist Queen Bee (Mavin, 2008) construction of women leaders, becoming ‘more male than the men’ in order to achieve, alongside the concept of female misogyny (Mavin 2006 a,b) setting up the woman versus woman agenda. A starting point for analysis is whether the film would have been made at all, had the central character Miranda Priestly been a man?

---

2 The Devil Wears Prada stars Anne Hathaway as Andy Sachs, a recent college graduate who goes to New York City and gets a job as a co-assistant to powerful and demanding fashion magazine editor Miranda Priestly, played by Meryl Streep. Emily Blunt co-stars in support of the two leads, as catty co-assistant Emily Charlton. Wendy Finerman produced and David Frankel directed; the film was distributed by 20th Century Fox (Wikipedia, 2009).
The seduction of the film is evident in terms of its popularity, its reach as part of popular culture and its powerful messaging. Part of the seduction is the performance by Meryl Streep as Miranda\textsuperscript{3}. Meryl Streep was aware of the power of the film and its construction of women; her character in particular, and at the Oscar’s ceremony, where she was nominated for Best Actress, in response to the question why she chose to become involved in the film Streep responded; “I wanted to know why we vilify women in powerful positions, I wanted to understand the pressures on such a woman.”

A central construction of woman as leader in \textit{The Devil Wear Prada} is that if you reach the elite powerful leader role in fashion editing then your behaviour will be male - to have got there at all within the patriarchal structures and culture – as a woman demonstrating agentic, masculine behaviours, then you are constructed as the ‘baddie’ of the film, doing harm to those around you – in both the work and domestic spheres.

Regarding Andy Sachs, if you are an ‘ambitious’ woman on your career track, the messages are about what you have to become (not very nice or communal) to achieve a senior leader role; you will have to give up any kind of ‘life’ and dedicate yourself to your career – only then can you achieve a powerful leader role. Also don’t expect any support or mentoring from your woman boss because the gender stereotype is reaffirmed; she is a Queen Bee. A further key message is evident, relating to Miranda’s impending divorce at the end of the film, while Andy who ‘gives up’, returns to her partner; reaffirming the ‘women can’t be powerful leaders and have it all’, message.

Greer (2000:222) argues that as women move into a predominantly male world of senior leadership, they are brought up sharply against prevailing misogynies and will only accept them if they are part of the process of swallowing the masculinist cultural package. When reconsidering this in terms of women’s relationships with other women in organisation, then women are brought up sharply against prevailing female misogynies, which manifest through women accepting male constructions of the female, who do so (sometimes unknowingly) as they submit to or accept the gendered structures and order, thus perpetuating a further gendered status quo (Mavin, 2006 a).

\textsuperscript{3}The commercial success and critical praise for Streep’s performance continued beyond the U.S.A. in foreign markets, with the film leading the international box office for a month. The U.S. DVD release was a top month rental. Ultimately, it grossed over $300 million and finished in 2006’s top 20 in the U.S. and overseas. It is the 2nd highest-grossing film in Streep’s career (except \textit{Mamma Mia}). Streep’s performance drew rave reviews from critics and earned her many award nominations, including her record-setting 14th Oscar bid and a Golden Globe for Best Actress (Wikipedia, 2009).
Through their characterisations the film’s writers appear to be conducting an ideological struggle (Ellis, 2008) between acknowledging women’s role as leaders in powerful positions in organisations and tempering their influence through the negative messages relating to the older woman turning into a man and getting divorced, and the younger woman giving up but keeping the man. Fictional representations of women as leaders in *The Devil Wears Prada* thus connect scholarly representations in a way that enriches our understanding of contemporary organisations (Ellis, 2008:720) and reflects other media in its messaging; women are out of place in powerful leader positions.

The film also reinforces outdated misogynistic explanations of the lack of women in senior leader positions by perpetuating the sexist construction of women leaders as Queen Bees (there is no alternative term for men, Mavin, 2008). Its depiction of the relationship between the two women reflects current academic thinking on female misogyny as a barrier to women’s progress (Mavin, 2006 a,b). These representations allow us to deepen our appreciation and understandings of actual and possible organisations and identities (Ellis, 2008: 720). There is little balance to the film’s message reflected in its title and audiences are left in no doubt that women in powerful positions become the Devil.

**Hillary Tears Up and What Happened to ‘Blair’s Babes’?**

The final analysis examines the portrayal of women leaders in newspapers and the web. In particular women political leaders’ representations and constructions were analysed, with examples of Hillary Clinton (figure 5.) and Blair’s Babes (figures 6.&7.) offered to highlight how, again, traditional gender stereotypes of women leaders, while ‘stretching’, remain embedded and reaffirmed.
Hillary’s Emotions are Page One Material gothamist.com
Video of the Day: Hillary Clinton Gets Verklempt gothamist.com
She Must Be Playing the “Female” Card whoisrichhand.blogspot.com
John Edwards’ Jab at Hillary, Claims She’s Not Tough Enough, Boys reason.com

Hillary Tears Up

A Muskie moment or a helpful glimpse of ’the real Hillary’? The headline of Newsweek, 7th January 2008.

Other Headlines and web titles:

We Think Hillary’s Tears Came Straight from the Heart roxies-world.blogspot.com
Watch the Video of Hillary Crying abcnews.go.com
Breaking: Hillary Reemploys “The Cry” nymag.com
The Two Hillarys: Fiery & Teary garlinggauge.com
Thank God For Waterproof Mascara! hillarystyle.blogspot.com
We Thought She Was an Ice Princess? reformedchicksblabbing.blogspot.com
A Rare Glimpse Into Hillary’s Soul? newsweek.com
Exhausted, Hillary Attempts a Last Chance to Regain Her Lead blogs.wsj.co
“There’s no crying in politics!” firstinengine.blogspot.com
Newsweek (2007) wrote “Her eyes grew red. The coffee shop, packed with about 100 members of the media and 16 outnumbered voters, grew silent. “I just don’t want to see us fall backward as a nation,” Clinton began, her voice strained, her eyes welling. "I mean, this is very personal for me. Not just political. I see what’s happening. We have to reverse it."

She was talking about the country under Bush, but it may well have been a metaphor for her campaign. Then came what may well be the only moment in this campaign when Hillary Clinton publicly displayed the vulnerability and frustration those around her have talked about in recent weeks, as her once formidable campaign struggles to regain the momentum lost to Barack Obama. "Some people think elections are a game: who's up or who's down," Clinton said, her voice breaking and tears welling. "It's about our country. It's about our kids' future. It's about all of us together. Some of us put ourselves out there and do this against some difficult odds."
Newsweek reports the extract above and asks how will it play? “No one will remember the hour of detailed policy talk that preceded Clinton’s emotional moment. Even as she spoke, a local television reporter was broadcasting live that Clinton had started crying. Other reporters tried to correct him, even as he was still on the air. No, she didn’t cry. But if the grim polls, which currently show Obama up by double digits heading into tomorrow's New Hampshire primary, are right, you know the pictures of a red-eyed Clinton will go up under the inevitable headline “Trail of Tears.” There will no doubt be comparisons to the teary press conference former Colorado representative Pat Schroeder held to announce that she wouldn't run for president, thus confirming that anyone who needed to carry Kleenex in her purse was unfit for the highest office in the land”.

Hillary Clinton’s modus operandi as political leader is perceived agentic behaviour. This agentic behaviour from a woman standing for election to become leader of the free world challenged traditional gender stereotypes. This agentic behaviour and challenge to a patriarchal status quo in the U.S.A. was unpopular and disconcerting for many of the population – a jolt against established assumptions of what a political leader ‘should’ be. The press could not wait to report the ‘emotional display’ by Hillary Clinton. It appears as if there was a collective sigh of relief – the woman cries - and can now be placed back into a ‘communal box’ or ‘non-leadership’ stereotype. The websites duly placed videos where audiences could watch communal, emotional, feminine behaviour being played out by an aspiring woman President.

The re-attachment of women political leaders to communal gender stereotypes is also evident in the way the UK press construct and message women leaders in Government. In November 2007 The Times newspaper ran a double page spread (see figure 6) with one page headlining “After the Blair Babes come the Volupts (ladies of a certain age),” and “Who are the Volupts? Self-styled band of curvaceous women? Or Rare breed of aliens in a hostile environment?” Obviously Blair’s Babes have grown older and are now more ‘shapely’ than ‘Babes.’

Readers need to be reminded that these political leaders are women and are therefore are aliens in the hostile environment of ‘male’ political leadership. Yvette Cooper, we are also reminded, is the wife of Ed Balls. Of course these women are both; they are women and they are some of the most senior leaders in UK Government.
On the other page are women leaders in UK politics, along with the headline “Harriet the Plotter and the Not Terribly Secret Chamber of her Old Feminist Friends”.

The Times piece constructs and re-attaches these women, powerful political leaders and decision makers, back into the communal box, attaching them to feminine family and nurturing activities, through the headline “Girlie’ issues such as the family are at the top of the political agenda, partly thanks to a small group of women” (see figure 7). Whilst at the same time sending the message that these are ‘feminist women’ who ‘club’ together and this ‘feminist clubbing’ needs to be ‘exposed’ – people need to know that these powerful leaders are women, are feminist and they know each other (club). Would a group of men political leaders who know each other, warrant a two page spread in The Times?
The piece includes an interview with Harriet Harman, constructed as the leader of the feminist club, but also the only woman political leader to have been in both the 1997 and the 2007 UK Cabinets. Harriet Harman is not constructed as one of the UK’s leading political leaders, but re-attached to communal feminine non-leadership behaviours. On analysing the text, Harriet Harman seems to be aware of what’s happening to her; the story and the angle the journalist will construct. She resists, as if she’s ‘coming out,’ commenting, “I am in the labour party because I am a feminist”.

The construction process of these senior women political leaders is to move them from an agentic to a communal feminine non-leadership place. So again, whilst the traditional gender stereotype of senior leader is stretched – there are a number of women in UK Government - the message is re-attachment of women political leaders to, and a reaffirming of, communal gender stereotypes, with the rider that these women are feminist...
Conclusion

An aim was to explore the relative strength (endurance, sustainability) of traditional gender stereotypes in popular media constructing women as leaders. The illustrative examples discussed here support Powell et al.’s (2008:158) position, in that they highlight a ‘stretching’ of traditional gender stereotypes; an expanding beyond the traditional boundary to include ‘slight inclusions’ regarding expectations of women actually holding senior leader roles. Yet returning to what happens when women leaders do not match feminine, communal, non-leadership stereotypes? The analysis of popular media examples surfaces representations of resulting jolts of gendered assumptions. Representation here refers to the significance of the construction of women leaders through the production of images and narratives in visual and written texts of popular culture (Muji, 1999). It is argued, after Muji (1999), that there is a striking degree of agreement between the examples, so that taken together they amount to a ‘closed text’ in which space for alternative representations of women leaders has been squeezed out. The examples are obviously different in detail and style but have enough similarities to evidence jolts of gendered assumptions represented through negative constructions of ‘agentic’ women as out of place in a leader role. The examples communicate the leader role as a non-role for women and/or question women’s suitability for a leader role. The examples reaffirm traditional gender stereotypes and do not highlight sufficient change to evidence movement to a less differentiated form.

A further aim was to investigate organisational life through popular culture (Rhodes and Parker, 2008) to enable further understandings of how gender stereotypes actively construct stereotypes and perceptions of leaders. It is argued after Ellis (2008) and Schroeder and Zwick (2004:22), that analysis of the media examples here do highlight that fictional representations are important, as they do not just express notions of phenomena like ‘leader,’ rather they help form perceptions of leaders and help construct leaders. Following the approach of Ellis (2008), Rhodes and Parker (2008) and Rhodes and Westwood (2008:22), this research supports their argument, that popular culture offers important representations of work, organisations and in this case, leaders, “that exceed those available to theory” and that integrating organisation and culture offers more fulsome and culturally aware understandings of contemporary organising.

A final aim was to inform leader development and management education programmes which continue to under prepare women for leadership positions (Mavin et al., 2004); continuing to ignore gender as a key facet of a leader role and failing to challenge entrenched gender stereotypes underpinning perceived successful leaders. The illustrative examples here are valuable to leader development programmes and management education, integrating them into the curricula is a means of raising men and women’s awareness of gendered constructions of leaders.
and to refocus leader constructions, enabling Business Schools to take a gender-aware approach (Mavin, et al., 2004) to leadership and management education.

**Word Count: 6,340 (minus figures, notes and references)**

**References:**


