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ESSAY

Hillary Clinton's Benghazi Hearing Coverage: Political Competence, Authenticity, and the Persistence of the Double Bind

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ABSTRACT

Despite inroads made toward gender equality, research has shown that news coverage of female politicians typically follows gendered lines that disregard women's competence in political affairs. Grounded in a feminist theoretical framework, this textual analysis examines articles from eight news websites covering then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 2013 congressional testimony about the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya. The findings suggest that though this news media coverage shows there has been progress regarding how a notable female politician was represented, this discourse still employs stereotypical feminine frames and questions her competence as a leader. Moreover, coverage hinted at a new bind pitting competence against authenticity, with Clinton's emotional displays during the hearing deemed as either a lack of control that undermined her capability or an insincere show of emotion to escape blame for the situation.

KEYWORDS

Hillary Clinton; double bind theory; feminist theory; gender; leadership; news media; politics

On January 23, 2013, Hillary Clinton made headlines as she executed one of her last significant duties as secretary of state of the Obama administration: testifying in the congressional committee hearings regarding the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya. This deadly assault took place the night of September 11, 2012, when a group of Islamist militants armed with anti-aircraft weapons and rocket-propelled grenades targeted the American consulate, killing U.S. ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. Both of the committees before which Clinton testified were made up primarily of White men, and, as has often been the case in her career, the circumstances of the hearings highlight a unique problem women face in the political sphere: presumptions that men are still the primary decision makers guiding international relations. Traditional normative understandings of gender have prescribed masculine attributes to the public sphere of politics (Burke & Mazzarella, 2008; Gidengil & Everitt, 2003; Jamieson, 1995; Meeks, 2012; Templin, 1999). For instance, the figure of a political leader is often linked in public opinion polls to stereotypical male traits, such as competitiveness, strength, and ambition, particularly for high-profile positions (e.g., Devere & Davies, 2006; Harp,

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Loke, & Bachmann, 2010; Rosas-Moreno & Bachmann, 2015). This is neither a natural nor necessary articulation but rather a cultural and ideological construction.

The language and myths associated with masculinity, politics, and power have been constructed and viewed through a patriarchal lens (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Ross, 2002, 2009). Women and femininity have traditionally been constructed in dichotomous opposition to these notions. As more women enter the public sphere of political discourse and remain within that sphere for longer periods of time (as Clinton has), this study explores whether mediated coverage has improved in terms of the rhetorical mechanisms related to the language and myths about gender.

To date, there is ample evidence demonstrating that media coverage of women in the political realm is decidedly different from that of men occupying the same spaces (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Falk, 2008; Gidengil & Everitt, 2003; Loke, Harp, & Bachmann, 2011; Meeks, 2012; Ross, 2009; Scharrer, 2002). The gendered nature of this media coverage forms the center of this inquiry, while a feminist analysis illuminates the problems with this discourse. Hillary Rodham Clinton offers an informative case from which to understand how gender and language intersect to form symbolic frames that reinforce perceived gender differences. Clinton's time in the media spotlight spans more than two decades, from her tenure as a non-traditional first lady in the 1990s, to her time as a U.S. senator, presidential hopeful, and, more recently, as U.S. secretary of state for the Obama administration (Meeks, 2012; Scharrer, 2002; Templin, 1999). Further, with her second presidential bid for the Democratic Party ticket, Clinton may become the first female U.S. president; by the time the primary started in February 2016, she was the top choice among Democratic voters and deemed the most likely winner (Agiesta, 2016; Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016). Based on previous scholarship analyzing media coverage of women politicians, this research considers the mediated discourse of one of the most prominent U.S. political figures—who also happens to be a woman.

The purpose of this article is to further knowledge regarding the rhetorical mechanisms that perpetuate gendered stereotypes of women in the discursive public sphere and reinforce a double bind in relation to leadership. Using a feminist theoretical framework, this research examined coverage of the Benghazi hearings in 93 stories published on the U.S. news websites with the highest traffic, as determined by eBizMBA.com.

Theoretical framework

This analysis draws from feminist communication, feminist rhetorical, gender performance, and double bind theories—particularly Jamieson's (1995) femininity/competence bind—to explain how language used to describe female politicians, like Hillary Clinton, creates symbolic frames. These symbolic frames have important consequences in real worldviews as they shape the ways in which people relate to one another (Burke, 1984).

Feminist communication scholars have highlighted the important relationship between mass mediated texts and cultural viewpoints, explaining that the discursive representation of women is a social practice through which beliefs and myths about gender are constructed (Ross, 2009). Feminist rhetorical theorists have critiqued the link between language and patriarchy, noting that language helps us order our world (Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 2006). Concepts are shared and significant when they are named and labeled, as they establish “a link with others for whom the concept is meaningful” (Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 2006, p. 12). For example, male/female and masculine/feminine are language categories that

construct shared meaning. These categories, however, also obscure the social and political differences between men and women. Such rhetorical mechanisms are assumed to be natural categories but are cultural concepts that function to keep White patriarchal power in place: “Although race and sex are seen as the cause or origin of oppression, they are actually the sign or mark imposed by the oppressor” (Kramarae, 2006, p. 41). That language is rooted in male control (as men have historically controlled the norms of use) must not escape recognition in an analysis of gendered rhetorical mechanisms and the dichotomous constructions within social (and, in this case, mediated) discourse. Language is a mechanism for social and ideological control (Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 2006; Kramarae, 2006).

The dichotomous nature of language as illustrated in the male/female, masculine/feminine construction of gender difference offers a problematic position from which to make sense of the world. Jamieson (1995) explains that people respond to complex situations by separating and “dichotomizing its elements. So we contrast good and bad, strong and weak . . . and in doing so assume that a person can’t be both at once—or somewhere in between” (p. 5). According to Jamieson, this double bind is a “rhetorical construct that posits two and only two alternatives, one or both penalizing the person being offered them” (p. 14).

Two of the most prominent double binds Jamieson identifies for women in leadership are femininity/competency and womb/brain. These two constructions prove problematic for women in the political sphere who are expected to illustrate their competency and intellect. As the bind suggests, to be a woman (i.e., to have a womb) and to perform feminine qualities conflicts with perceptions of competence. Power is understood to be a masculine domain, and within the framework of double bind theory, to be feminine then is to lack power. This falls within the same construct that casts women as emotional and men as rational (Falk, 2009; Gesualdi, 2013; Kelly & Hutson-Comeaux, 1999). Another commonly circulated dichotomy is that women are shy and men are assertive—and if females show assertiveness, they are deemed aggressive and bitchy (Devere & Davies, 2006; Gidengil & Everitt, 2003; Falk, 2008; Mandell, 2015). The double bind as a rhetorical frame clearly presents a problem for women politicians, as discursive constructions that highlight their femininity then preclude them from possessing competency—to emphasize their womanhood (their womb) means to understate their brains.

These binds became evident once again in the coverage of the 2013 Benghazi hearings, when then likely presidential hopeful Clinton, at the center of a political spectacle, defended herself against a group of mostly male politicians.

Literature review

Studies addressing the coverage of female politicians in different countries, including the United States, agree on a disturbing and frustrating point: Coverage is often sex stereotypical to the extent that the media function to undermine or even dismiss women politicians. The literature shows that coverage of female politicians is inequitable; women in politics receive less coverage, are more likely than men to be paraphrased instead of quoted, and are constantly trivialized and undermined (Burke & Mazzarella, 2008; Byerly & Ross, 2006; Falk, 2008; Ross, 2009). Their platforms are usually second- or third-tier material, whereas their family issues (such as children left at home while mommy is campaigning), sartorial style, and personality traits are given high prominence (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Devere & Davis, 2006; Falk, 2008; Harp et al., 2010; Loke et al., 2011; Mandell, 2015; Meeks,

2012). Such coverage marks women politicians as different and makes their gender the central focus of their political personas (Ross, 2002, 2009). Comparative research suggests that while these biases are present in other countries they are particularly pervasive in U.S. media (e.g., Falk, 2008). As a consequence, political women struggle to attain legitimacy and are often deemed not tough enough and “too nice to get involved in the dirty business of big boys’ politics” (Ross, 2002, p. 40).

Another particularly problematic aspect of coverage of female politicians is the way in which certain emotions are deemed typically—or even appropriately—female or male in a society that insists on seeing gender in dichotomous terms, as in Bem’s (1981, 1993) sex-role index. This is an inventory that assesses how individuals identify themselves with degrees of maleness, femaleness, and androgyny—traits that are culturally defined rather than biological. Similarly, Best and Williams’ (1990) multinational study lists 300 traits that are believed to characterize men with much greater (or much lesser) frequency than they refer to women. The list includes insensitive, assertive, independent, and aggressive for men and emotional, dependent, noncompetitive, and gentle for women.

This gendered motif of emotion translates into differential evaluations for women and men in the public sphere (Citrin, Roberts, & Frederickson, 2004; Gidengil & Everitt, 2003; Shields, 2000, 2002) and works to the disadvantage of women in politics. In media discourses the role of a political leader is linked to stereotypical male attributes and qualities, including ambition and assertiveness, which are viewed as counterstereotypical in women (Devere & Davies, 2006; Gesualdi, 2013; Harp et al., 2010; Rosas-Moreno & Bachmann, 2015).

The assumption that women are emotional and thus incapable of logic and reason is a widespread belief at the core of gendered stereotyping (Kelly & Hutson-Comeaux, 1999; Shields, 2002), with media texts relying on those stereotypes to ascribe emotions as more typical or appropriate for women. Such discourse ends up reinforcing the femininity/competence double bind (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Mandell, 2015). Because emotions in general are seen as needing to be controlled (consider expressions like “losing control,” “emotional outburst,” or “feeling upset”), the woman–emotion pair further conveys women’s lack of reason and competence to lead or hold positions of power.

Furthermore, while both men and women can experience emotions, the gendered cast of emotions shapes our understanding of sex roles. For instance, men are said to *act* emotional whereas women *are* emotional (Shields, 2002; see also Shields, 2000). This is not to negate that there are sex differences in emotion. However, research has found that the differences are not as ubiquitous as cultural assumptions and media discourses suggest (Shields, 2002).

Along these lines, both anger and sadness play an interesting role in gender boundaries. Shields (2002) highlights that anger has long been linked to masculinity and is associated with action, or at least an impulse to change things. It is a masculine prerogative, an emotion of *entitlement*. Sadness and crying, on the other hand, are not considered appropriate for men (e.g., “boys don’t cry”). As emotions of *powerlessness*, argues Shields (2002), they are deemed more properly feminine. Breaking such gendered emotion norms (e.g., a very angry woman, a man crying in public) is often met with social sanction (Citrin et al., 2004; Gesualdi, 2013).

These gendered assumptions regarding emotion are pervasive. Empirical data suggest that evaluations of politicians’ emotions favor women who adopt “a rational, unemotional

approach” (Hitchon, Chang, & Harris, 1997, p. 64) and indicate that people rely on their beliefs about men’s and women’s emotionality to evaluate how well politicians can manage different issues (Sanbonmatsu, 2003). Similarly, the argument that women are too emotional and unable to handle crises, and therefore not viable as politicians, remains a recurring theme used by the U.S. press in its coverage of women running for president since 1880 (Falk, 2008). In her study of eight specific campaigns, Erika Falk concluded the media’s focus on women’s emotional expressions underscores cultural assumptions about women’s unsuitability for public office. Further, Hillary Clinton’s expressions, whether interpreted as displaying lack of emotion or too much emotion, have garnered much focus in the media (e.g., Falk, 2009; Templin, 1999).

In her trailblazing political career, Clinton has been the subject of intense media scrutiny that exemplifies many of the gendered underpinnings of media discourse on women politicians (e.g., Harp et al., 2010; Tucker-McLaughlin & Campbell, 2012). As a first lady, media portrayals and depictions often focused on Clinton’s defiance of gender norms and her counterstereotypical traits. She was cast as a nontraditional woman obsessed with power; her strength emasculated her husband; and her political ambitions overstepped her acceptable role (Bystrom, McKinnon, & Chaney, 1999; Edwards & Chen, 2000; Scharrer & Bissell, 2000; Templin, 1999). Such negative depictions implicitly and explicitly criticized Clinton for being involved in White House politics rather than sitting on the sidelines, suggesting she transgressed boundaries between private and public spaces. This tone continued when Clinton made her historic transition from first lady to political candidate and ran for a New York seat in the U.S. Senate (Scharrer, 2002). Her bid for elected office was met with skepticism, and news stories portraying Clinton as politically active (e.g., reports on issue positions or poll numbers) contained more negative statements and a more negative tone than those regarding her traditional, nonpolitical activities (Scharrer, 2002). Similarly, Clinton’s bid for the Democratic Party nomination in the 2008 presidential election also resulted in negative portrayals and comments, questioning her chances to win even at times when she was the front-runner for her party ticket and seemingly casting doubts about a woman’s suitability for office (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Carroll, 2009; Lawrence & Rose, 2010). Further, Clinton’s authenticity throughout her career has often been challenged by the media, as her actions are frequently deemed too flagrantly political to be genuine, and descriptions paint her as shrill and downright bitchy (Carroll, 2009; Parry-Giles, 2004).

An instance of the typically intense media scrutiny of Clinton’s actions and intentions was the Benghazi hearing. This highly mediatized event was covered live on multiple platforms in the final days of Clinton’s tenure as secretary of state and amid speculation of a 2016 presidential bid. Clinton’s competence as head of U.S. diplomacy and her capacity to respond to intense probing about her responsibility were under examination.

Analyzing news coverage of Clinton during the Benghazi hearings helps articulate the ways in which gender played a role in this recent discourse. Using previous research to guide our analysis, we investigated the role of gender in these news reports, guided by two overarching questions:

RQ1: How do traditional and nontraditional ideas about femininity in regard to double bind theory appear in the texts?

RQ2: How do traditional notions of gendered emotionality appear in the texts in regard to Hillary Clinton?

Media coverage of the hearings is a particularly interesting site for analysis: Not only was this an event in which a female politician participated in a heavily male-dominated setting, but also Clinton's performance was at the core of the political event. The juxtaposition of gender and politics, televised for all to see, is especially noteworthy.

Methods

The present study relies mostly on a qualitative analysis of stories published in the top news websites in English, as rated by eBizMBA in January 2013. An e-business knowledgebase commonly used in the industry, eBizMBA regularly publishes rankings of top-visited websites based on each site's Alexa global traffic rank and rankings from both U.S.-based Compete and Quantcast. We excluded news aggregators, such as Google News, and non-U.S. outlets, such as BBC News, so the final sample includes online news articles and commentary from eight websites: CNN, MSNBC, *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, Fox News, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*.

While these outlets differ in terms of audiences and backgrounds, all are prominent players in the current media landscape. Moreover, news websites are key avenues for analysis because, even though there has been a significant readership decline in traditional daily newspapers, the overall news market has grown as a result of the availability of online coverage (Pew Internet Institute, 2010). Around the time of the hearings, more than half of Americans got their daily news online, and today it is the main source for news consumers (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2013).

Clinton's two-part testimony on the attack of a U.S. diplomatic outpost in Benghazi, Libya, received widespread coverage because it was one of her last formal activities as secretary of state. To garner the varied representations of Clinton's persona and performance during the January 23, 2013, hearings, we used each website's search feature and collected all stories with the words *Clinton* and *Benghazi* posted from January 22 to February 4, 2013. This two-week period resulted in 93 articles, excluding duplicated stories (for example, Associated Press reports published in more than one outlet).

The rationale was to examine media texts to recognize how they construct and relate notions of femininity, competence, politics, and gender, and to examine the themes that emerged in depictions of Clinton and her testimony. While we performed a cursory comparison of the treatment in news stories to those in opinion pieces and editorials, we were more concerned with the overall themes circulated in media about Clinton's performance and emotional management with regard to the hearings. In particular, and informed by the literature, we examined the rhetorical mechanisms within the discourse, looking for the presence and absence of traditional and nontraditional ideas of masculinity, femininity, emotionality, or double binds. With this approach in mind and with a critical perspective, we read each text multiple times to identify patterns, assumptions, and narratives that formed conceptual frames. In doing so, we considered how public affairs were articulated and covered in the news websites.

Analysis

In the 93 articles examined, a dominant narrative of Clinton as a competent and respected politician emerged, particularly in news stories (in comparison to opinion columns).

However, this seemingly positive portrayal was countered by the emergence of stereotypical female depictions as coverage emphasized Clinton's emotional manner during the Benghazi hearings, a portrayal that hinted at the femininity/competence (as well as a new competence/authenticity) double bind. In the following section, we address these findings and offer an analysis of the prominent ways these websites contributed to a complex gendered discourse about Clinton.

News emphasizes Clinton's competence

The overall narrative about Clinton during the Benghazi hearings illustrated a strong and competent individual, with very few references highlighting Clinton's gender or suggesting that her gender precluded her from being competent. Generally, news stories and commentaries framed the Benghazi hearing as extremely challenging for Clinton. It was an atmosphere in which she faced numerous political foes less focused on obtaining information about the Benghazi attacks and more interested in creating a spectacle and visibility for themselves to lay the foundation for future elections.

In that context, the media told the story of an individual, Clinton, who was ready to "take on Capitol Hill" (e.g., Borovitz, 2013). Clinton was described in another MSNBC piece as one who would not allow "Benghazi—or the GOP—to bring her down" (Frumin, 2013). David Horsey of the *Los Angeles Times* surmised that "When Hillary Clinton went to Capitol Hill... Republicans opened their bags of overly ripe conspiracy theories and moldering fruitcake ideas and tossed everything at her. Every shot missed" (Horsey, 2013).

Clinton's successful tenure as secretary of state was repeatedly mentioned in the texts, furthering the narrative construction of a competent political figure. Journalists consistently used terms like "top U.S. diplomat" and CNN specifically noted that she had logged more than "950,000 miles, visiting 112 countries in four years" (Bolduan, 2013). She also enjoyed a "soaring 70% approval rating" (a number that is a rarity in contemporary U.S. politics) and was described on CNN as "sprinting to the finish as America's top diplomat" (Labott, 2013a).

In what could be a sign of the loosening of one double bind for female leadership, Clinton's competency was not explicitly questioned or deemed at odds with her gender, as has been the case in other situations involving her, including during her bid for U.S. Senate (e.g., Carroll, 2009; Scharrer, 2002). Many news media texts during the hearings, including a *New York Times* editorial, constructed Clinton as "professional and authoritative... in the witness chair" ("Republican Myopia," 2013). MSNBC published a Reuters newswire story saying that Clinton had "forcefully defend[ed]" the handling of the Benghazi attack (Mohammed & Zakaria, 2013); another MSNBC report noted that she displayed "absolute confidence" (Frumin, 2013) in her demeanor while being interrogated. Language focusing on her gender, dominant sexist narratives, and stereotypical portrayals that usually plague female politicians rarely appeared other than in relation to her emotional state during the hearings (which will be addressed shortly).

While the double bind opposes power and competence in women, in Clinton's case the mediated discourse primarily emphasized her competence and confidence. Indeed, there was no overt mention of her being masculine, unfeminine, or nontraditional, which is especially interesting as these critiques have been persistent over the years in news coverage of the pantsuit-wearing, politically ambitious Clinton (Harp et al., 2010; Lawrence & Rose,

2010; Scharrer, 2002). After more than 20 years in the public sphere with steady criticism for her lack of adherence to traditional gender roles, Clinton seems to have garnered respect for her worth as a political figure beyond her gender. Arguably, the fact that more women are moving into politics now than in past decades suggests that they are no longer a rare occurrence in this arena and inevitably subjected to gender-specific scrutiny. The news media analyzed here seemed to pay more attention to Clinton's job performance than her gender performance—except when it came to her emotional demeanor.

Portrayal of emotions underlines gendered coverage

While there were very few overt references highlighting Clinton's gender, news coverage nonetheless reverted to stereotypically gendered representations of emotions reserved primarily for women (as past research has shown; e.g., Falk, 2008). This finding marks a subtler form of gendered coverage than female politicians in the past have received. Though coverage of Clinton's testimony on Benghazi portrayed a competent figure in the secretary of state, texts often described Clinton using emotional labels that illustrated a loss of control, typical rhetorical frames used in the context of women and emotionality (e.g., Planalp, 1999). A *Los Angeles Times* story explained that at one point "Clinton's voice broke" (Richter, 2013); *USA Today* highlighted both that she "was near tears as she talked" and that "she erupted in anger" (Dorell, 2013a); and a *Washington Post* commentary described her as "blowing her lid" (Rubin, 2013). These descriptions are in line with past research findings that show how women's emotions are the focus of much attention, whereas men's emotional displays are scrutinized or mocked only when the reaction is deemed exaggerated or in violation of hegemonic masculinity (Shields, 2000, 2002), such as former Speaker of the House John Boehner's tearful episodes during important interviews and political events (Gesualdi, 2013). For women, being emotional is a part of who they are, but for men it is a trait that is demonstrated only sporadically, a peculiarity that is *not a part of being* male. The two emotions most prominent in these websites' coverage of Clinton during the Benghazi hearing were anger and sadness.

Anger

Typically understood as masculine, anger served as the dominant emotion ruling this narrative. *USA Today's* news accounts described Clinton as "combative" (e.g., Dorell, 2013b) as she "erupted in anger" (e.g., Dorell, 2013a). She was also described as "emotional and fierce" at times in both the *Huffington Post* (e.g., Cassata, 2013) and MSNBC (Mohammed & Zakaria, 2013). Further, texts described her as "defiant" (e.g., in *Huffington Post*; see Cassata, 2013) when interrogated about the terrorist bombings, and CNN remarked that she "shouted ... in frustration" (Dougherty & Cohen, 2013) at her interrogators. Other texts labeled her "fiery" (e.g., CNN; see Hounshell, 2013) and noted that she "got testy on Capitol Hill" (e.g., *Huffington Post*; see "Hillary Clinton, Ron Johnson Engage in Heated Exchange at Benghazi Hearing," 2013), examples of terms reserved for women's emotions and not typically used to describe men's displays of anger.

According to previous research (e.g., Shields, 2002), when women are angry they are described or constructed as expressing a weaker and more emotional version of a traditionally male trait. Through the cultural context of gender norms, the texts implied that she was not competent in dealing with a tense situation and had trouble controlling her

emotions—a common frame that feeds the femininity/competence bind. The texts then tapped into the idea that women (and emotions) are irrational, and Clinton was cast as somewhat powerless, expressing an invalid emotion, with her personality (or gender) getting the best of her. In other words, and in line with that double bind, womb trumped brain. Anger (reserved for males) signified an inappropriate response for Clinton to express and therefore became an important and gendered aspect of the coverage.

Though Clinton was in fact frustrated by many of her interrogators at the Benghazi hearings (arguably a justifiable reaction) the choice of words used to report on her emotional state reflected the way women are often described when displaying anger: a result of powerlessness and internal characteristics rather than a valid response to external circumstances. Women are traditionally portrayed as out of control (one side of a rational/irrational double bind) and overcome with emotion as these examples in CNN illustrated: she “lost her cool” and had a “rare loss of composure” (Stanley, 2013). Note that Clinton’s reaction was deemed atypical, as she has often been cast as too cold and too controlled to be either genuine or feminine.

Demonstrations of frustration and anger were heavily emphasized and repeated throughout the discourse. CNN accounts reported that Clinton “banged her hand on the table,” “shouted ... in frustration,” had an “outburst,” was “shaking fists,” and “bristled at claims” that the Obama administration had misled the public with regard to Benghazi (e.g., Dougherty & Cohen, 2013; Labott, 2013b; Liptak, 2013). Within traditionally gendered rhetorical frames, the narrative here suggests that Clinton’s emotions could be a handicap to her leadership skills. These news organizations may have moved beyond overt sexist coverage related to a woman politician’s appearance and family life, but the coverage confirmed gendered stereotypes with an either/or script when it comes to femininity and competence. In doing so, news coverage emphasized the rational/irrational double bind in relation to emotions even while portraying a competent woman who seemingly breaks the womb/brain and femininity/competency binds.

It was not just partisan conservative media that represented Clinton’s emotional state in a negative light. News outlets such as MSNBC and *Huffington Post*, both considered liberal news venues, reinforced the stereotypical view of women as intrinsically emotional and powerless. A few texts, however, did construct Clinton’s anger as a legitimate reaction rather than a lack of control or a personality failure, deviating from stereotypical understandings that allow men to be aggressive and express anger while expecting women to be meek and self-controlled. An interesting example found in the *Washington Post* by opinion writer Jonathan Capehart (2013) praised Clinton’s performance as legitimate while also drawing attention to her gender. This is important because, while it calls out Clinton as a woman, the writer is pointing out an example of a strong, assertive political female. Talking about intense questioning by Republican Senator Ron Johnson, who suggested that the public had been deceived about the origins of the attack by the Department of State, Capehart wrote:

With each of these experiences, Clinton learned the do’s and don’ts of public combat, especially with Republicans. That she gave as good as she got from Johnson bespoke a woman comfortable enough in her own skin and with her considerable stature to tell Johnson to stuff it. Brava! (Capehart, 2013)

Over the years, Clinton has consistently been described as counterstereotypical and defiant of gender norms to the extent of generating much uneasiness among the media

and citizens, who deemed her unlikable (e.g., Bystrom et al., 1999; Lawrence & Rose, 2010). For such a nontraditional woman, displaying anger seems to be considered a valid reaction in some of the media texts. This suggests Clinton's nonnormativity might in fact have helped make inroads in how female politicians' displays of emotions are perceived when the media go beyond gender dichotomies, at least when it comes to typically male emotions.

Sadness

During Clinton's testimony, she was visibly affected when speaking about the deaths of four Americans in the bombings. Journalists and columnists quickly reported this display of emotion in every one of the news websites studied. It was highlighted in the coverage of the Benghazi hearings, and in some cases the headline exclusively referred to Clinton's sadness (e.g., "Hillary Clinton Chokes Up During Benghazi Hearing," Johnson, 2013). This sadness was reminiscent of media coverage of Clinton's 2008 reaction during a political rally in New Hampshire, when her voice quivered and her eyes welled up when responding to a question from an undecided voter in the audience (Falk, 2009). The fact that Clinton expressed sadness, even in a rather controlled fashion, was deemed noteworthy and was discussed (often in colorful terms) in at least 80 of the stories analyzed.

Clinton's display of emotion was described as "near tears" in Fox News, "emotional" in *USA Today*, and "choking up" on MSNBC (e.g., "Clinton Takes on Critics Over Benghazi," 2013; Dorell, 2013a; Leigh, 2013). *Huffington Post* highlighted that "her voice crack[ed] as she recalled" the victims' families ("Hillary Clinton, Ron Johnson Engage in Heated Exchange at Benghazi Hearing," 2013), and CNN reported both that "Clinton showed a personal side in discussing what happened" (Dougherty & Cohen, 2013) and "grew emotional and held back tears" (Labott, 2013b). Writers also commonly included the following passage of her testimony in the news coverage: "I stood next to President Obama as the Marines carried those flag-draped caskets off the plane at Andrews. I put my arms around the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters" (e.g., Dorell, 2013a).

While it is true Clinton was affected when speaking about the deaths of these Americans (which can be witnessed by watching her testimony), it bears consideration why writers so heavily emphasized and so often mentioned this reaction. Repeatedly stressed in all of the news websites studied, this response fits stereotypical notions of women's emotionality, even though throughout her career Clinton has rather contradicted basic gender expectations and has often been deemed too cold or even emotionless—and thus unfeminine (e.g., Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Falk, 2009). The heavy emphasis on the moment (particularly in tandem with an emphasis on her anger) alludes to the common idea that women *are* emotional and cannot control themselves, a gender trait that makes them less fit than their male counterparts for positions of leadership. Without directly questioning her leadership skills, the coverage tapped into long-held notions that showing emotions in politics creates liabilities, at least in the United States (see Burrow, 2005; Koziak, 1999; Redlawsk, 2003). In the words of Winsky Mattei (1998), if one is to be a political leader one should be rational, deliberate, and market driven, not irrational and uncontrollable as the gendered reading of the woman-as-emoter notion suggests. Emotional behavior is seen as a loss of control and an inappropriate response that cannot provide rational ground for actions (e.g., Burrow, 2005).

While Clinton expressed appropriate feminine emotions, her actions can be regarded as inappropriate for a political leader. Within the masculine framework of politics, she showed weakness and incompetence, as sadness and crying are linked to powerlessness. This construction again conveys the double bind of femininity/competence. One can only wonder whether this display of emotion would have resulted in the same heavily emphasized moment had Clinton been a man. Male politicians' displays of sadness, however, are typically met with a different reaction from the press. Indeed, men are allowed to display emotions in very specific contexts in which they are deemed "human" and their authenticity is not questioned (e.g., Gesualdi, 2013).

More concerning in relation to Clinton is the undercurrent in some of the media discourse hinting at her display of sadness as a sign of frailty, tapping into the gendered assumption that women are vulnerable and cannot endure much. She was described as "choked with emotion" on CNN (Dougherty & Cohen, 2013) and "near tears" in *USA Today* (e.g., Dorell, 2013a), rather than "moved," "touched," or "compassionate." A commentary in *Huffington Post* criticizing such word choices summarized the notion behind them in the following terms: "If a woman even chokes up, she is a weak little girl who can't be trusted in a position of power" (Bamberger, 2013). Certainly, as emotional behavior, like gender, is dictated by situational contexts, social relationships, and cultural conventions (Fivush & Buckner, 2000), a woman's failure to manage her emotions is rather notorious. That renders Clinton's less-than-stoic performance as a liability rather than a simple reaction for a political figure.

The new bind: Competence/authenticity

Clinton's show of sadness became a strategic talking point as some political foes accused her of faking it to gain sympathy or divert attention. This has been a common accusation when talking about women's tears in general and Clinton's public displays of sorrow in particular (e.g., Falk, 2009; Parry-Giles, 2014). In that sense, coverage of the hearings is in line with past media discourses about Clinton, portraying her not only as an unsentimental person but also as too ambitious to have heartfelt reactions (e.g., Bachmann, 2014; Carroll, 2009; Templin, 1999).

Such a narrative suggests a new bind that seems to be Clinton specific: one that pits competency in opposition to authenticity. Indeed, even though Clinton's credentials are generally acknowledged, her capability as a politician is marred by questions about her authenticity as a human being to the extent that she has been caricatured as a 21st-century Lady Macbeth (see, e.g., Falk, 2009). Over the years Clinton has been labeled dishonest about her intentions and ambitions, with her focus being on how she can benefit and gain power rather than the citizens to whom she is seemingly pandering. Thus, if Clinton tears up it is deemed a performance rather than a genuine reaction—and regarded with suspicion that hers are crocodile tears to obtain some desired result.

When Clinton does show her humanity with an emotional display, either her capability is compromised by a show of weakness or her display is considered part of a calculated ploy. One of the senators at the hearings complained to CNN that Clinton "used an emotional trump card" to avoid his questions ("Tense Moments at Clinton's Hearings," 2013), and a column on Fox News argued that the display had been strategically timed. Because she has often been considered hard and lacking warmth (and unfeminine as a

result), in ways hindering her likeability (e.g., Falk, 2009; Lawrence & Rose, 2010), had Clinton not choked up when talking about the victims of the Benghazi attacks she would have arguably been criticized for being too cold and unsympathetic. This perfectly illustrates the double bind's no-win situation.

This is not the first time that media discourse has portrayed Clinton as flagrantly political and calculating. Such rendering paints her as a conniving individual even when showing emotions, dismissing the chance of spontaneous or heartfelt reactions (e.g., Parry-Giles, 2014). The rhetorical frame thus advances the idea that Clinton can be either competent or genuine but not both. Because competence is unfeminine, Clinton is portrayed either as fake or frail when being more emotionally open.

On the other hand, various articles lambasted the notion that the sadness displayed by Clinton was faked. A *Washington Post* column criticized Senator Johnson for suggesting the emotion was insincere: "Oh no, he didn't! It's one thing to disagree about whether the genesis of the Benghazi attack is critical to understanding how to prevent future assaults. It's another entirely to insinuate that Clinton cried on command, faking tears to avoid facing the music" (Cillizza, 2013). This example is important in that it illustrates how traditional gender tropes are being countered and critiqued in mainstream mediated discourse.

Media critiques of media

Columns and commentary that critiqued media coverage of Clinton during the Benghazi hearings made up another form of text found within the 93 articles. An analysis in the *Huffington Post* accused the media of sexist coverage in descriptions of Clinton as "erupting" during her response to Johnson (Bamberger, 2013). The article noted that instead of describing Clinton as a woman who "erupted," she could have been described instead as "speaking forcefully." The word *erupt* connotes images of a volcano exploding: often unpredictable, without reliable estimate of size or exact nature. This also resonates with an irrational/female versus rational/male dichotomy, presenting Clinton as a woman unable to contain her emotions and reinforcing the femininity/competency and womb/brain binds.

Another case of media criticism focused on the cover of the *New York Post*, which contained this headline: "No Wonder Bill's Afraid: Hillary Explodes With Rage at Benghazi Hearing." While we acknowledge that the *New York Post* is known for its sensationalist headlines and was not part of the sample in this research study, the cover is still important as it became part of the studied discourse via this critique. Similarly, a January 24, 2013, *Huffington Post* column highlighted the cover, noting, "Sigh. *The New York Post* kept it classy" ("*New York Post's* Raging Hillary Clinton Cover," 2013). This critical coverage indicates that a cultural shift might be occurring in terms of ideologies about women, power, and politics, with both blatant and covert sexism being questioned. Media audiences are witnessing discursive evidence of this ideological shift in how we see political women through media criticism of media practices.

Discussion and conclusions

News coverage of Clinton is well studied in research concerning women in U.S. politics. This study, which investigated news websites to understand reporting on Clinton during

a significant moment in her political career, offers important findings and illustrates more nuanced or subtle ways in which journalists and writers are covering Clinton (and gendering politicians). Significant findings include that Clinton is presented as a competent political figure but also that Clinton's emotions are referenced in gendered ways. The analysis also suggests a new bind that allows the media to discuss seemingly insincere displays of emotion and considers ways in which media writers are bringing debates about Clinton's coverage into mediated discourse, a significant indicator of a broader public conversation about gender, media, and politics.

First of all, a common narrative in the texts related to the Benghazi hearings was Clinton's successful and outstanding tenure as U.S. secretary of state. Coverage portrayed Clinton as a capable and hardworking official. This is even more remarkable given the news media's historical scrutiny of Clinton and the gendered lens informing much of that critique. That framing of Clinton must be understood within the context of the popularity and longevity of Clinton in the public sphere of U.S. politics. With more than two decades in the political arena, Clinton has been critically examined by the media and the public at length. Clinton's work as the country's top diplomat proved that, in her case, being a woman and doing her job are not at odds. Clinton has endured a long-lasting vetting process in the United States and, individual preferences aside, she seems to have finally convinced a large portion of citizens of her suitability for politics. Other women who are less well-known, respected, or popular may not have received such gender-neutral coverage. Clinton may have cracked the glass ceiling at last, causing a permanent fracturing in traditional narratives about female politicians and loosening the femininity/competence double bind.

Unfortunately, this study notes the gendered motif in the coverage of emotions and highlights an important bind underpinning the dichotomy between femininity and competency: a conflict between authenticity and competence in women politicians. The decidedly gendered lens informing how the writers repeatedly described Clinton's emotionality (especially her displays of anger and sadness), while subtler than other stereotypical coverage of female politicians, still highlights the age-old notion that women are emotional and lack the control necessary for the world of public affairs and policy. Likewise, questions regarding the genuineness of her emotions pit her capability as a politician against sincerity. This serves to perpetuate the either/or script of the double bind: One is either feminine (or emotionally open) or competent. It also insinuates that women are unstable and incapable of commanding a higher office in politics and might play an emotional card to get away with it.

Thus, this analysis has uncovered that while news reporting on the Benghazi case focusing on then Secretary of State Clinton on the whole broke stereotypical gender elements, coverage of Clinton's emotions/reactions during the Benghazi trial did revert back to the damaging stereotypes of an emotional-thus-irrational, womb-holding-thus-brainless woman. An examination of coverage of the most recent congressional probe into the Benghazi attacks in October 2015 suggests that media reliance on gendered scripts remains to a certain extent. Several analysts stressed that in the new hearings Clinton needed to "look presidential," that is, calm and in control (Gearan, Tumulty, & Viebeck, 2015; "Hillary Clinton Stronger After Benghazi Hearing," 2015). While Clinton managed to do so in a "grueling" 11-hour hearing, the media message once again relied on the notion that women are frail and that (female) displays of emotions have no room in political settings. Even the

seemingly simple gesture of brushing her shoulder was scrutinized as to whether it conveyed coolness or represented her attempt to symbolically brush the whole thing off.

Several texts analyzed in this study of the January 2013 hearing portray expressing emotion as an imperfection or loss of control and cast Clinton as temperamental, a gendered reading that stems from the woman-emoter pairing. Others question the genuineness of her reactions. Although both men and women can and do experience emotions, these texts illustrate the gendered cultural norms relating to emotions and prime a gender-coded sense of emotional appropriateness (e.g., Shields, 2002) to interpret Clinton's performance. The deaths of those four Americans at the Benghazi consulate incited an emotional situation, but we point to the heavy emphasis in the media on Clinton's emotions and her authenticity as a red flag that not everything has changed for the better. Instead of describing Clinton as defiant, fiery, and emotional, writers could have described her as standing her ground, presenting a strong demeanor, and showing determination. Questions about the frankness of her reactions only add to the problematic coverage.

Together these two findings—competency of a female politician paired with an emphasis on emotions—bring into question how Jamieson's double bind theory might apply to or be revised for this case. What we may be seeing is a breaking of the binds, whereby a woman politician can be competent at moments, while her gender is highlighted at other times. In other words, the bind may be loosening so that it does not always apply. Further, while the double bind of competency/authenticity identified in this analysis is specific to Clinton, it is worth investigating how it might appear in discourse related to other female politicians. It is, after all, another losing proposition for female politicians when they cannot both demonstrate their competence while also showing their authentic selves.

It is not appropriate or useful to rely on the findings of this study to claim that news media producers are simply sexist in their coverage of female politicians. After all, these journalists and writers are using the language and shared concepts available to them. Some media texts did criticize the gendered nature of the Benghazi hearing coverage and did contest sexist arguments in an effort to shape the discourse on female politicians. A feminist intervention calls for educating journalists to be aware of their word choice and the consequences that may result with use of certain language. One of the reasons stereotypes and cultural assumptions persist is because they seem normal and undeniable, and the assumption that women are emotional and men rational "has been told and retold in stories over centuries" (Falk, 2009, p. 58). Progress in this regard is up against enduring narratives that are difficult to overcome.

Because news media form and contribute to discursive constructions of reality, however, the messages and ideas they circulate have real consequences for women seeking and holding political office (Falk, 2008; Ross, 2009). For that reason, media critiques of sexist coverage of Clinton's performance are valuable and a sign that the watchdogs are watching themselves. Beyond the political considerations, though, are the general consequences of dictating women's appropriate roles. Feminist theorists argue that as long as women are subjugated to lesser positions in the public sphere and unable to participate fully in public life, issues of inequality will persist. Therefore, media discourses that publicly raise questions about the emotional limitations of women in politics can have important consequences on society. Evidence shows that women's presence among the visible political elite is a key element in promoting gender equality in politics (e.g., Desposato & Norrander, 2009), but then those who are visible are traditionally undermined and trivialized by news

media. Conversely, when Clinton is seen as a powerful and competent politician, this can also resonate with women and allow Clinton to serve as a model for future generations of female leaders.

The discourse surrounding Clinton's testimony at the first Benghazi hearings offered a rich case for reconsidering women, politics, and double binds related to femininity and masculinity. Future research should expand on these notions. Examination of other portrayals of Clinton and female politicians deemed competent by the media could help determine the current extent of the double bind within the mediated public sphere and whether there are other signs of improvement. Coverage analyzed here shows progress regarding how a prominent female politician is portrayed in the news, but it also highlights that the double binds are pervasive and have yet to completely loosen.

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