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“Nice girls don’t carry knives”: Constructions of ambition in media coverage of Australia’s first
female prime minister

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Abstract

Julia Gillard became the first female prime minister of Australia in 2010. This paper examines the various ways in which her success was constructed in the Australian print media in the days immediately following her elevation. In particular, we focus on how an issue that has long beset women aspiring to power and leadership – the so-called ‘double-bind’ in which aspiring women leaders must display high competence and ambition in traditionally masculine domains while maintaining sufficient femininity so as not to be disliked – was constructed in this high profile instance. We discuss the coverage in terms of its implications for the need to create an androgynised presentation of ambition, the continuing relevance of gender stereotypes, and the mixture of threat and opportunity provided to women taking positions on ‘the glass cliff’. These issues remain crucially important for women aspiring to power and leadership in contemporary western societies.

“Nice girls don’t carry knives”: Constructions of ambition in media coverage of Australia’s first female prime minister

Julia Gillard became Australia’s first female prime minister in June 2010. Her entry into the position followed an unorthodox and controversial route: she replaced the incumbent prime minister via a party-room ballot¹, rather than leading her party in opposition and becoming prime minister as the result of a general election. Gillard herself deviates in many ways from the traditional profile of a political leader; not only is she a woman, but she is also unmarried and has no children (and is a redhead, as she noted facetiously in her first press conference as PM). Previous media coverage of Gillard has focused on her ‘deliberate barrenness’ (as she was described by an opposition minister), a newspaper photo that ‘caught’ her in her house with an empty fruit bowl, and her alleged inability to manage her hair or clothing style effectively. There are thus many ways in which Gillard does not conform to a straightforward political stereotype, a situation which provokes public curiosity and provides a striking opportunity for news media to interpret the new leader for the Australian public.

Discussion of the social significance of Australia finally having a female prime minister was an important feature of media coverage of Gillard’s rise to that office. In addition to analysis of the immediate effects of the leadership takeover on day to day politics, much was made of the historical nature of the event and its (potential) wider significance for gender equality in Australia. However, although the great successes of individual women are symbolically important for gender politics, widespread celebration of them as evidence of the disintegration of the glass ceiling is unduly

¹ A party-room ballot entails a vote among members of parliament belonging to a particular political party about internal party matters.

optimistic. Gender inequality in the workplace is still entrenched as reflected by indicators such as the pay gap, lifetime earnings, seats on corporate boards, appointments as CEO, and election as political representatives; although there are local variations, it remains the case that these indices show a substantial disadvantage for women in Australia (Kee, 2006), Britain and Western Europe (Arulampalam, Booth & Bryan, 2007), Canada (Catalyst, 2009), and the United States (Catalyst, 2010). Research suggests that ambition in women remains ideologically problematic, and that women aspiring to positions of power must find ways to negotiate the tensions between normative prescriptions of femininity and the more masculine qualities associated with positions of power and influence (e.g., Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). Furthermore, recent research by Ryan, Haslam and colleagues has shown that when women are appointed to positions of high power and responsibility within organisations it is disproportionately likely to be in circumstances of crisis (e.g., Ryan & Haslam, 2005). The development of effective strategies for women to manage these issues is complex and fraught, and yet must be addressed if women are to continue to narrow the gaps in opportunities and outcomes that they experience in their working lives.

The recent events in Australian politics provide a powerful, contemporary context in which to explore the constructions of ambition in a politically powerful woman, in order to understand the specific challenges faced by aspiring women and how such challenges might be addressed. In this paper, we draw together insights from work on female leaders in organisational contexts as well as work that directly examines perceptions of women in politics to develop a picture of the particular issues that must be negotiated by women with ambitions to success in politics. Although there are important differences between political and organisational contexts, in particular that women in politics have a wider audience on whose approval their success depends than do women in other organisational contexts, we consider these contexts to be closely linked and mutually informative.

Politicians occupy high profile but relatively rare positions; many more women occupy non-traditional roles in organisations than in politics, and most of the ground breaking work on how women occupying traditionally ‘masculine’ roles are perceived comes from studies of organisational leadership. Conversely, the public nature of politics means that the examples of women occupying traditionally male roles in this domain are highly visible and may provide very salient examples of the counter-stereotypical abilities and qualities of some women that can allow female politicians to serve as role models for women aspiring to leadership in public life both within and beyond politics. Furthermore, as most ‘contact’ between politicians and the general public occurs via the media, it is particularly important to examine how these successful female politicians are constructed in the media, as it is the perceptions that flow from these presentations— rather than their ‘actual’ qualities and actions – that form the basis for shared cultural understandings about the contributions that can be made by women in public life and the rewards and costs associated with these roles. In this paper, we aim to augment the literature on how female success in traditionally male domains is understood by analysing the ways in which the Australian news media portrayed Julia Gillard in the days immediately following her elevation to the office of prime minister.

Women in politics; ambition, androgyny, and the need to establish (sufficient) femininity

Gender is a more salient feature of female political leaders than male leaders not only because of the relative scarcity of women in such positions, but also because of the incongruence between cultural stereotypes of women and politicians (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Ambition and other power-seeking characteristics are cardinal features of the stereotype of politicians, understood as being necessary for success in the ‘cut throat’ world of politics (Huddy & Capelos, 2002). Ambition combines elements of assertiveness, competitiveness, confidence and self-promotion, characteristics that form a central part of cultural stereotypes that present men as agentic and self-focused, but that

have a more problematic relation with stereotypes of women that emphasize communal characteristics of warmth, sensitivity, nurturance and self-effacement (Bem, 1974; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). This stereotype incongruence presents two potential problems for women aspiring to political leadership. The first is that women must overcome stereotype-based expectations that lead them to be considered less competent than men and work to overcome assumptions that they will not be 'tough enough' for the hard decisions and personal attacks of political leadership. Women who do succeed in overcoming these expectations of lower competence by displaying counter (gender) stereotypical agentic qualities must then contend with a second issue; the prescriptive elements of the gender stereotypes, which imply that women *should be* communal and that lead displays of agentic behaviours in women to be seen as evidence of coldness and unfemininity (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). It is for these reasons that women's aspiration to positions of power in public life is widely understood as involving a double bind, in which women's exhibition of characteristics traditionally understood as required for successful political leadership, such as assertiveness, authority and ambition, can come at substantial cost to their likeability and thus their popularity and electoral success (e.g., Jamieson, 1995).

Research into role (in)congruence finds that there are indeed costs for women in being perceived as highly agentic. In organisational contexts, researchers have shown that professional women are perceived negatively when they exhibit agentic traits (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007; Heilman, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 1999). Highly agentic women have been found to be perceived as less warm (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy & Glick, 1999), less likable or friendly (Rudman, 1998; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs & Tamkins, 2004), and are more likely to be met with hostile sexism (Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner & Zhu, 1997) than less agentic women or agentic men. In the political domain, there is a growing literature documenting the penalty attached to behaviour that is interpreted as power-

seeking in female politicians (e.g. Gill, 2004; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). The display of ambition, power and leadership qualities has been shown to undermine the femininity and 'relatability' of female politicians (Herrnson, Lay & Stokes, 2003). This research suggests that it is an 'excess' of agency which elicits negative reactions towards female politicians who act against stereotypes of women.

The double bind account of women's under-representation as political leaders is complicated somewhat by recent research that suggests that it is not the presence of agentic (masculine) characteristics (such as ambition) per se so much as the implied hit to communality (femininity) that reduces liking of powerful women. Heilman and Okimoto (2007) found that less favourable evaluations of women leaders were attributable to an inferred lack of communality, rather than to their possession of agentic traits; when it was made clear that the agentic women did also possess communal qualities, the negative judgements that had initially been made were ameliorated. Similarly, Okimoto and Brescoll (2010) found that negative judgements of power-seeking female political candidates could be explained by a perception of lack of communality rather than by the presence of agentic qualities. There is also evidence that some audiences may reduce the perceived role incongruence presented by ambitious women by introducing differences in the nature of the ambition attributed to women and men; Larimer, Hannagan and Smith (2007) found that ambitious women were perceived as being more collective in their ambition than ambitious men, whose ambitions were described in more self-serving terms. Taken together, these recent studies suggest that so long as evidence of their communality is maintained, female politicians are not necessarily judged negatively for their ambition. These findings present more cause for optimism for female leaders than the traditional double bind analysis in that they offer a path by which aspiring women

may display the agentic qualities so apparently necessary for political leadership without inevitably rendering themselves unlikeable.

If negative judgements of powerful women are centred around an inferred lack of communal traits, rather than an excess of agentic traits, then female politicians might be able to counter the potential hostility provoked by their perceived ambition and power seeking by finding ways to simultaneously show aspects of their communality (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). On the surface, this seems consistent with longstanding ideas about androgyny – the simultaneous possession of high levels of masculine (agentic) and feminine (communal) characteristics – as the most desirable and effective constellation of attributes, particularly for successful women (Bem, 1974; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). In this way, women would be free to display ambition, aggression and other power seeking qualities in the same way and to the same extent as men without social penalty, as long as they balanced these characteristics with sufficient displays of self-effacement, concern for others and other communal characteristics. Previous research on female politicians and femininity has focused largely on the ways in which appearance, style, and motherhood/domestic duties contribute to the (sufficiently) feminine identities of female politicians, such as Angela Merkel (van Zoonen, 2006), Hillary Clinton (Scharrer, 2002) and Helen Clarke (Devere & Davies, 2006). The emphasis on these features is used to show that even as successful politicians, these women still share the concerns and priorities that enable them to be seen as ‘real’ women.

However, the strategy of emphasising femininity as a means of balancing and thus ameliorating the negative consequences of being (“too”) ambitious is complicated by features of the political context, in which information about politicians is frequently presented in short, disjointed and partisan formats; candidates may not be able to rely on constituents carefully collecting and

weighing information across multiple contexts, but must instead create ‘balance’ within particular characteristics themselves. The ease with which individual attributes can be taken ‘out of context’ increases the need for female candidates to transform potentially unpalatable characteristics (such as ambition) into androgenised versions of these characteristics themselves, rather than simply balancing these agentic characteristics with unrelated communal characteristics. For example, although Hillary Clinton took many opportunities to emphasise her femininity during her bid for the Democratic party’s presidential nomination, this did not serve to ‘balance’ the negative impression formed among many voters of her ‘overweening ambition’ (Gutgold, 2008). Conversely, Sheeler (2010) documents the ways in which gubernatorial candidate (and eventual Governor of Michigan) Jennifer Granholm’s attractiveness and femininity was used to portray her as less knowledgeable and competent than her male counterparts. The need to create androgenised (rather than ‘balanced’) portraits of female politicians can be seen in the epithets used by their supporters; for example US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi, with a ‘heart of gold but a spine of steel’ (Dabbous & Ladley, 2010, p181), and Hong Kong official Lily Yam, known as the ‘Iron Butterfly’ (Lee, 2004, p212). In these descriptions, these women’s possession of (apparently politically necessary) toughness and resolve are softened through the incorporation of communal/feminine elements.

One specific way in which female politicians may express their integrated communality and agency is by adopting aspects of the transformational leadership styles now widely acknowledged in the organisational leadership literature (e.g., Eagly, 2007). A transformational leadership style allows female leaders to display key agentic qualities of leadership while at the same time incorporating communal qualities to exhibit an integrated androgynous leadership style (Eagly, 2007). The communal qualities that are incorporated into transformational leadership include cooperation, open communication, and an ability to encourage others (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010).

Transformational leadership has been found to be more desirable in female leaders than a traditional leadership style, with women adopting this style perceived to be more effective, more likeable and more trustworthy than women with a more traditional (non-communal) leadership style (see Eagly, 2007 for a review). A transformational leadership style may thus effectively convey an androgynous persona, allowing the female politician to create an integrated presentation of herself as both agentic and communal.

Female politicians and the glass cliff

Although it appears that the clear solution to overcoming the classic double bind of female leadership is for aspiring women to ensure that they highlight their communal qualities, this strategy is not without its costs. The emphasis on communality in the leadership styles of female politicians may have the unintended consequence of making them particularly appealing as leaders in times of political upheaval or strife. Extensive research in organisational contexts finds that women are much more likely to become leaders of companies during periods of crisis than at other times, leading to the phrase ‘think crisis, think female’ (Ryan, Haslam & Kulich, 2010). This may be at least partly because women are seen to have the required traits to deal with crisis situations – namely, the flexibility, empathy, creativity, and communal interpersonal skills needed to motivate employees to work together in recovering from a crisis (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ryan et al, 2010). The women who gain these precarious ‘glass cliff’ positions can often find themselves in a lose-lose situation in which they are either the scapegoat if the organisation does not successfully manage its crisis, or they are replaced by a male manager once the crisis has been resolved (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). The identification of the glass cliff phenomenon is a salutary reminder of the importance of focusing not only on the number, but also on the nature, of the opportunities for power and influence that are available to women. The

systematic appointment of women to positions with a higher than usual chance of failure has profound consequences not only for the careers of the particular woman appointed to such positions but also for perceptions of the general suitability of women as leaders.

Evidence of the glass cliff can be seen in Australian politics, where women have come into power in times of crisis. Of the five female state premiers in Australia's history, all were appointed to the position mid-term following the resignation of an incumbent (male) premier, in the hopes of turning around the governments' low popularity. Of these five, only one was subsequently returned to office following a general election, vividly illustrating the precariousness of the positions that these women were given the 'opportunity' to take. Similar findings have been reported in lower profile political races; Ryan and colleagues found that female politicians are seen to be more suited to risky seats, and male politicians to winnable seats (Ryan, Haslam & Kulich, 2010).

The present study

This study draws on recent political events in Australia to ask the question: how is the success of Julia Gillard, in becoming Australia's first female prime minister, accounted for, and how are the challenges she will face as prime minister constructed in the mainstream press? By exploring the various accounts that are constructed of how a woman can achieve success in breaking through this iconic gender barrier, we aim to show the nature of those barriers as well as the attributions and inferences that are made about what it takes for a woman to surmount them. We do this through an analysis of constructions within the media in order to understand the various ways the Australian public is encouraged to perceive Gillard, and strategies that are used to encourage these perceptions.

Of course there are idiosyncrasies in this case that introduce elements that may not be routinely present for other successful women in politics. In particular, the hostile removal of the incumbent prime minister, Kevin Rudd, by his own party, and the elevation of his former deputy

(Gillard) inevitably introduces questions of loyalty and betrayal that might not be present (at least to the same degree) in more conventional transfers of power. Nevertheless, even with the idiosyncrasies and complexities of the particular case, events such as these have enormous social significance; they capture public attention and provide a powerful story about female success in traditionally male spheres – how it happens, what it means, what it costs, what it’s worth. In so doing, they contribute to a shared social understanding of the meaning and function of gender in these domains, which itself provides a basis for the myriad unremarkable judgements, expectations and exhortations that are made of and by women in the everyday world of work.

Our analysis of media coverage of Gillard’s ascension focuses largely on the way her ambition is portrayed in conjunction with stereotypically masculine (power seeking) or stereotypically feminine (communal) traits. Specifically, we investigate the ways in which her leadership style is portrayed throughout these articles, and the extent to which qualities associated with agency and communality are used to construct both sympathetic and antagonistic representations of Australia’s first female prime minister.

Method

The data corpus

The data corpus for this study comprises all articles about Julia Gillard published in the Australian mainstream press in the five days following her elevation to the office of Prime Minister (Thursday 24th June to Monday 28th June 2010). A search of the 11 state and national newspapers (using the Factiva database, with the search keywords “Gillard” or “Julia”) retrieved 241 articles; removing duplicates left a total of 229 original articles. This time period was chosen in order to focus specifically on the media’s ‘introduction’ of the new prime minister to the public and their accounts of how it was that she came to occupy that position.

Method of analysis

The analysis of the data corpus was undertaken using a theory-driven thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in which we examined the ways in which the ascension of Julia Gillard was framed in the newspaper media. Our focus was on discussion and analysis of Gillard's personal qualities (rather than, for example, her allegiances within party factions, or other more institutional aspects of her political biography), with particular attention to the ways in which her agentic and communal traits were constructed. After reviewing the material in the data corpus relevant to these issues we identified several common themes relating to the issue of Gillard's ambition and the implications of her gender for her performance in the role of prime minister. Our analysis is based on the entire data corpus and is illustrated with extracts that best capture the identified themes. Given the unorthodox way in which Gillard came into power, we were largely concerned with the ways this same event was constructed differently within different articles, and particularly, the role her gender played in the different constructions of this event. In this sense our aim was not to assess whether, on balance, she was presented positively or negatively across the newspaper coverage; rather, our focus was on the role her gender played in these positive and negative constructions when they occurred.

Analysis of newspaper articles allows an investigation of widespread constructions of current events and their protagonists that are presented to the general public. However it must also be noted that the very nature of newspapers makes analysis complex, as the many larger political and ideological agendas of the media will influence the ways in which political events are reported and editorialised. Most important to this analysis, however, is identifying *how* these agendas may be pursued, rather than *why*. Kahn (1996) defines agenda-setting as "the news media [deciding] which issues people will consider most important" (p12). Additionally, telling the public what it 'wants to

know' can prime readers to believe this is the most important information to use in forming judgements of these politicians (Kahn, 1996). Thus it is important to identify *how* Gillard's gender is made an issue in the ways in which she is constructed within the media (both positively and negatively), in order to identify how this aspect of her identity is primed to be important to readers and voters.

Analysis and Discussion

Gillard's ambition and aggression

As discussed earlier, ambition is a cardinal feature of the stereotype of politicians (Huddy & Capelos, 2002), and a quality that is read differently in women and men. References to Gillard's ambition were a dominant feature of accounts of her rise to the office of Prime Minister. However, although the issue of ambition was routinely canvassed, there were quite distinct differences in the ways in which this characteristic was attributed to Gillard and the ways in which it was valenced. In the sections that follow we discuss the various ways in which the role of ambition in Gillard's success was constructed, and the contributions of these differing constructions to the creation of a sympathetic or antagonist portrait of Gillard.

Many articles made direct attributions of ambition to Gillard. For example,

Extract 1

"When the opportunity came, the ambitious Gillard did not hesitate to take up the knife and plant it in Rudd's back" ("Labor's brutal plot unnerves Liberals", The Courier Mail, Saturday 26th June).

This extract characterises Gillard's ambition as the key factor in her actions in relation to the change of leadership; in this account, all that was required for her action was a suitable 'opportunity'. Gillard's actions are presented as treacherous ('take up the knife and plant it in Rudd's back') and as sufficiently explained by reference to her ambition.

In addition to noting or commenting on her ambition, several writers explicitly presented Gillard's ambition as something potentially shocking or disappointing in the face of expectations that voters might have had for a female Prime Minister:

Extract 2

“A lot of people, including many women, were upset at Gillard's action in tapping Rudd, describing it as brutal and unpalatable. They expected a more genteel transition for Australia's first female Prime Minister.” (“Rising up the ranks – Gillard's challenge”, *The Age*, Saturday 26th June)

Extract 3

“Certainly, anyone expecting Parliament to be a softer, gentler place because a woman is in charge is likely to be disappointed.” (“Family values forged a dedicated achiever”, *The Advertiser*, Friday 25th June).

Extract 4

“NICE girls don't carry knives. So Julia Gillard, who has arrived in the prime ministership with the image of the clean, fair player, knows she has to be persuasive in explaining how she came to plunge one into Kevin's neck. So she has a mantra. She had to get the government "back on track".”
 (“Finessing a flagrant backflip”, *The Age*, Saturday 26th June);

These extracts are striking for the way in which aggressive ambition was strongly emphasised in terms of both its centrality in Gillard's rise to power, and in terms of the ways in which it might confound voters' expectations about Gillard. The view of ambition conveyed in these extracts is as a characteristic that is self-evidently both agentic and non-communal; Gillard is presented as both power-seeking (agentic) and brutal (non-communal) as if these characteristics obviously and necessarily occur together. Ambition is presented here as both unpleasant and also potentially unseemly for a woman. Her ambition was framed as coming at a cost to ‘a lot’ of people's expectations of a woman, making her unrelatable to the general public (particularly ‘many women’). This emphasis on Gillard's putative deficits in communal qualities is in line with Okimoto and

Brescoll's (2010) claim that it is a perceived lack of communality, rather than 'too much' agency that leads to negative judgements of female politicians.

However, it is not the case that a lack of fit to traditional gender stereotypes is routinely read as undesirable; Gillard's ability to flout gender-based expectations was sometimes also a source of praise, as in the following extracts:

Extract 5

"Any old-fashioned male chauvinists who thought a woman might not be tough and ruthless enough to be a PM can rest easy." ("Ousting aborts Abbott's attack", The Sunday Times, Sunday 27th June)

Extract 6

"Indeed, Gillard also has a likeable Aussie blokey quality that makes her more mate than madam. And this is part of her broad appeal that makes her electable in her own right." ("Cool head on matey shoulders", Herald Sun, Friday 25th June)

Here, there is a sense that Gillard's 'broad appeal' is in fact based on her distancing of herself from a kind of precious femininity in favour of a more down to earth, 'blokey' style. Additionally, 'masculine' characteristics such as toughness and ruthlessness, apparently required in a prime minister, exist within Gillard, and are presented as a key to her viability and potential effectiveness as prime minister.

The extracts presented above show that ambition is a key element of the descriptions of Gillard and the accounts of her rise to power. It is also clear that these readings of her ambition are set closely within the context of expectations based on her gender, and the positive and negative framing of Gillard often relies on gendered notions of the kinds of actions that are expected and accepted of women, or of leaders.

Androgenising Gillard's ambition

Not all of the coverage of Gillard attributed high levels of ambition to her; in fact several articles made a point of explicitly denying ambition as the source of her success. Writers of these articles were at pains to create accounts of Gillard's take over of the leadership that explicitly rejected her ambition as a key factor in the unfolding of events. For example,

Extract 7

“JULIA Gillard has never suffered from a shortfall of self-confidence but, equally, she has never displayed the kind of naked ambition that defined Kevin Rudd before he got the job, either.” (“First female PM? She's confident, disciplined – and has no trace of hubris”, *The Age*, Thursday 25th June);

Extract 8

“Ms Gillard did not orchestrate this change. In the past few months she has been scrupulous in deflecting, usually with humour, questions about her leadership ambitions. Whilst she's never kept it a secret that she would welcome the opportunity and honour of becoming Australia's first woman Prime Minister, she has not been actively seeking the position..” (“‘Authentic’ Gillard gives Labor and women hope”, *The West Australian*, Friday 25th June)

Extract 9

“Gillard says she "didn't set out to crash my head on any glass ceilings". As a study in ambition, she combines self-belief with loyalty. She did not stick the boot in as soon as Rudd was down. She demurred, until the inevitable eventuated and the party's wise men and union and factional chiefs came calling.” (“Revolution is worth a shout”, *The Age*, Friday 25th June).

Here Gillard's ambition is downplayed by the writers of these pieces. Gillard is constructed as not being ambitious – or certainly not as *excessively* ambitious, particularly compared with other politicians – and other qualities are emphasised to account for her success. These accounts actively work to separate Gillard's success from her ambition; in this view it is possible to be confident that one has the necessary attributes of a successful prime minister and even to ‘welcome the opportunity

and honour' without being understood as actively promoting oneself to that position. Thus the issue of success, and even of aspiration to that success, are separated from the actions that are understood to constitute ambition ('active seeking', 'knives in backs', or other types of 'brutal' action). Here, Gillard's rise is not attributed so much to her ambition, or aggressive realisations of that ambition, but to the greater needs of the party (as in Extract 9). Gillard is presented as waiting her turn, and as taking the lead only when it was in the best interests of her party. This emphasis on collaboration, and restraint ('she demurred') is consistent with a conceptualisation of communal ambition and leadership, in which power is taken and exercised for the sake of the collective rather than as an expression of personal self-interest (Larimer, et al, 2007). It is telling, however, that even in these instances, the issue of Gillard's ambition is still actively addressed; it seems that although ambition can (perhaps) be reputiated as an account of her success, it cannot be ignored.

Whereas the extracts above can be seen to have denied or downplayed Gillard's ambition, other articles characterise her methods of pursuing her ambition in ways that soften it and make it more acceptable by combining it with communal qualities and thus overcoming the penalties associated with the costs to communality that agency implies (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010).

Extract 10

"...[Gillard] has relentlessly pursued her ambition for high office by carefully bringing her colleagues with her by nurturing them, listening to them and, as one frontbencher says, 'making them feel very special'" ("A pragmatist's rise to the top", The Australian, Friday 25th June).

Extract 11

"Julia Gillard is a very talented politician and very strong leader. Paradoxically, she will head a very different style of Government, far more inclusive and consultative than the autocratic Mr Rudd." ("Momentous elevation of Gillard", The Advertiser, Friday 25th June)

In these extracts, ambition is presented as an obvious and unremarkable characteristic of a leader. The emphasis here is on the ways in which ambition is ‘pursued’ – the kinds of behaviours that Gillard both embraced (‘bringing colleagues with her’) and eschewed (‘autocratic’) in her efforts to realise her (itself unproblematic) ambition. Though she is described as ambitious, her ambition is described as being expressed in a very particular way, and her rise is attributed to her ability to nurture and include others. This construction of her interpersonal style presents Gillard as ambitious and competent, while at the same time warm and communal.

A success for women?

The question of when Australia would finally have a female prime minister has been a topic of speculation for many decades, and unsurprisingly much of the coverage of Gillard’s take over of the prime ministership emphasised the historical significance of her rise to the position. Although Gillard was often presented as taking power on behalf of a collective (either the Labor Party, or the Australian public), she was very careful about managing the meaning of her success for women as a group. Indeed Gillard was often described as actively distancing herself from the glass ceiling and feminism. Many articles discussed the moment in Gillard’s speech where she stated that she “didn’t set out to crash my head into any glass ceilings” (e.g., Extract 9).

Extract 12

“Defly navigating the right tone between humility and confidence, elation and regret, she showed great restraint by not dropping the F-word. Feminism.” (“Changing the rules, from schoolyard to boardroom”, The Daily Telegraph, Saturday 26th June).

Extract 13

“She has pointedly avoided being a feminist poster girl because she saw Labor women such as Carmen Lawrence, Cheryl Kernot and Joan Kirner trip up when given power at the worst of times. Yesterday, Gillard was again careful to distance herself from any feminist symbolism by arguing her

pursuit of power has been about fairness and hard work, not smashing the glass ceiling.” (“A pragmatist’s rise to the top”, *The Australian*, Friday 25th June).

Extract 14

“Asked about the significance of the moment, Gillard hosed down talk of glass ceilings with some quips about redheads.” (“Changing the rules, from schoolyard to boardroom”, *The Daily Telegraph*, Saturday 26th June).

Gillard is commended for presenting her success as evidence of how opportunities for women in Australia have *already* changed, rather than as a harbinger of further future change. Her emphasis on ‘fairness and hard work’ both defends her success against potential allegations of tokenism and denies the relevance of gender politics to her achievements. It also suggests a belief that identification with feminist issues would be alienating to voters, both men and women, echoing the contemporary postfeminist sentiment in which feminism is seen as an historical movement that achieved important changes in the past, but which has outlived its premise and is no longer necessary or appropriate (e.g., McRobbie, 2009).

In several articles there was some attention drawn to the parallels between the less-than-ideal circumstances of Gillard’s elevation to the prime ministership and the mid-term appointment of women as premiers of Australian states, brought in to turn around the fortunes of unpopular governments. These articles echo aspects of the phenomenon identified as the glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), focusing on the restricted nature of the opportunities for leadership given to women – opportunities to ‘clean up’ the ‘mess’ made by male leaders:

Extract 15

“What is it with Labor that every time things look bleakest they call in a woman: Joan Kirner, Carmen Lawrence, Kristina Keneally?” (“Can Labor’s Tigress Change her Stripes?”, *The Australian*, Friday 25th June).

Extract 16

“Whilst Julia Gillard’s new role as Prime Minister is a positive move for women in Australian politics, realistically it follows a pattern of the Labor Party turning to women in difficult electoral circumstances.” (“Authentic Gillard gives Labor and women hope”, *The West Australian*, Friday 25th June).

Extract 17

“As has occurred at the state government level for the past 30 — yes, 30 — years, Gillard has come in to clean up the mess left by a flailing, failed male leader.” (“Being a first isn’t enough — we need good government”, *The Age*, Friday 25th June).

Extract 18

“But I’m always somewhat suspicious when the NSW Right tries to get a woman in a position of power because they tend to regard the woman as trying to clean up the mess.” (“Gillard is equipped to handle the role”, *Daily Telegraph*, Thursday 24th June).

At various times it was noted that when the Labor party was in crisis, it was not unusual for a woman to take over leadership (‘think crisis, think female’; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ryan et al, 2011); this was put forward as either the reason for Gillard coming into power, or as an assumption that others might make about the party’s motivations behind her elevation. Aside from this arguably undermining Gillard’s individual achievements and presenting gendered notions of women as ‘cleaners’, it also suggests that perhaps Gillard’s gender was a factor in promoting her as an appropriate leader in the party’s crisis, in line with the glass cliff phenomenon (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). This suggests some recognition that the circumstances surrounding Gillard’s ascension are more fraught than those usually confronting a new prime minister, and thus that the opportunity for her to take this high office can also be seen as something of a poisoned chalice. In these articles, Gillard’s chance for historic achievement is set against the possibility that she will be made a scapegoat for the party’s failures that were already clearly on the

horizon, a typical glass cliff scenario that tempers straightforward celebration of the apparent successes of women in breaking glass ceilings.

General discussion and conclusions

Our main aim in this paper was to use the recent dramatic events in Australian politics to examine the media discourse surrounding an iconic example of female success in a traditionally male sphere – the leadership of government – in order to explore how the success of a politically powerful woman was constructed. We did this in order to examine how issues that have long beset powerful women – namely the need to demonstrate high competence in traditionally masculine domains while maintaining sufficient femininity so as not to be disliked – would be constructed and managed in this high profile instance.

Ambition was a key feature of accounts of Gillard's rise to power, although there was a good deal of variation in the specific ways in which ambition was constructed. In several articles, a traditionally masculine style of ambition (aggressive, self-serving) was drawn on to account for Gillard's success. In many of these cases, there was a sense that direct expressions of ambition would confound the public's expectations of Gillard based on her gender. Occasionally, this deviation from stereotypically feminine behaviour was presented positively, as a 'refreshing' reassurance that she would have the necessary ruthlessness and aggression apparently required of a prime minister. More often, however, when Gillard's rise was discussed in terms of her personal ambition it was accompanied by comments about how this was likely to surprise and disappoint voters, who would have expected 'kinder, gentler' behaviour from a woman in this role. Thus it appears that ambition – certainly traditional, aggressive ambition – is constructed as problematic for a woman, because of its incompatibility with expectations of more stereotypically feminine communal behaviour. The articles were careful to avoid any sense that they were holding Gillard to

a different standard of behaviour than they would a man in her position; there was no sense that aggressively ambitious actions from Gillard *are* worse than they would be in a man, but this was undercut by the strong focus on the message that they would *appear* worse to ‘others’.

The treatment of Gillard’s ambition across the newspaper articles is consistent with the growing literature that suggests that power-seeking characteristics in women are viewed negatively, unless they are combined with overt evidence of communal qualities (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kahn, 1996; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). The consensus across the coverage of Gillard’s rise to power that being seen as traditionally ambitious is problematic for women suggests that this is an issue that requires active management. There is ample evidence of this management, where constructions of Gillard were put forward that either denied the role of ambition in her success, or ameliorated the apparently negative connotations of traditional ambition by inflecting it with other, communal qualities. Gillard was frequently described as realising her ambition through an inclusive, nurturing and communicative style, and as acting on her ambition for the good of her party, and by extension, the country. This strategy reflects Okimoto and Brescoll’s observation that it is inferred deficits in communality (rather than an ‘excess’ of agency *per se*) that is viewed particularly negatively in women, and that makes the establishment of communal qualities key to the establishment of a successful political persona for female politicians.

This emphasis on the importance of communality suggests two main strategies by which female politicians, and by extension female leaders, can present themselves as (necessarily) ambitious without suffering the usual negative consequences of violating feminine stereotypes (eg. Heilman, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 1999; Fiske et al, 2007). The first involves combining individual ambition with a communal style, while the second involves reconceptualising the beneficiaries of one’s ambition such that the ambition is understood as less for the self and more on behalf of the group.

Of the first construction, it seems that ambition can be acceptable if the behaviours carried out to realise those ambitions are communal in nature. In this sense, an ambitious woman could pursue her ambitions through cultivating a leadership style that, in addition to showing authority, decisiveness and vision, features kindness, open communication and empathy, allowing her to avoid the typical negative repercussions of women displaying ambition or other masculine characteristics (cf Herrnson et al, 2003). In the second construction, the ambition itself is collective –the ambition is not for the self, but rather is exercised on behalf of a broader collective. Both of these alternative constructions of ambition alter more traditional understandings of ambition so that they no longer clash with the need for women to be seen as feminine/communal (Larimer et al, 2007). In this way, ambition as a key characteristic of a politically successful woman is androgynised.

Our findings in this case study of a high profile female political leader present several lines of enquiry to be tested in future research. Certainly, it would be valuable to test our claims about the particular benefits of an androgynous leadership style for powerful women in a series of experiments in which aspects of leadership style (agentic and communal) and nature of ambition (self-interested or collective) were systematically varied to examine the independent and combined effects of these factors, and to compare their relative importance to perceptions of male and female leaders, and in political and organizational contexts. Such studies would allow us to further specify the types of situations and the types of leaders who are most likely to benefit from particular constellations of leadership styles and types of ambition. Our findings also suggest that studies of leadership and ambition in ‘real world’ contexts should consider not only how much ambition leaders are seen to have but also on whose behalf this ambition is expressed. Attention to the subtleties of these issues can contribute to a richer understanding of the strategies that can be used by women to continue to find ways to escape the classic double bind of female leadership.

Emphasising communal qualities seems to be a clear way in which women can display the agentic qualities required for leadership without being disliked for them. However, this emphasis on communality may shape the kinds of leadership opportunities made available to women, and may increase the likelihood that they become leaders in precarious, situations (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Ryan et al, 2010). Several newspaper articles made mention of the ways in which Gillard's elevation could potentially be seen as part of the Labor party's apparent 'think crisis, think female' strategy – a key element of the glass cliff phenomenon. These articles pointed out the difficulties of the circumstances under which Gillard (like all female leaders of Australian state governments to date) took power, emphasising that she would be judged at least partly on how well she was able to 'clean up the mess' created by others. Two months after the period covered by our analysis, Gillard was re-elected to the position of Prime Minister (in August, 2010), but only through forming a minority government requiring the support of several independent and minor party members. Gillard will thus continue her prime ministership as leader of a 'hung parliament', a highly precarious situation and one which is perhaps anticipated by the glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). It remains to be seen how Gillard's leadership will eventually be judged, but it seems clear, and perhaps not coincidental, that the first woman in the role has started out her prime ministership on a more precarious path than most. The greater likelihood of being given leadership opportunities in risky situations – with its attendant greater potential for failure – is a clear potential downside of displaying a communal leadership style. Further research designed to specify and untangle the relationships between communal leadership style and the nature of the opportunities for leadership that result from it are needed before it can be concluded that displays of communality are an effective strategy for addressing the under-representation of women in positions of leadership.

Real world examples such as the one we have analysed here can help give a clearer understanding of the nature of portrayals of female politicians in the media, and can provide evidence for the usefulness of hypotheses derived in less naturalistic experimental studies, while also suggesting new questions for future experimental studies. Of course, as noted earlier, there are aspects of the events discussed in this paper that are important to how the events themselves and the role of key protagonists – especially Gillard – are discussed that are specific to this context. In particular, the unprecedented usurping of an incumbent first term prime minister lent a level of intrigue and drama to these events that must certainly have coloured the ways in which the actions and motivations of key players were constructed. And although politics provides high profile examples of women achieving success and power in a traditionally male dominated sphere and is thus an important arena in which to study constructions of such women, there are aspects of the political role that are particular and that may not translate seamlessly to other organisational settings. However, despite these caveats, such a high profile event as a nation witnessing its first female prime minister provides a moment in which society turns its attention to gender and both asks and answers questions about what kinds of achievements are possible for women and about the role that gender plays in the opportunities that exist for leadership, power and influence in contemporary western societies. The construction of Julia Gillard's rise to power suggests that ambition can be accepted and (perhaps) admired in a powerful woman so long as it is enacted in appropriately communal and collective ways. However, although Gillard may declare herself 'the first redhead', it is clear that it is gender and not hair colour that has set many of the parameters for her success to date and that will continue to shape the ways in which women's aspirations to power and leadership are constructed.

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