***Women Leaders and Gender Stereotyping in the UK Press:
A Poststructuralist Approach*
Judith Baxter (2018)
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Reviewed by Nancy Henaku

Women Leaders and Gender Stereotyping in the UK Press: A Poststructuralist Approach is the latest of Judith Baxter's numerous works exploring the intersections between language, women and leadership. The six-chaptered book has four main purposes. First, it explores gendered representations of women leaders from varied professions (that is, politics, business and entertainment media) in selected UK newspapers. Second, it examines constructions of women leaders across the 'feminist agenda spectrum', a framework that identifies a range of implied attitudes towards feminism in press representations of female leaders. Here, Baxter identifies articles that are profeminist, gender-neutral and antifeminist. Third, it explores the contributions of three critical perspectives – namely, Kanter's leadership stereotype, feminist agenda spectrum and the reflexive approach – in analysing gendered discourses. Finally, it explores the potentialities of the reflexive approach in examining newspaper texts.

Informed by feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA), Baxter examines samples of a corpus comprising a hundred articles, collected over twenty-four months, from three UK newspapers: *the Daily Mail*, a centre-right tabloid newspaper; *the Sunday Times*, a middle-ground broadsheet and *the Guardian*, a centre-left, mid-sized newspaper. Baxter's selection of these newspapers is described as 'semi-ethnographic' (p. 13); thus, the selected texts are not meant to be representative of the politics and readership of all British newspapers (p. vii). However, Baxter's analysis reinforces (and

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enriches) previous scholarly observations about the often problematic representations of female leadership in the media even as it makes significant theoretical and methodological contributions towards understanding the discursive dimensions of women's leadership challenges.

Baxter argues that in spite of women's growing success in several professions in the UK, newspapers frequently produce 'gendered, stereotyped and/or essentialized' constructions of women leaders (p. 2). This is, for instance, evident in Chapter 2, where Baxter employs Kanter's four women leader stereotypes (iron maiden/battle-axe, seductress, mother/school marm, pet) and a fifth one (queen bee, included by Baxter) in examining representations of UK Prime Minister Theresa May. Her analysis shows that representations of May align with the iron maiden/battle-axe, queen bee and seductress stereotypes. The result is that May comes across as simultaneously charming, sexy and cruel. For Baxter, such stereotypes are harmful to women's leadership potential in two ways: first, they suggest that women are not suited for leadership in a male-dominated professional world; and second, they may dissuade women from engaging in leadership and political activities. Interestingly, Baxter's work suggests that even newspapers, such as *The Guardian*, which have a feminist orientation cannot be exempted from such problematic constructions because underlying their liberal feminist outlook are essentialist notions that conceive gender in binarisms and ignore complexities by reducing women to victims. In the same manner, texts that directly denigrate women leaders are likely to contain some ambiguities and contradictions. This argument draws attention to the need for complex analysis of gendered representation through careful attention to internal contradictions within texts and the possibility for alternative readings. In this regard, Baxter's 'tri-perspectival approach' is useful because as she explains 'multiple, contrasting "windows" on a text can provide a richer range of textual meanings and insights' (p. 3). Baxter's analysis not only challenges simplistic categorisations of texts but also empowers readers for deconstructive readings that provide new insights into women leaders' complex subjectivities.

Baxter's methodological contribution is the book's main merit. The book is structured around the three critical perspectives used in examining data. Besides Chapter 1, which presents an overview of the theoretical framework of the book, each chapter focuses on at least one of the three methodologies. Chapter 2 points to the usefulness of Kanter's woman leader stereotypes in deconstructing articles that malign women leaders. Significantly, the chapter provides a discursive/linguistic basis for Kanter's classification of woman leader stereotypes. In Chapter 3, Baxter uses the feminist agenda spectrum (FAS) to examine representations of Tamara

Mellon, the fashion designer and business leader. For Baxter, FAS could reveal deep-rooted gendered assumptions that may not align with an article's official rhetoric. Baxter's use of the FAS in examining data draws attention to the significant connections between attitudes towards feminism and the problematic representations of women in the media. Baxter's main theoretical contribution is the reflexive approach respectively discussed and applied in Chapters 4 and 5. The reflexive approach, which is based on FPDA (see Baxter 2003), involves three stages: first, analysis of texts along the grain; second, deconstruction of texts against the grain; and third, reconstruction of alternative readings from discursive evidence. The reflexive approach is applicable to 'four ascending levels of discourse analysis': micro-linguistic, textual, representational and discursive. For Baxter, this multilevel analysis should result in leakages of gendered assumptions that hints at a more complex leader than a text projects. These aporias allow dominant representations to be undermined and reconstructed. A crucial insight of Baxter's work is its scepticism towards all texts on women leaders regardless of their feminist credentials.

Baxter's main aim is in exploring approaches for analysing representations of women in newspaper texts. In Chapter 6, where the three critical perspectives are evaluated, Baxter indicates her preference for the reflexive approach. For her, it supplements and supersedes the two others. She suggests that the deconstruction in the reflexive approach is similar to those of critical discourse analysis (CDA). However, she indicates that 'the reflexive approach ... does not share the critical agenda of seeking out abuses of power' so as to effect transformation (p. 149). This is an interesting argument as it does not seem to align with the book's feminist outlook. Baxter's argument is connected to her poststructuralist influences which, as Breeze (2011:500) explains, reject normative theory as imbued with 'totalizing metanarratives'. The question then is: what do we do with the problematic representations identified in these texts? It seems to me that Baxter is concerned with a certain overemphasis on negative critique and the often top-down, linear approaches to the analysis of power in perspectives such as CDA (see Breeze 2011). Baxter's reconstructive stage provides a solution as it allows readers to move beyond the kind of negative analysis characteristic of CDA's post-Marxian critique.

This book is significant for several reasons. First, there is the need for more linguistic perspective on women and leadership. Second, it provides a straightforward step-by-step methodology for language, gender and leadership researchers through its detailed description of linguistic, discursive and semiotic features of texts. Moreover, it provides ample fine grained analysis that could be beneficial to those who are new to [feminist] dis-

course analysis. Third, the reflexive approach provides scholars with skills that make it possible to maintain critical distance as they deconstruct texts and when necessary, reconstruct for a richer and positive reading. Baxter's analytical practices in this book provides a good example of how reflexivity could be achieved. Significantly, her analysis comes with a caveat: '[a]s a reflexive researcher, I ... acknowledge that the discourses I have identified are interpretive, provisional and partial; they are an effect of my western feminist poststructuralist inclinations, and ... my choices could be disputed and other discourses identified by other readers' (p. 10). By this statement, she suggests that her analysis is open for contestation. Finally, for an approach that Baxter hopes 'can be simplified and adapted for a wider audience' (p. 153), the argument and theoretical substance remain accessible even to those with little or no knowledge in language, gender and leadership research.

References

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