

‘Fish wives’ in UK Parliament: Discursive intersections of (un)respectability, class and gender in newspaper representations of Angela Rayner.

RICKETT, Bridgette and KILBY, Laura <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9766-1985>>

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“Fish wives” in U.K. Parliament: Discursive intersections of (dis) respectability, class, and gender in newspaper representations of Angela Rayner

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journals.sagepub.com/home/fap**Bridgette Rickett** 

Leeds Beckett University, UK

Laura Kilby 

University of West Scotland, UK

Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Abstract

This research develops an intersectional understanding of U.K. newspaper coverage of White, working-class-origin women politicians through a single case analysis of the reporting of Angela Rayner and her supposed attempt to “distract” the U.K. prime minister (PM). A dual process discourse analysis was conducted on 74 U.K. newspaper articles (47,000 words) whose main topic was Rayner and the alleged incident. The two overarching discourses identified—unrespectable “fish wives” and respectable “working-class heroes”—functioned to both confer and revoke gendered and classed notions of the (un)respectable politician to reproduce the “elite male as norm” and class the gendered double bind. The discourses also functioned to restrict working-class women’s ability to adopt, reject, or demolish elite, masculine standards, and to caution against working-class women politicians by framing class markers as inherently dangerous (e.g., “inner fishwife”) and unrespectable (e.g., uncouth and hyper-sexualised) compared to White middle-class feminised standards. Finally, discourses reasserted classed and gendered boundaries via portraying working-class women politicians as unworthy and

Corresponding author:

Bridgette Rickett, Sheffield Institute of Social Sciences, Sheffield Hallam University, Redmires Building, Howard St, Sheffield City Centre, Sheffield S1 1WB, UK.

Email: b.rickett@shu.ac.uk

potentially dangerous, and normalising (White) masculinised power and privilege. This technology of governance has implications for voting decisions, our shared understanding of the overall appropriateness of working-class women in positions of power, as well as our treatment towards them.

Keywords

discourse analysis, discursive psychology, dual process analysis, feminist, U.K. newspapers, social class, women politicians

Discourse and media text research

Media text research enables us to ascertain how the media constitutes influential textual resources from which we can draw upon to construct ourselves and others to inform how we should behave and how to understand others' behaviour. It also reflects and informs knowledge on an infinite range of topics to produce prescribed systems of categorisation to which we are assigned, such as race, gender, sexuality, and social class (e.g., Day, 2020; Foster & Kilby, 2023; Korkmazer et al., 2020). As such, the media does not simply reflect social realities or the facts nor is it a neutral source of information—it contributes to the construction, maintenance, and alteration of our social realities (Gamson et al., 1992). In sum, the media can persuade us of certain world views that are often underpinned and motivated by the financial and political interests of powerful social groups and institutions (e.g., Bogart, 2017).

Media text, gender, and social class bias

A recent systematic review (Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020) of a subfield of scholarship which examines gender bias in the popular media coverage of women politicians reached three key findings: (a) gender stereotypes saturate coverage, (b) women politicians receive less coverage than men, and (c) sharp gender differences in the content of coverage include attention to private life, appearance, and family.

The homogenous category of womanhood dominates this research; however, a few examples do afford an intersectional understanding of gender bias. For example, research has found that while Black women politicians received more coverage than their White counterparts, this was negatively focussed on their ethnicity and gender (Ward, 2016), and such raced and gendered representations had negative implications for public support for them (Burge et al., 2020). Relevant to the present research, it has also been found that media coverage of women politicians derogates and others via intersections of gender, race, and class bias (Galy-Badenas & Gray, 2020).

Discursive psychology, gender, and politics in the media

However, it is important to go beyond establishing gender bias in media representations to utilise a discursive psychological understanding of the interrelationship between the

rhetorical mechanisms that underpin bias in the portrayal of women politicians and how broader, embedded, dominant, and powerful societal-level discourses persuade/dissuade us of the legitimacy of women in politics. While research has established that print media portrayals of men politicians often primarily utilise discourse that centres on them as politicians (O'Neill et al., 2016), other research has found that discourses drawn upon in the portrayal of women tend to decentre them as politicians. For example, a feminist examination of U.K. newspaper coverage of the significant increase in women members of parliament (MPs) at the 1997 U.K. general election (O'Neill et al., 2016) revealed how this cohort were primarily categorised as “Blair’s babes” (Tony Blair was the incumbent U.K. PM), while photos of the first Spanish majority-women government (2008) triggered U.K. newspapers to conclude “when it comes to totty, Britain really is the poor man of Europe” (Brown, 2008, p. 12). These discourses obscure meritocratic narratives of success and simultaneously foreground socially dominant constructions of women as male possessions whose value rests on the ability to fit heterosexually desirability standards (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012). As such, the male standard discourse is produced and substantiated.

While U.K. newspapers present women politicians as objects for heterosexual consumption via the male gaze, other European and North American media coverage often derogates women politicians via constructions of them as lacking intellect, having morally questionable characters (Bachmann et al., 2017; Sakki & Martikainen, 2022), or as interesting mostly via their private lives and relationships (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl Jorgensen, 2012). For example, Arrieta-Castillo and Berdasco-Gancedo’s (2020) discursive analysis on the Spanish media coverage of the U.K.’s departure from the European Union, or “Brexit,” found differential portrayals between two U.K. PMs—Theresa May and Boris Johnson. In relation to Johnson, May, despite her extensive experience, was presented as an unknowing “player” who lacked courage and the necessary, masculinist aggressiveness.

Discursive psychology, gender, class, and politics in the media

Again, there is scant psychology-based discourse analytic scholarship that takes an intersectional approach to analysing media coverage of politicians, yet this small body of work steadfastly evidences the necessity of doing so. For instance, raced and gendered portrayals have been found to discursively undermine Black women’s legitimacy as political figures (Dan & Iorgoveanu, 2013; Tolley, 2016). French media coverage of women politicians Rachida Dati and Najat Vallaud-Belkacem both reinforced traditional gender stereotypes and constructed them as unworthy via reference to their Maghrebian origins (Galy-Badenas & Gray, 2020). Pertinent to the present research, race, gender and class intersect in such depictions. In this vein, Iqani (2015) found that media discourse around the high-profile South African figure Winnie Madikizela-Mandela trivialised and moralised her considerable accomplishments via constructions of her as an intruder in an elite system driven by her preference for “expensive tastes,” and as a Black, working-class woman who has “sold out” her class and race politics for ostentatious greed.

It is now vital that intersectional feminist discursive scholarship aim to further this work. While there is disappointingly little discursive psychology research focusing directly on class and gender in the representation of women working in politics, there is a small corpus of work that demonstrates the manner by which discourses around gender, class, and origin privilege already powerful groups in traditionally White, male-dominated work, and subjugate others to produce “outgroups.” For example, Rickett and Roman (2013) found that narrow constructions of working-class femininities in door supervision work focussed on both an assumed lack of autonomy and agency and an excess of ungovernable sexual practices. This follows Skeggs’s (1997) early feminist sociological arguments that, like most women, working-class women must develop strategies to deal with being positioned as a sexual object for heterosexual male ownership, but working-class women are additionally constructed as hyper-heterosexual (Taylor, 2006) compared to White, middle-class feminine standards. Further discursive research explored working-class women’s talk around the traditionally White, middle-class, masculinised U.K. higher education work, making evident how a recurring “deficient working-class self” discourse, coupled with sexist and classist knowledge hierarchies, socially segregates and dislodges working-class women’s status and respectability (Rickett & Morris, 2021).

In sum, raced, classed, and gendered media rhetoric colludes to derogate women who work in elite spaces, and especially women of colour and/or working-class women, as unworthy occupants; and the U.K. media has a particular propensity to sexually objectify women in the public eye. The present research develops an intersectional understanding of the particulars of the portrayal of working-class-origin women politicians in U.K. newspaper coverage.

In detail, we aim to employ feminist-informed discourse analysis to:

- Explore the intersecting gendered and classed constructions within mainstream U.K. newspaper portrayals of a high-profile, working-class-origin woman politician.
- Identify discourse, discursive strategies, and subject positioning around both objectification and hyper-heterosexualisation, as well as in relation to personhood and practices.
- Consider implications for how classed and gendered portrayals of politicians shape public understanding of their ability to serve in White, elite, male-dominated work-spaces such as politics.

Details of the study

Single-case media text analysis

Discursive media text analysis employed a single-case focus centring on 4 weeks of U.K. newspaper reporting on a supposed act that happened during PM’s Questions time (PMQs). PMQs is a regular weekly event where the U.K. leader of the opposition or a representative asks the U.K. PM a series of previously published questions, and they respond. On the 24th of April, 2022, an article published in *The Mail on Sunday* UK

newspaper alleged that Angela Rayner, the then shadow deputy leader of the opposition, “distracted” the then U.K. PM Boris Johnson by crossing and uncrossing her legs. Rayner is a White woman of working-class origin from the North of England, and Boris Johnson is a White man of elite upper class origin

Data collection started with a 650-word online newspaper article published in the U.K. newspaper *The Mail on Sunday* on April 24, 2022 that ran with the headline “Tories accuse Angela Rayner of Basic Instinct ploy to distract Boris: MPs claim Labour deputy leader likes to put PM ‘off his stride’ by crossing and uncrossing her legs at PMQs” (Owen, 2022a). It also featured a photograph and a video of Angela Rayner and Boris Johnson during PMQs captioned “It’s Not Clear Boris Was Thrown Off by Rayner’s Rumoured ‘Enchantment’” and “Boris Blushes Under Angela’s Giddy Glare in Playful Exchanges at PMQs.” A second photograph was of the iconic, full-body, front-facing image of Sharon Stone from the U.S. suspense film *Basic Instinct*, sitting on a chair crossed-legged and purportedly wearing no underwear, captioned “Labour’s Deputy Leader Has Been Compared to Sharon Stone in the 1992 Neo-Noir Thriller.” The last photograph presented Angela Rayner smiling and cross-legged on a sofa.

Media text corpus

The sampling strategy utilised the LexisNexis.com newspaper archive to collect the original article, in addition to newspaper article responses across a 4-week period. The inclusion criteria were any U.K. newspaper article where (a) the main topic was the alleged act, (b) Angela Rayner was directly referred to, (c) publication date was between April 23 and May 21, 2022. Search terms “Angela Rayner” and “Prime Minister’s Question Time” returned 2,221 articles. These were examined individually, replicated reports were deleted, and all remaining articles that met the inclusion criteria were included in the final dataset. This comprised 74 U.K. newspaper articles, totalling 47,000 words, the majority of which (82%) were published within a week of the original article. The sample spanned 16 publications, including tabloid, broadsheet, national, and local newspapers. Two national publications accounted for 49% of the overall sample—*The Independent* (31%) and *The Mail on Sunday* (18%)—which, alongside *The Guardian*, published the most 1,000-word-plus articles. The word count across the sample ranged from 201 to 1,250, with an average word count of 556.

Analytic approach

First, a top-down analysis used a Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis with a feminist and class theorist focus (Rickett & Morris, 2021; Rickett & Roman, 2013; Willott & Griffin, 1997) to specifically identify overarching discourses deployed within newspaper articles around class, race, and gendered identities, with a particular interest in subject positioning, the possible implications for subjectivity and practice, and what discourses might tell us about the wider social conditions within which working-class women politicians are situated. Text was read through several times and then “chunked”

(divided into sections of text centring on a topic/issue), then coded using NVivo themes. These themes reflect the words or phrases used repeatedly in them and/or what best represented what was being described (e.g., a ploy to distract). We then identified ways in which these themes were being discussed (e.g., ploy was required to overcome state school education). Finally, we looked for similar ways of talking; first within each theme, then across the different themes to examine different ways that class and femininities were constructed.

Second, using a more traditional bottom-up discursive psychology approach (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wiggins & Potter, 2017), we reexamined all the transcripts to consider how discursive and linguistic devices were locally deployed. This level of analysis allowed us to explore the action orientation of the discourse and consider how microfeatures of the discourse were embedded and enacted to achieve certain interactional business. Our intention here was not an attempt to complete an exhaustive microanalysis of every identifiable device (e.g., extreme case formulations, three-part lists, strategic vagueness, script formulations) within the data. Indeed, such attempts are largely rendered futile by the sheer complexity of any given text. Rather, in keeping with our aims, we worked systematically through each article in turn and focussed our analytic attention to where and how linguistic and discursive devices served to elevate classed and gendered ideological claims, and how such claims infused the macrodiscourse with rhetorically persuasive qualities that emboldened the implicit and explicit arguments and assumptions being made. Completing this second phase also challenged our initial assumptions about the macrodiscourse and our developing sense of the overarching discourses.

After the completion of both stages of analysis, and a synthesis of our findings, we arrived at and labelled two main overarching discourses: Fishwives—gendered and classed unrespectability in parliament (Discourse 1), and working-class heroes—gendered and classed respectability in parliament (Discourse 2).

This dual approach aligns with that of critical discursive psychology (e.g., Edley & Wetherell, 2001; Locke & Budds, 2020; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 2014). As Locke and Budds (2020) argue, using these two (often presented as opposing) approaches enables the analysis to address the dual concerns of discourse, which focus on macrolevel issues that consider wider societal discourses and the repertoires and subject positions inherent in these, and the micro, rhetorical, and agentive aspects of the discourse. As Locke and Budds (2020) contend, this dual interrogation permits a more comprehensive analytic picture of the focal topic. Finally, while this approach has mainly been employed in health research, we sought to examine how well it would fair in the context of identities and social inequalities research.

Findings

Fishwives: Gendered and classed (un)respectability in parliament

This discourse dominated the data and drew upon a broader rhetoric that evokes socially located narratives of working-class women as inferior, manipulators, self-determined

temptresses in relation to elite heterosexual men (Peace, 2003). These features established Rayner within the historically located White, gendered, and classed discourse of the “loose and vulgar tongue(d)” and undisciplined “fishwife” (Cameron, 2014, p. 451; Sangster, 2007).

Extract 1:

“If she curbs her inner fishwife she’s got the charisma to go far.” (Article 60, Platell, 2022, p. 19)

In our first extract, Rayner is explicitly characterised as harbouring a potentially career-sabotaging “inner fishwife” that requires discipline via self-policing (“curbs”). The following analysis reveals how this characterisation was also implicitly alluded to via discursive markers of unrespectability, which deviates from elite masculinised standards.

Extract 2:

“The exchanges between Ms Rayner and Mr Johnson—which take place when leader Sir Keir Starmer is absent—have become a highlight of the Commons calendar, pitching the comprehensive school-educated Labour MP against the Old Etonian.” (Article 1, Owen, 2022a)

Historically, within British politics, education is structurally embedded in the creation and maintenance of a dominant, White, and masculinised British class hierarchy. Access to elite (private) educational institutions is the backbone of intergenerational reproduction and maintenance of social-class hierarchies and creates a pathway from educational elitism into professional political careers, particularly for men. Extract 2 summons up this history to construct a spectacle which is banked upon a battle between opposing, intersecting classed and gendered subjects: “comprehensive” Rayner versus “Old Etonian” Johnson. Here, differential abilities gained from traditional, elite, fee-paying schooling are presented using a contrast structure (Drew, 1990) to set them against gains derived from modern, public-funded (state) schools.

Extract 3:

“One MP said: ‘She knows she can’t compete with Boris’s Oxford Union debating training, but she has other skills which he lacks.’” (Article 1, Owen, 2022a)

A deficit framing (cf. Brown, 2019; Cushing, 2023) of the professional capabilities of Angela Rayner (Extract 3: “she knows she can’t compete”) is used to uphold the class-driven status quo where “Oxford Union debating training” is prerequisite to a successful British political career. Moreover, Angela Rayner is positioned as having to overcome this deficit by turning to “other skills” which he (Boris Johnson) “lacks.” Given the

focal claims and the wider context of this media story, the clear implication is that these skills are linked to the performance of her (hetero)sexuality.

Extract 4:

“The paper likened the claims to a scene from the 1992 erotic thriller *Basic Instinct* and said she was trying to put the PM ‘off his stride.’” (Article 18, Calvert, 2022)

Extract 5:

“Rayner was adopting a ‘Basic Instinct’ style ploy towards Johnson, in a reference to the Sharon Stone 1992 film in which she flashes a policeman during an interview”. (Article 24, Mason et al., 2022)

Extract 6:

“Ms Rayner likes to distract the PM when he is at the dispatch box by deploying a fully-clothed Parliamentary equivalent of Sharon Stone’s infamous scene.” (Article 1, Owen, 2022a)

The above extract rewrites the accustomed practice of Rayner sitting opposite the then PM into a heterosexually charged, pornified show (see Anderson, 2011) laden with sexual suspense (Extract 3: “erotic thriller”). She is also rewritten as a femme fatale (Extracts 5 and 6: “deploying” a “ploy”) intended to hinder Johnson’s performance (Extract 4: “to put [him] ‘off his stride’”). While the PM is revised to a man weakened by masculinised hyper-heterosexual desire.

Extract 7:

“Angela has very fine legs (sorry Ange, but I’m female, and allowed to say that). She’s an attractive woman, so colleagues are going to notice her and fancy her, and since most MPs are male, lumpen and think they’re still at boarding school, they’ll make stupid vulgar cracks about Angela’s assets.” (Article 6, Finnegan, 2022)

Extract 8:

“It started with the classic, unforgettable image of Sharon Stone and her kryptonite muff next to a picture of Rayner in silky stockings.” (Article 66, Long, 2022)

In Extract 7, “vulgar cracks” from male colleagues towards “attractive” women working in U.K. politics are normalised, and an embodied elicitation of upper class/elite “boarding school” masculinised desire is infantilised and ridiculed (“they’re still at boarding school”). In addition, heterosexually desirable feminine bodies become “assets”

(Extract 7) to be weaponised against elite men's uncontrollably hyper-sexualised, infantile minds. Such parodying can be read as subversive and empowering (Rickett & Roman, 2013); however, it also justifies sexual harassment in the workplace since infantilised, upper-class men don't fall under adult standards of appropriate behaviour, and "attractive" women, as provocateurs, should expect to be subjected to it (Rubchak, 2009).

A nod to a political-correctness-gone-mad narrative (Extract 7: "I'm female, and allowed to say that") legitimises the narrow focus on Rayner's body, which becomes hyper-sexualised and devalued. Her black tights become "silky stockings" (Extract 8) enclosing a "kryptonite muff" (Extract 8)—"muff" being a vulgar U.K. slang euphemism for a woman's pelvic area, while "kryptonite" is a term that has been recently repurposed as a metaphor for women who "sap" the power of successful male politicians. For instance, research has found that strong, intelligent women were positioned as Obama's kryptonite in the reporting of the former US president (Thornton, 2010). As such, via the deployment of such terms, we see feminised power over weakened, elite male politicians being both bestowed and delegitimised via a highly eroticised and degrading heterosexual male gaze.

In addition, as illustrated in the extract below, interesting discursive features also make plausible that Rayner is a potential danger to both the masculinised power system embedded in the traditional British ruling classes (Reeves & Friedman, 2024) and to traditional, White, bourgeois standards of femininity (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008).

Extract 9:

"In addition to the original Conservative MP who spoke to the newspaper, three other MPs alleged that it was Mrs Rayner herself who joked about her 'tactic' during a night on the Commons terrace. The Mail on Sunday has spoken to four MPs, who all gave the same account of what she said, including the use of a startling slang colloquialism." (Article 15, Hodges, 2022)

Extract 10:

"Now, it transpires that about a week later on the booze-fuelled terrace of the Commons, Rayner was seen by at least four MPs joking about her 'Sharon Stone' ploy to disarm the PM. Could it be that she had read my article and was enjoying being portrayed as a sexy politician and compared with a Hollywood star?" (Article 61, Owen & Hodges, 2022)

Extract 11:

"Talking in such crude terms ... they cannot be repeated in a family newspaper." (Article 61, Platell, 2022, p.19)

Extract 12:

“Three other MPs who were part of the group on the House of Commons terrace, one of them a woman, have come forward to corroborate the account of Angela Rayner’s remarks.” (Article 52, Hughes, 2022)

Here, a coded appeal others Rayner’s language (Extract 11: “cannot be repeated in a family newspaper”) as unfit for consumption by the everyday working-class-family reader of the *Mail on Sunday*. Furthermore, consensus building (Potter, 1996) legitimises the claims via reference to multiple sources—“at least four MPs” (Extract 10), “three other MPs” (Extract 9)—that recount her supposed use of “crude” (Extract 11) and “startling slang colloquialism” (Extract 9).

Therefore, Angela Rayner is further delegitimised via a moralising discourse that frames her as both delighting in engaging in sexually manipulative practices (Extract 9: “Mrs Rayner herself who joked about her ‘tactic’”) and an enthusiastic member of a masculinised Westminster drinking culture “on the booze-fuelled terrace” (Extract 12: “one of them a woman”). In sum, she is positioned as unsuitable as a politician because of her purposeful transgressions from idealised, White, middle-class, feminised respectability standards (Brown & Gregg, 2012; Lennox et al., 2018; Skeggs, 2005).

Working-class heroes: Gendered and classed respectability in parliament

This significantly less prominent discourse serves to promote even-handedness via a counter-characterisation of Angela Rayner as a hard-working woman on the receiving end of sexism and classism. However, whilst Angela Rayner is depicted as a down-to-earth woman of the people and a respected debater and politician, she nevertheless remains marked out as a classed, gendered Other within the elite space of U.K. politics.

Extract 13:

“Ms Rayner, 41, a socialist grandmother who left school at 16 while pregnant and with no qualifications before becoming a care worker, has frequently landed blows on the Prime Minister during sparky—some say flirty—exchanges.” (Article 1, Owen, 2022a)

Extract 14:

“By mentioning the standout achievement of Ms Rayner’s career—that she has managed to break into the inner circle of Westminster’s power elite despite leaving school at 16 without qualifications after becoming pregnant.” (Article 64, Owen, 2022b)

Extract 13 (originating article) uses age as a temporal anchor against which the subsequent detail is judged. Setting aside the political positioning (“socialist”), we learn

that Angela Rayner is a “grandmother” at “41,” who “left school at 16 while pregnant.” This anchoring draws on socially located norms where, first, contemporary, White, middle-class women complete higher education, then establish a career, and then start a family, and women who do not follow this sequenced trajectory are derogated (Wilson & Huntington, 2006). These norms sit within a wider narrative of working-class mothers as lazy, wilfully oblivious, morally corrupt, and, finally, to blame for any current or future health and social problems encountered by their children (Rickett, 2016). This use of temporal anchoring therefore powerfully invokes socially situated, classed, and gendered understandings to create a morally questionable mother.

Extract 14 is from a response article published by the same author in the same newspaper. While the author claims bemusement at criticisms following the original article, with a notable footing shift (Goffman, 1981) referring to Angela Rayner’s “standout achievements,” her character is remarked as morally dubious via a reformulated version of the same biographic description. A character deficit framing is offered where Angela Rayner “managed” to access elite politics “despite” herself, delivered via a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) that renders her knowable as someone who left school a “16” without “qualifications” after becoming pregnant.

Discussions about Angela Rayner’s education remain a focal concern of Discourse 2, and whilst, superficially, this counter-narrative offers a celebration of a “working-class hero,” an alternative reading reveals a mundane reliance on classed and gendered ideals that do little to shift the dial beyond that of a woman who succeeds despite her assumed classed and gendered deficits.

Extract 15:

“She may have missed out on the overrated union debating society experience, but she has all the brains and passion she needs to floor the rogue prime minister in open combat.” (Article 38, O’Grady, 2022)

Extract 16:

“Rayner went to a rather better finishing school for aspiring politicians than even the Oxford Union—she was a Unison shop steward. As a union rep she learned how to deal with entitled blokes, how to make and win an argument, and above all, how to think on her feet and throw in the occasional sharp barb.” (Article 38, O’Grady, 2022)

As such, Extract 15 contests the classed and gendered disrespectability discourse while simultaneously constructing an educationally subordinate subjectivity who has “missed out.” A deficit framing of working-class education is contrasted with the elite standard (“debating society experience”). In turn, this classed hierarchy is challenged via a claim that she has “all the brains and passion she needs.” Ideals around passion are coupled with a heroic “fighter” discourse (“floor the rogue prime minister in open combat”). However, such socially situated discourse also serves to delegitimise women

politicians (Frasca et al., 2022) as either too hegemonically masculine (Lünenborg & Maier, 2015) or too emotional, both of which deviate from White, middle class, feminised standards.

Extract 16 frames Rayner's education as rooted in her working-class professional background as a "union rep." A three-part list argues that she is equipped to deal with "entitled blokes" and "make and win an argument" to present her as overcoming her state education via a celebratory narrative that challenges elite ideals of what is valued as good education. However, this also operates to obscure her formal education, her intellectual competence, and her significant political acumen developed through extensive experience in senior political roles.

Extract 17:

"She also has a line in working-class, small 'c' conservatism on crime, antisocial behaviour and terror. This is no Islington Lefty." (Article 38, O'Grady, 2022)

Extract 18:

"Rayner's media appearances also display an admirable tendency not to take any nonsense from journalists. She's rare for someone on the left in being willing to go on the offensive, and for not apologising for not being a Tory." (Article 38, The Independent, 26/04/2022)

In Extract 17, Angela Rayner's ideologies are explicitly categorised as being shaped by her working-class origins, thereby departing from normative, middle-class left-wing ideology. The contrast structure offered between Rayner as a "working-class" Labour politician and an "Islington Lefty" centres upon a framing of her as willing to tackle "crime, anti-social behaviour and terror." Here, Angela Rayner is a woman who is unapologetically and fearlessly claiming a working-class left position of politics ("small c"). In Extract 18, she is presented as "not take(ing) any nonsense"—quality couched as "rare" for a left-leaning (middle-class) politician. As such, Angela Rayner is narrated via notions of working-class personhood ("admirable"), yet the development of such claims relies on framing her as an outsider and Other both as a politician and as a working-class woman.

As the following extracts attest, this second discourse also presents her physical appearance as a portal to her character.

Extract 19:

"I like her—she is funny, different, powerfully charismatic. In ordinary times, in an ordinary parliament, she might easily end up capturing our hearts as, say, a foxier, more capable John Prescott." (Article 66, The Sunday Times, 01/05/2022)

Extract 20:

“Angela Rayner is a clever and talented politician who doesn’t need curly hair extensions and split skirts to pack a punch. Describing her as sexy when she chooses to flash her enviable legs is not misogynistic, it’s the simple truth.” (Article 61, Long, 2022)

Extract 19 starts by contesting deficit discourse to reframe Rayner as “funny, different, powerfully charismatic,” with traditionally feminine ideals of emotionality (capable of “capturing our hearts”) before switching to an overtly sexually objectifying characterisation of her as “foxier” than a high-profile, working-class male political figure (John Prescott, a previous deputy Labour leader). Therefore, any countering of derogatory and damaging feminised and classed ideals to enable a respectable subject position, albeit via gendered and classed stereotypes around emotionality (Reay, 2004), is rapidly undermined by the objectification of a working-class woman who stands only in relation to men and their sexual desires.

Similarly, Extract 20 frames Angela Rayner as “a clever and talented politician,” offered within a contrast structure which refers to her embodied self. This structure claims to discount the relevance of her appearance as superfluous to her professional capabilities, while actively homing in on her fashion tastes and simultaneously attempting to block accusations of sexist objectification as “plain speaking,” “not misogynistic,” and “the simple truth”. The pairing of fashion and capabilities evokes gendered markers of class (“curly hair extensions and split skirts”) to conspicuously draw Rayner as deviating from the embodiment of White, middle-class cultural capital required to be a respectable parliamentarian, such as making what may be understood as proper, modest, “respectable and tasteful choices of presentation” (Pilote & Montreuil, 2019).

Extract 21:

“Angela Rayner, I would suggest, is not remotely prudish, and a clever northern lass like her is not going to have a fit of the vapours because some creep makes an adolescent joke about a notorious cross-legged moment, made famous by Sharon.” (Article 60, Finnegan, 2022)

In our final extract, “northern”—broadly euphemistic for the White working classes (Spracklen, 2018)—frames a “clever northern lass” in relation to intersecting classed and gendered hierarchies. The phrases “not remotely prudish” and “a fit of the vapours” (Extract 21) utilise a sexist parody of White, middle-class, and feminised ideals in contemporary discourse (Mitchell, 2011). Knitted into this extract is the production of sexual harassment as innocuous and assailable. “Creeps” who harass women continue to be minimised as “adolescent,” and their behaviour framed as a “joke” which a working-class woman can and should laugh off. Thus, once framed as a working-class woman, Angela Rayner is denied a right to be impacted by sexualised abuse because of who she is.

Discussion

In setting out to explore the constructions of gendered, classed portrayals of a high-profile, White, working-class-origin woman politician, we responded to calls for feminist psychology to be explicitly intersectional and focussed our analytic gaze toward ideological dead spots which have the consequences of reproducing gendered and classed hierarchies (Mirza, 1997). As such, we aimed to make crucial inroads into understanding the intersecting, expansive, and damaging repercussions of the male standard (Gilligan, 1982) in the world of U.K. politics.

Following earlier arguments (e.g., Locke & Budds, 2020; Wetherell & Edley, 2014), we argue that adopting our dualistic discourse analytic approach permits a more sophisticated understanding of how the micro and macro aspects of discourse jointly shore up the intersectional subjectivities within the media portrayals of working-class women politicians. Moreover, it is clear the approach fairs well when applied to media portrayals of classed, gendered identities and social inequalities.

A predominant discourse (“fish wives”) marked out gendered, classed (and at times raced) borders of respectability (Jensen & Ringrose, 2014) which dictate who has value and who is devalued in parliament to repurpose previously established classed (e.g., Iqani, 2015) and gendered (e.g., Bachmann et al., 2017) societal discourses. This supported earlier findings around the portrayal of working-class women, by pointing out the framing of Rayner as hyper-sexual (Skeggs, 1997; Taylor, 2006), the wrong kind of mother (Rickett, 2016), not educated via the right kind of schooling, and generally embodying an inherent deficit inner self that predisposed her to be immodest, uncouth, not ladylike enough, and thereby deviant from ideal, White, middle-class womanhood (Day, 2020). Previous objectifying discourses of women politicians (e.g., O’Neill et al., 2016) have constructed them as passive, sexualised beings to be gazed upon and whose worth is associated with a capacity to conforming to White, middle-class, feminised representations of beauty (Gurrieri et al., 2016). Here, we found a discursive shift where both sexual objectification and self-objectification, embedded in a neoliberal-postfeminist framework, positioned Angela Rayner as sexually empowered and agentic. This appropriation of feminist discourse of women’s sexual liberation switched women-as-victims-of-the-male-gaze to women-as-freed-by-sexual-liberation (Gill, 2007, 2008). This was underpinned by heterosexist scripts around pleasing and teasing men while mundane items, contexts, and practices were hyper-sexualised using gender-based parody. We align with previous theorisation that these sexual scripts or “political pornography” function to police transgressions from the gendered boundaries of appropriate behaviour while simultaneously seeking to trivialise and ground women who seek to rise “above their station” in having political power (Anderson, 2011). Furthermore, this scripting serves to regulate working-class femininities by drawing upon gendered *and* classed constructions of womanhood, which, in turn, shore up sexual objectification and funnel it through a White, heterosexual, male elite gaze. To previous findings that White, working-class women (Skeggs, 1997; Williams, 2021) and working-class women of colour (via the “ho” and “jezebel”; Hill Collins, 2004) are particularly regulated via hyper-sexualisation and unfavourable comparisons with White, middle-class

women, we would add that working-class women are particularly vulnerable to pornified portrayals.

The second, “working-class hero,” discourse counters the first to celebrate White, working-class feminine subjectivities as equal to or even superior to men and women elite/middle-class counterparts, and repositions Angela Rayner as a respected, worthy occupant of parliament. However, a celebratory interpretation is hindered since this discourse also justifies sexual harassment against women politicians. It is trivialised and normalised. A “boys will be boys” narrative is classed (Murnen et al., 2002) to establish elite men as having little agency over their behaviour provoked by a powerful and agentic White, working-class woman *femme fatale*. Finally, postfeminist scripts (Gill, 2007, 2008) around agency are heavily classed and gendered to present working-class women as particularly “tough” and able to shrug off sexual harassment, compared their “fragile” middle-class counterparts.

Furthermore, discourses identified in this research question working-class women’s rights to be in public office by a rewriting of the “male as norm” (Gill & Gill, 2007) into an elite/upper class male norm standard (politician). Here, a classed production of the double bind (Campus, 2013) requires working-class women to conform to the restrictive ideals of both working-class femininity (van Zoonen, 2006) and middle-class, White feminised standards. These requirements constrain working-class women’s ability to adopt, reject, or demolish the elite, masculinised standards. Thus, discourse identified in the present research functions to, first, position working-class femininities as “unrespectable,” and second, caution that transformation from such working-class unrespectability to middle-class “respectability” (i.e., via a career in politics) is futile due to both inherent classed and gendered deficiencies (e.g., “inner fishwife”) and embodied (un)respectabilities (e.g., a dangerous *femme fatale*). Therefore, class and gender boundaries are reasserted by positioning working-class women as unsuitable, unworthy, and potentially dangerous incumbents of the political elite.

However, elite hegemonic gender identities cannot be separated from Whiteness (Galpin, 2023). It is important to note that both post-feminist scripts and quasi heroic discourse has not been identified in the media reporting of Black, working-class women politicians. Instead, discourses of contamination and revulsion (Palmer, 2020) are deployed to justify particularly sexually violent threats towards them (e.g., the Black women, working-class, UK Politician, Diane Abbott; Kuperberg, 2018).

Future work should look to expand our findings in the following three ways. First, our analysis did not scrutinise variations to intersections of class and gender. For example, our analysis concentrates on reporting of a Labour (left-wing) politician largely written in centre to right-wing newspapers (Ponsford, 2024). Future exploration of women politicians of working-class origin with differing political allegiance would develop valuable further insight across both the political spectrum and the U.K. newspaper media. Moreover, a focus on women of colour of working-class origin was beyond the parameters of this research, but it is now crucial to develop earlier discursive work (e.g., Galy-Badenas & Gray, 2020; Iqani, 2015) to examine media constructions to determine how/if they serve to even further marginalise minoritised women politicians.

Finally, we are not simply positioned by existing media discourses—we negotiate ourselves within them to strive to achieve a desired identity (Day et al., 2012; Rickett & Thompson, 2024). Intersecting ideologies of gender can be subverted through alternative/counter discourses that position us in more powerful ways (e.g., Eckermann, 1997; Rickett & Morris, 2021). Discourse, a crucial site for active resistance to ideologies, opens possibilities for positive action and social change (Day et al., 2012; Wetherell, 1998). As such, future research could fruitfully examine if and how intersecting media discourses are countered and reworked by women working in politics to reshape understandings of themselves as worthy and respected politicians.

In conclusion, the media content analysed in this study can be understood as a technology of governance aiming to persuade us of the classed, gendered (and raced) ideologies are stitched into societal norms that, in turn, shore up hierarchies. These are often underpinned, motivated, and served by financial and political interests of powerful social groups and institutions (Bogart, 2017) disproportionately occupied by elite White men (Reeves & Friedman, 2024). Our research furthers and nuances our knowledge that social class, gender, and race collude to shape the portrayal of working-class women who work in elite spaces to derogate them as unrespectable. This process potentially sustains the power and privilege of elite masculinities and femininities and therefore configures our shared understanding of the (in)appropriateness of working-class women in positions of power and influence. In doing so, this discourse invites particularly classist and misogynist readings of and treatment toward them—and ultimately have the potential to prejudice our voting decision against them.

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ORCID iDs

Bridgette Rickett  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0047-9803>

Laura Kilby  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9766-1985>

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Author Biographies

Bridgette Rickett is Head of the Institute of Social Sciences at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK. Her research practice employs critical and feminist-informed qualitative methods to understand how discourses can shape our identities, relations, and experiences. A key aim is to examine situated inequalities, particularly within the intersection of social class and gender. Bridgette is the founder and Chair of Psychology of Social Class – UK Policy and Practice Implications (POSCUPI), a collaboration between U.K. psychologists who examine the policy and practice implications for the psychology of social class. In the latter role, Bridgette works with organisations to enhance inclusion for both women and working-class-origin employees.

Laura Kilby is a Professor of Social and Discursive Psychology at the University of the West of Scotland. She draws on analytic methods that cohere with a discursive psychology approach to examine both textual and visual discourse. Her research examines core areas of identity, including race, gender, sexuality, and social class, and the intersections of such to explore how people experience forms of everyday exclusion or marginalisation in relation to their identity. She has a particular interest in examining how identity work features in media and political discourse to achieve ideological ends, and the implications of this for gender equity.