Perceptions of women as political leaders at a time of crisis; A psychosocial study

Introduction

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, women political leaders received widespread praise for their handling of the crisis. Early in 2020, the New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, was lauded as the figurehead of a new style of empathetic leadership, Scotland's Nicola Sturgeon's measured approach to the crisis earned her praise from the news media, and Taiwan's leader, Tsai Ing-Wen, took swift action resulting in an initial control of the virus. Such examples foreground the significance of women's political leadership during times of crisis, not only in terms of their gendered leadership style and the ways in which they challenged stereotypes of strong and containing leadership being associated with men, but also how they make us think and *feel* about women in positions of authority at times of fear, danger, and anxiety. What do we want of women leaders? What emotions are evoked in relation to women in positions of political power and as figures of authority on the world stage, and how are they experienced symbolically and affectively as objects of the mind?

This article explores such questions by discussing an online reflective group study about women in political leadership that we conducted in the UK over a 6-month period in 2020, during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown. We use the findings from that study to examine the conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings that shape perceptions of women as political leaders at a time of crisis.[i] It is often argued that over the past two decades, the content, style, and engagement with politics has become increasingly emotional (Richards, 2007; Yates, 2015), and this development has implications for how we view women in positions of leadership. In an age of emotionalised

politics, where the display of feelings is often perceived as a sign of credibility and authenticity in a political leader, women have a different 'pact' with the electorate (Evans, 2009). Women leaders are often judged more harshly than men in this regard, as for them, competency is often viewed as incompatible with the show of emotion or vulnerability, a phenomenon referred to as the 'double bind', and yet at the same time, assertive women leaders are often deemed unnatural and unappealing (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Jamieson, 1995).

Our research employs an intersectional approach to gender (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), that pays attention to the intersecting layers of gendered identity and its significance for the women leaders discussed and also for the participants taking part in the study. Drawing on Crenshaw's work, we recognise the cultural significance and power dynamics at play in the shaping of identity and experience in relation to the intersections of gender, class, 'race', sexuality, age and disability. As is well documented (Savigny, 2020), the mediatisation of politics and the intense scrutiny of women in the public gaze exacerbates the affective dynamics of such processes, and perceptions of women in the political sphere are strongly influenced by the digital media environment of social media, news, and current affairs programmes.

However, rather than focusing only on mediatised representations of women in political leadership roles, our research explores the psychosocial responses to such representations using reflective focus groups that met on Zoom at the height of the pandemic and during the first UK lock-down. In setting up and designing this group project, our aim was not to research the cause and influence of such images, but rather, we used them as prompts to facilitate discussion about participants' thoughts and feelings regarding

women political leaders (from herein, WPLs) at a time of crisis. At the level of surface content, we wanted to discover how such responses might challenge gender stereotypes of women leaders within parliamentary democracies; at a symbolic level, we wanted to explore the emotional and affective investments that underpinned those responses.

The psychosocial study of political leaders and followers and of WPLs in particular, remains under-researched[ii], and the ways in which women in positions of political authority make us feel is an area of study that has yet to be developed. The pressing significance of such research is linked to the under representation of women in parliamentary democracies across the world, where an understanding of the prejudices and biases towards women politicians allow us to understand and therefore rectify such imbalances.[iii] A psychosocial approach to this issue enables us to look at the unconscious and affective aspects of such biases (Hoggett and Crociani Windland, 2012), to adopt a method that 'listens to politics' (Yates, 2021), and pay attention to that which lies 'beneath the surface' (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009; Williams and Cummins, 2018)[iv].

The article begins by discussing the psycho-politics of the gendered 'Double Bind' (Eagly and Karau 2002) of political leadership, and the emotions and affects that are stirred up in relation to women in positions of authority. We then turn to our research project and discuss the psychosocial approach taken in that work and its findings.

The psycho-politics of the gender double bind and women political leadership.

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Feminist researchers have approached the question of women in leadership and the negative stereotyping they attract through both 'Role Congruity Theory' and the 'Double Bind' (Eagly and Karau 2002; Jamieson 1995). Role Congruity Theory posits that there are two categories of traits, or characteristics defined as 'agentic' and 'communal'. Stereotypically, agentic traits have been associated with men, and communal traits with women. The characteristics that are traditionally linked with leadership fall into the agentic category and therefore, men are deemed more congruent with leadership. As a consequence, women have traditionally been deemed as incongruent with leadership positions. The Double Bind refers to the ways in which women are perceived as either having so-called 'soft' 'communal' traits associated with constructions of traditional femininity or having assertive 'agentic' qualities stereotypically associated with men. These studies show that to be liked, women leaders need to be communal, and yet to be respected, they need to be agentic, but combining both traits has, until recently, been seen by the public as incompatible (Blackman and Jackson, 2021; Zheng et al 2018; Rudman and Glick, 2001). Women of colour, women identifying as queer, or women living with disabilities experience an additional layer of prejudice, and the racialised and classed projections that are mobilised in relation to them, complicate further the concept of a gendered double bind as an intersectional double-bind in relation to responses to women in political leadership roles (Yates, 2019).

Leadership in the modern political system requires a degree of self-promotion as well as the deployment of assertive tactics and behaviours; for women in such environments, navigating the stereotypical projections associated with the intersectional layers of the double-bind presents more risk of incurring a backlash and sanction for transgressing gender norms and expectations (Fridkin 1996, Hall and Donaghue 2013).

Former UK Prime Minister Teresa May was widely criticised for a perceived lack of emotion following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, while such stoicism in a man may not have received such harsh condemnation or have been framed in terms of emotional abnormality. To overcome this assumed deficiency, one potential strategy employed by WPLs is to display high levels of communal behaviour to mitigate such fears (Heilman and Okimoto 2007, Deason et al 2015). Well known examples here include the UK MP Andrea Leadsom's focus on her caring maternal credentials during the Conservative Party leadership campaign in 2016, or more recently, Vice President Kamala Harris' highly visible show of her role as a stepmother to offset any anxiety evoked by her not having children.

Fridkin (1993) argues that issues as well as personal attributes have communal or agentic dimensions. As we discuss in relation to Jacinda Ardern, these associations are significant when assessing leadership in times of crisis – particularly in context of the pandemic when communal issues, such as family, health or education have come to the fore. At the same time, the theory of 'the Glass Cliff' proposes that although women are given positions of leadership at times of precarity they are, nonetheless, set up to fail in such situations (Ryan and Haslam, 2005). This theory has been developed to explore the placement of women in positions of leadership at times of adverse conditions in that it can cause negative perceptions of women in leadership and thus be used as evidence for their unsuitability for such roles (Ryan and Haslam 2007). The former UK Prime Minister Theresa May, who came to power in a divided country following the Brexit referendum provides a good example of such processes at work and was widely discuss in media outlets (Gerster, 2018; Rorich, 2019; Stern, 2019). Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign evoked commentary on her navigation of the glass cliff: one *Financial Times* article speculated that, should she win, "she will join Mrs May at the top of the glassiest of 'glass cliffs'" (Hill 2016).

Women political leaders as objects of the mind

The affective dynamics of WPLs and the identifications that occur in relation to them take on a new significance when viewed from a psychoanalytic object relations perspective. (Yates, 2014). This psychoanalytic approach emphasises the affective psychological defences that are developed in relation to phantasies of the primary caregiver (usually the mother) to ward off anxiety, and feelings of vulnerability and helplessness (Rose, 2018; Klein, 1988 [1946]). The complex interactive process of object relating and the psychological defences developed in the first months of life creates a pattern for the ways in which adults engage with the immediate or wider socio-political and cultural environment (Richards, 2019).

The identification with mediatised images of WPLs and the powerful affects that accompany such identifications provide an example of such processes at work. In periods of social and political crises, there is a common desire amongst citizens for a reassuring leader in the mould of a 'containing' parent to ward off feelings of anxiety and risk (Gabriel, 2011; Richards, 2019)[v]. Such studies have implicitly held male political leaders in mind – for example, President Franklin Roosevelt is often discussed as an archetypal containing leader and father figure at a time of crises in terms of his reassuring 'fireside chats' and so on (Graubard, 2004). One can cite other male presidents and prime ministers from Churchill to Reagan who at different moments created a sense of paternal identification and trust for their followers.

However, women in positions of political authority may attract powerful, conflictual feelings and, at the level of fantasy, evoke associations of the mother as an ambivalent object of maternal phantasy and identification. Research has addressed the media habit of

representing women politicians in relation to their real and symbolic status as mothers (Gentry and Sjoberg, 2015; Yates, 2019, 2020). As the media coverage of politicians from Diane Abbott to Priti Patel, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez shows, the intersectional dimensions of identity may further complicate the feelings aroused by images of women in authority, where defence mechanisms are mobilised to protect against an imagined threat to identity as underpinned by the structures of 'power and entitlement' (Yates, 2019, p.350).

Conducting online reflective focus groups

Our reflective focus groups took place a few weeks after the UK went into lockdown when we were struck by the positive media coverage that WPLs were receiving for their handling of the crisis. We noticed that the 'communal' qualities associated with cultural constructions of femininity – such as empathy and care were now seen as a necessary component of good governance. As an all-woman research team with leadership responsibilities, we identified positively with the images of Ardern and Ocasio-Cortez, who appeared to embrace qualities such as empathy, care, and kindness that had hitherto been feminised as 'weak' and deemed inappropriate for national emergencies. It seemed that the perceptions of these women challenged the construction of the gender double-bind and we wanted to dig deeper to see how 'ordinary' groups of men and women viewed such women. At a conscious level, how might such perceptions trouble traditional stereotypes of women leaders within parliamentary democracies? And what kind of affective identifications and projections underpinned such perceptions? And following on from our discussion above, were WPLs allowed their complexity?

We hosted four online reflective focus groups, with 5-8 participants per group, with a total of 24 participants mainly from the UK. Given the centrality of gender in our research, we considered the composition of our focus groups that would help generate insights through interactions of participants, as is key to the method (Barbour, 2007). To that end, we recruited all women for Group 1, all men for Group 2, a mix of men and women for Group 3, and in Group 4, there was a self-selecting open group of all women[vi]. The research was not designed as a comparative study, seeking to identify the differences between men and women's responses. However, we were interested in the possible gendered dimensions of the emotional responses to WPLs and the possible differences that might emerge. The single-gender focus groups sought to generate data from shared experiences, where mixed-gender focus groups generated data from different experiences (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999). We were also conscious of potential differences in responses from the different genders and therefore wanted to provide a space in which our participants could reflect on their responses freely and safely. This was especially important in the context of our women participants. As Gluck and Patai (1991) argue, women's experiences are "often muted", especially when their "interests and experiences are at variance with those of men" (p.11). As we discuss, whilst such gendered differences were not evident in the single gendered groups, differences emerged more clearly in the mixed gendered group (Group 3). All participants were from mixed occupational and class backgrounds and apart from the last all-women group, the members of those groups were white. After the initial introductions, we began each group showing clips of well-known women leaders to prompt discussion. The clips were selected to include diverse images of women leaders making speeches at moments of crisis. [vii]

The clips were chosen as part of an elicitation technique (Barton 2015), designed to stimulate conversations on the topic, but also as a way to foreground different types of women leaders to the participants. The clips thus represented a diverse range of leaders and leadership styles, but were not exhaustive in terms of candidates for discussion. [viii] This diversity included ,for example, representations of working class women (Jess Phillips), white middle class women (Theresa May) diverse images of women of colour (Priti Patel, Dianne Abbot, Alexandra Ocasio Cortez), and leaders in different settings including formal institutions and at home lockdown announcements

The groups were held over a six-month period and took place during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic (May-September 2020) when there were restrictions in place regarding in-person gatherings. For this reason, the data collection took place via the free online platform Zoom which, at that stage, was experienced as a novelty by both the researchers and the participants. We were concerned that we would not be able to facilitate the same kind of the group dynamics that are present in in-person group settings. However, the shared crisis conditions of the pandemic brought an enhanced sense of relevance and immediacy to the work which broke down the barriers between 'us' as the researchers and 'them' as the subjects of the research project.

Following Weinberg's (2020) and Parks (2020) research into the psychodynamics of online groups, we initially had concerns about the absence of embodied contact and presence, and the capacity to 'hold' the group in a virtual, digital context. However, we found that speaking from the comfort and familiarity of their own homes, a sense of intimacy and informality emerged, that might not have been achieved in a university research setting. We borrowed from aspects of the psychosocial group analytic approach in

its dual focus of paying attention to the surface level of content as well as that which is 'hidden beneath' (Cummins and Williams, 2018). As far as possible, we deployed an active mode of listening to the voices of the participants in terms of *what* and *how* thoughts and feelings were communicated in an online group environment.

The research process involved a reflexive awareness of the researchers' own feelings that were stirred up at that time when, like the participants themselves, we were caught up in the crisis of that perilous moment of fear and uncertainty. Examples of that response can be seen in the extracts (below),taken from the reflexive fieldnotes describing the experience of the first (all-women) group:

> *Although we had planned and rehearsed hosting this online group, the tech still felt precarious, especially as my home internet signal was unreliable. My anxiety came across, as I talked too much and tried too hard to put the participants at ease. Given the topic we were researching, it seemed important to look calm, confident and competent when communicating with the participants and I was so relieved they had turned up and that it seemed to be working.*

As this extract shows, alongside the need to learn new skills of operating focus groups in what was then an unfamiliar virtual environment, the project also involved a high degree of emotional work. We did our best to facilitate group discussions in a reassuring and containing manner, whilst paying attention to psychosocial processes of the group – of what was being said, how and why. This work took place against a backdrop of Covid related anxiety and a fear of the unknown, and we supported each other as researchers, working from our individual homes in domestic settings, often with precarious broadband connections. These research conditions brought us closer to our participants, who were also

speaking from their kitchens and bedrooms. However, we also noticed that alongside the

empathic connection with participants, there was also sometimes a defensiveness about our

performance and competency as online research group facilitators, as we communicated

with participants and self-consciously watched our images on the Zoom screen. As we

discuss, these concerns about performance, mirrored some of those of the participants and

the representations of the WPLs under discussion, allowing us also to reflect constructively

on the psychodynamics of political leadership and followership in a way that might be lost in

more traditional political science research methods.

"Trusting what she said"; Research themes and findings

To arrive at our research themes, we applied Braun and Clarke's (2013) method of

thematic analysis and, we met several times as a research team, working closely together

with the group interview transcripts to identify recurring themes – paying attention to the

surface content of what was said and also its unconscious symbolism. We were mindful of

the affective dynamics of those group discussions whilst paying attention reflexively to our

own experiences of the research process. The overarching theme to emerge in relation to

WPLs was 'Trust' - or the lack of it. This finding about the value placed on trust is not

surprising given the vulnerability and lack of certainty for citizens at times of crisis. Indeed,

the decline and lack of trust in politicians is a recurring theme of wider survey -based studies

(such as the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer[ix]). From a psychosocial perspective, the loss of

trust is linked to the loss of containment experienced across different organisations

including government and trust in parliamentary democracy and its representatives. This

has implications for WPLs who as objects of disappointment, evoke fantasies associated

with dependency and powerlessness of voters who may project feelings of hate or idealisation onto those women, where trust is continually tested.

We also identified the following three sub themes that variously linked to the theme of Trust, that we discuss below.

1. Empathy
2. Authenticity and performance
3. Too hot or too cold

1. Empathy, trust and the good mother

Across all four groups discussions, the theme of empathy was present as an indicator of trust. Empathy is a complex and contested term (Yates and MacRury, 2021) and broadly refers to the capacity to put yourself in the shoes of another. We use it here to connote – rightly or wrongly, a perception on the part of our participants of mutual 'affinity' (as one participant put it) between themselves and the WPLs. It also refers to a leadership style that appears warm and approachable and, in this instance, aligns with traditional cultural associations of nurturing femininity. The participants spoke of the value of seeing what they perceived to be empathy in WPLs and here, their discussions often centred positively around Jacinda Ardern and her handling of the Covid pandemic. In Groups 1 (all women) and 2 (all men), participants said that during the pandemic it was as if she was "in the same boat" as ordinary people and that she seemed "down to earth" when addressing the nation over Covid restrictions. Another participant in Group 2 said that it felt like Ardern was "your doctor giving you some bad news…you trusted what she said".

Women participants across all groups identified with her as mothers and daughters as a kind of multi-tasking empathic 'Mum', who functioned well under pressure:

> "She can lead because she can put her foot down and you know, go back it with science, but then she can also be like, you know, I understand what hundreds of you are also going through because I am also going to be, you know, sat in, looking after my children, not being able to go out." (Group 4)

Participants also spoke of their own feelings of empathy towards women leaders. This sentiment was strongest amongst the women participants who identified with the difficulties WPLs encounter when balancing their work and personal lives:

> "I think I feel a bit worried about them, I even felt worried about Theresa May you know, that even people who I don't feel any other affinity with, I do feel affinity with them just because they're women and because of the way that our society is set up." (Group 3)

This experience of "affinity" overcame ideological differences with the political leaders, as in the example of Theresa May. Here, several women participants confirmed they did not support her politically but said that they did feel empathy for her situation as a political leader, who was managing the contradictory demands of home and work identities. As one said,

> "I sort of admire her and others because I can empathise, I've been there….and I think I'm exactly the same". (Group 3)

Participants across all groups disliked it when they felt that the WPLs did *not* display empathy in an appropriate way. Here, the discussion often centred around Priti Patel's apparent lack of empathy, as in the clip we showed regarding her response to a question in Parliament from a Black woman Labour MP about her failure to address racism and racial

injustice. Patel responded by talking about her own experience of racism and the very personal attacks she has received as a Conservative MP woman of colour. Despite the content of Patel's words, the men and women in Groups 1 and 2 objected to what they saw as her non-empathic and assertive style of delivery:

> "She didn't use the opportunity to be like "no I understand your pain, I feel your pain", it wasn't something that she was trying to empathise, instead it felt like she was being like "you don't know what you're talking about", like it was very defensive and angry, like she was putting up a wall". (Group 2)

Patel's hard-line right-wing policies as Home Secretary are well-known. However, the concept of the intersectional double-bind is relevant here, as there is the implication that as a woman of colour, her trustworthiness is being judged not only because of her hard-line views on immigration but because of her seeming lack of emotion and empathy in her performance. In Group 2, discourses of race and gender sometimes converged regarding the machine -like performance of both Patel and May as the men were highly critical of their lack of empathic communication skills, as exemplified in the oft-repeated media caricature of "May the Maybot".

2. Authenticity versus Performance

The theme of authenticity versus performance was present across the groups and again, connected to their sense of trust in WPLs and their capacity to lead at a time of crisis. When discussing authentic WPLs, Ardern was again at the forefront of the exchanges, especially in response to the film of her streamed Facebook appearance from home in

casual clothes on the eve of the New Zealand Lockdown. One participant (from Group 3) said, "she seemed a lot more human" and that this meant that she had "a connection with her". The women were especially positive in this regard, with one saying that it felt like they had called up "my friend Jacinda" (Group 1). Another woman said that Ardern seemed "a genuine real person in a genuinely difficult situation" (Group 3).

However, the informal setting of Ardern did not evoke positive responses from all participants. For some, there was a sense that her Facebook broadcast was not the behaviour of a leader, as one man said of her performance: "it was too informal for me" and "didn't convey the seriousness of the situation" (Group 2). Another said that the setting was "too informal", and "if that was my first encounter, I probably wouldn't have trusted her" (Group 3). A woman participant commented on how they did not feel reassured or calmed by Ardern as "she was very casual", it wasn't what she expected from a politician and so did not provide a sense of authority (Group 1).

These varied responses to Ardern as the responsive, if (for some), infantilising mother highlight the ambivalent feelings aroused by such women and how perceptions of authenticity and their trustworthiness are bound up with discourses and fantasies of gender and maternal authority. Whilst Ardern's performance of the empathic maternal leader was praised by some for its authenticity, for others, those very qualities failed to convince as belonging to someone with authentic leadership qualities.

The dynamics of intersectionality were also present when discussing the trustworthiness of performance, as in the mixed responses to US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. There was some scepticism regarding her impassioned speech in the House of Congress about social injustice, with one participant saying that it felt like "manufactured

passion" (Group 1), and this distrust was echoed by others who said that her performance seemed "staged" (Group 1). By contrast, as we have seen, Patel's performance was deemed inauthentic and untrustworthy because she was seen as not passionate enough. As one (white) participant said of Patel, "you could sort of feel that suppressed emotion" (Group 1). Another said of her 2020 parliamentary speech about her experience of racism: "it was all very defensive and was either emotionless or if any emotion, quite angry" (Group 2).

Several participants said that Theresa May lacked authenticity because of her poor performance skills; as one said: "(she seemed) a bit removed from this situation despite being right in the middle of it" (Group 2). However, in contrast to Patel, there was for some a perception that May was being "professional" and that had she displayed a lot of emotion they would not have been "impressed". As one said of May,

> "she can't be ranting and raving and saying, and crying in front of the cameras there can she?" (Group 2)

These conversations between the participants, highlight the difficulty that WPLs face in terms of being seen as authentic and giving the right level of performance. The display of strong emotion, whether that is anger or passion about an issue, provoked conflicting responses in the groups, and these responses were further complicated when discussing the performances of women of colour, such as Patel, where mixed views about her advocacy of far-right immigration policies, sat uncomfortably alongside a distrust of her performance when discussing her own experience of racism ,thereby reinforcing racialised discourses about the relationship between her emotional subjectivity as a woman of colour and her trustworthiness as a leader. Participants spoke of Diane Abbott MP in far more understanding tones, articulating the harsh media coverage Abbott received and

acknowledging the racial discrimination she faces. A participant in the mixed gender Group 3, labelled the treatment of Abbott as "quite bizarre and quite unique to her". The group responses to Patel and Abbott highlighted an ideological split in terms of empathetic feelings towards their experiences as women of colour and spoke to a lack of empathy with the Conservative Priti Patel.

3. Too hot or too cold?

The words "warm" and "cold" were used repeatedly through each of the groups to express how the participants felt about the women leaders in times of crisis. When participants spoke positively about WPLs, they used terms like "my response was kind of like a warmth and a connection to her", and "I liked it, it felt friendly and warm". (Group 1)

Like empathy, the perception of warmth in a politician, was often aligned with authenticity and trust. By contrast, the word "cold" was linked to WPLs who were seen as "lacking emotion" during a crisis, most notably Theresa May. Participants in all groups referred to her as "coming across as quite cold" and as one man said, "she's not very warm", and "keeps herself tightly wound" and he concluded by saying,

> "I think it's why the British public didn't warm to her really, because, er, she didn't come across as being like, a normal person at all". (Group 2)

One participant said that when political institutions were more confrontational, WPLs "have to take that sort of, serious, colder approach" (Group 1). However, some were worried about women being "too emotional" and not "cool" enough, and Jess Phillips MP was mentioned as an example of such concern:

"I felt at any minute she could switch into not being calm and therefore I found her (pause) slightly, I felt slightly anxious watching her, I thought what's going to happen next, so I think that calmness is really important, and level-headed, you don't want someone (pause) making political, making important political decisions in times of crisis if they are unable to stay calm" (Group 3 – woman participant).

Concerns about Phillips' hot passion appeared to be linked to perceptions of her class – as coded by some in their description of her "down to earth manner".

However, others valued the authentic warmth of those such as Phillips, with one woman saying that during a crisis, she found "calm" leaders untrustworthy, "cold" and disconnected from reality:

"of every crisis I've experienced, um, I instinctively, I don't want [calmness] because if someone is able to be calm when you know, horrible, horrible things are going on, then it kind of shows they they're disconnected from how horrible the thing is".

(Group 3)

It appeared, therefore, that members of all the groups wanted warmth from the leaders at a time of crisis (albeit not too hot,) even if at times this raised questions about their authority and lack of emotional containment as leaders. This questioning of their ability to lead, often fell back on assumptions linked to a classed, racialised, intersectional double-bind, and familiar gendered associations regarding the emotionality of women as being either excessive or lacking.

The contradictions of identification, trust and the challenges of complexity

The recurring three themes that we identified from our data suggest a desire for a leader who is trustworthy, competent and reassuring in an "Old School" manner (as one participant put it), whilst at the same time offering emotional containment through relational displays of empathy and warmth. This response holds out the potential to transcend or at least move on from the old, gender stereotypes of the strong leader upon which traditional perceptions of leadership rest. Role Congruity Theory proposes that in order to attract the trust of followers, WPLs must conform to male stereotypes of strong leadership- both in terms of their personal qualities and their policies. However, whilst the latter continues to appeal via the performance of those such as Theresa May, the pandemic also opened up a kind of transitional space for a different kind of leader with qualities associated culturally with a form of nurturing femininity, exemplified for our participants by Ardern.

The push and pull of identifications with Ardern were striking, as some appeared to idealise her, identifying with her consciously and unconsciously as a containing good mother. However, others saw this quality in Ardern as a sign that she was too 'soft' and therefore lacking authority – compared say, to what some referred to as the 'old school', 'reliable' professional manner of Theresa May. [x]

The success of some WPLs navigating the treacherous waters of the pandemic showed that it is possible to overcome the dangers of the gendered glass cliff by foregrounding communal values such as empathy at a time of national crisis. The stereotyped ideal of the strong containing male leader during such moments has been undermined by the real and symbolic blurring of the public/private boundaries, as exemplified by Ardern's Facebook broadcasts from her home on the eve of lockdown. This blurring is symptomatic of the

emotional turn of media and politics (Richards, 2007; Yates, 2015), and what some see as the 'feminisation' of the public sphere, where the values and language of nurturance and care – hitherto linked to cultural constructions of femininity – are more visible and potentially valued in public life. We have also seen – as with Kamala Harris, a new public emphasis on the ethos and language of nurturance and care albeit framed in part by normative discourses of the family. As she said in her first speech as Vice President: "I see it in the parents who are nurturing generations to come...building a better life for themselves their families, and their communities" (White House ,2021).

There are debates about whether the emotionalisation of politics is a positive and meaningful development, or whether it is symptomatic of narcissistic neoliberal discourses about the self and its representation through empty political performance (Yates, 2015). In addition, the framing of care as a feminist issue carries with it the risk of gender essentialism. However, the significance of care as a public and domestic issue has historically been an enduring value of feminism since the 1970s (Nava, 2020). The importance of compassion and acknowledging vulnerability for challenging the individualism of neoliberalism as well as the banal platitudes of the discourse of individual 'wellbeing' (Yates, 2015) have, of late, been discussed by scholars and activists (Kellond, 2022; The Care Collective, 2020), where the relational values and practice of interdependence take on a new urgency in the contemporary age. By contrast, the 'careless' macho leadership style Donald Trump and other men of his ilk, such as Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro or Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, underperformed as leaders during the pandemic by failing to keep their fellow citizens safe.

The positive reaction of our participants to displays of vulnerability and empathy in representations of WPLs, has implications for the political economy of leadership and followership. For example, as Freud (2021) argued, following and identifying with a leader involves a degree of unconscious surrender, and in the contemporary era, where the neoliberal ethos of the individual and a resistance to meaningful attachment prevails, the willingness to trust and identify with a leader and to allow them to be "good-enough" may prove difficult. There are examples of extreme, fanatical devotion to populist leaders such as Trump, but the toleration of a complex, good-enough woman leader who is both assertive and vulnerable presents a challenge where the temptation to dismiss or idealise their qualities as leaders. For example, some participants idealised Ardern as the good mother figure, which reflects perhaps a regressed desire to merge with her at a time of crisis anxiety. Another tendency when splitting and idealising WPLs is to look back nostalgically to the fantasy object of a past leader such as Margaret Thatcher, who, despite her divisive legacy, was mentioned admiringly by participants as a "conviction politician". Such nostalgia for an invulnerable strong woman leader impacts upon the affective mechanisms of bias and political identification and it also reflects the underlying features of the emotional tenor of the pandemic when, feelings of loss and longing were widespread.

The affective ambivalence towards WPLs was also present in *how* participants communicated their ideas. A constant sense of conflict was present about what the participants wanted to see from the leaders, and what was acceptable and what was not. This conflict came through contradictions, caveats, and stilted sentences. This contradiction from the participants and a continued inability to reach consensus on what they wanted from the women leaders, speaks to the continued discomfort with seeing women in positions of leadership.

The participants were careful not to reproduce stereotypical assumptions around the gender double bind, and resisted essentialism as both men and women participants across the groups said that good political leadership transcended gender. Nonetheless, they often found it hard to avoid slipping into the split projections when discussing WPLs which drew on distinct gendered symbolism associated with emotional femininity as excessive, persecutory or withholding. As we have seen, May and Patel were critiqued for being too cold, Phillips, for being overly emotional and uncontained and Ocasio-Cortez's articulate, passionate speeches were viewed with distrust as being too skilled in her oratory and performance and of being too "manufactured". There was a mixed picture regarding racialised projections, as Dianne Abbott was praised for her authenticity when speaking truth to power, whilst negative comments about the 'hot' passion of Ocasio-Cortez from some group members undermined her competency as a leader, positioning her as 'other' in relation to discourses of the white Western subject.

Some of the contradictions in those discussions about performance, emotion, and the identification with fantasies of maternal warmth, also resonated with the performative dynamics of the Zoom group meetings themselves. As group facilitators, we were conscious of our performance on screen – and how we interacted with group members in what was then a new Zoom research environment. Were we good enough as online group facilitators? Could we hold the space? One could say that the latter contributed to a layered performative dynamic – a process that included the WPLs in the clips – the group members' responses and the interactions of the research team.

The participants were conscious of what they were saying and how they were coming across, and in the mixed gender groups, we noticed that the men chose their words

carefully – as if treading gingerly so as not to offend and say the wrong thing to the women in the group – including ourselves, as an all-women research team. Although there were few differences in the content of what was said by women and men about WPLs across the groups, there was a difference in the mixed gender group. In the latter, women made a point of showing empathy towards WPLs and (despite political, classed and racialised differences), they identified with aspects of WPL's experience as women, and the problems of asserting their authority in a man's world.

The empathic identification with WPLs was not strongly pronounced in the all-women groups, but empathy with WPLs was articulated more clearly by women in the mixed gender groups as a way, perhaps, to shore up their power in the group by asserting their difference to men. The mixed gendered group dynamic appeared to heighten the feelings of identification on the part of women participants individually and with each other through an identification with the potential struggles of WPLs. This is an interesting new research finding, as it emphasises the diverse ways in which genders respond to women leaders and how this empathy can be brought to the fore through such group dynamics.

Sense and sensibility: The dilemmas of women political leadership

Our research set out to explore the feelings and thoughts of men and women about WPLs at times of crisis. Is there a distinct form of women's political leadership? And if so, what might it look like, and can we tolerate and therefore trust a style and form of leadership that reflects the complexity beyond the limitations of the gender double bind? We were interested to unpack the meanings of women's political leadership for our participants, which is a highly slippery terrain. So much of politics is now based on narrative

and fiction and the masquerade of performance. Across the four groups, there was an overarching sense of ambivalence in the responses to WPLs, as participants often contradicted themselves or questioned each other when working towards an understanding about how they felt towards the women in positions of political authority at moments of crisis.

The split projections onto WPLs as objects of idealisation or denigration are shaped by the psychosocial and historical contexts in which they take place. In this study, which took place against the backdrop of the pandemic, one could see that these fantasies and projections were symptomatic of a wish for containment and care at a time of crisis. We have discussed the pressures that we experienced as the research team, and our concerns about being good-enough to carry these groups at a time of crisis. That experience opened up a space for us to think about the projections that WPLs are made to carry on our behalf. At such moments of crisis, members of the public project onto these women fantasies of what they fear, or want, or think they need. Just as Ocasio-Cortez was seen by the British participants as maybe 'too American' and polished compared say, to the real 'grit' of Jess Phillips or Diane Abbott, Ardern who rules in a country far away becomes an object of idealisation of some, a woman who at the time of our groups seemed to embody both 'sense and sensibility' [xi].

The wish for a good-enough mother leader who can be trusted and who has authority is a model of leadership which goes beyond the defensive binary of the gender double bind. That desire is also linked to the feelings and fantasies bound up with the structures of intersectionality and the importance of working towards this framework as a central drive towards inclusion and belonging in the political context. These ideas and the

resistances to them which were articulated at moments in our groups, should be seen against a backdrop of wider dissatisfaction with political representation and a sense of lack, in relation to the experience of leadership in the UK context and elsewhere. It also connects us to the mood of the UK more widely and what the public think about gendered political leadership at a time when the meanings of gender are contested and in flux.

By adopting a psychosocial listening approach, we wanted to capture the thoughts and feelings of our group participants, to learn more about what it is that they wish for in relation to WPLs at a time of crisis, and what they feel might be lacking in a political culture where traditionally, men's voices have dominated, especially at a time of crisis. This way of researching allows us to gain new insights into the meanings of WPLs at particular moments of crisis. It is easy to make polarised comparisons between on the one hand, women leaders such Ardern or Merkel and Trump and Bolsonaro. However, a more nuanced understanding is needed of the psychosocial gendered dynamics of their appeal and the kinds of identifications and desires that the electorate experience in relation to them. Through our groups we discovered that during the pandemic, there was a powerful longing for a leader who was authentic in their delivery, showed empathy during times of crisis and who displayed genuine warmth for the people they lead, thereby facilitating community, connectivity and new ethos of care.

There remains conflict around how these traits in WPLs should be displayed and about what is deemed "authentic". This ambivalence mirrors the feelings evoked by women breaking expected gender boundaries and highlights the distance still to be travelled in order for WPLs to challenge the normative psychosocial structures of political leadership and whether as women they are allowed their complexity. At the time of writing, Italy and

the UK have new women Prime Ministers, both from the far right of the political spectrum, and in UK, Liz Truss appears to mean what she says in terms implementing hard-line policies of austerity and the free market. At one level, her unpopularity as a non-empathic leader appears to bear out our findings.[xii] However, it remains to be seen whether in the future, a more progressive and empathic woman Prime Minister from the left of the political spectrum can be trusted or tolerated by the public in countries such as the UK or Italy. It may be that the relationship between fantasies of the maternal and women political leaders are linked to particular formations of maternal holding, so that the hegemonic structures that have hitherto sustained the double bind remain in place.

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[i] The research followed Bournemouth University's ethics procedure and was granted ethical approval.

[ii] With these exceptions: Evans, 2009; Gabriel, 2011; Richards, 2019; Western, 2019. Yates, 2018; Yates, 2019.

[iii] 2021 figures show that globally only 25% of all national parliamentarians are women and 21% of government ministers are women. (UN Women, 2021).

[iv] Whereas the term 'emotion' is used here to denote the 'relatively conscious' socio-political realm of discourse, 'affect' refers to the seemingly irrational, unpredictable sphere of embodied feeling that is linked to the processes of unconscious fantasy (Crociani-Windland and Hoggett, 2012: 2).

[v] We are drawing here on the Bion's (1959) theory of 'containment' as a process which denotes a mother's capacity to manage and thereby de-toxify the intolerable feelings of the infant. This theory, which describes the management of early infantile anxiety, has also been applied to society to explore significance of 'social containment' and the containing functions of parliamentary democracy and its institutions (Figlio and Richards, 2003: 407).

[vi] This fourth group was part of an ESRC funded social sciences public engagement event that was advertised externally. This group also attracted international participants beyond the UK. An external consultant, Prof Caroline Bainbridge attended this fourth group, serving as a containing presence and enabling group and research team members to reflect on the experience of the group and its discussions. This aspect of the project will be discussed in a different publication.

[vii] See Table 1 for clips shown.

[viii] There were some famous WPLs that were not included – Angela Merkel for example, whose speeches were mainly in German. But the focus of our study was on particular leaders, but rather on different types of WPL represented in the clips of leaders we showed at the start of each group.

[ix] https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer, (accessed 15/07/22)

[x] This view of May's professionalism was very different to how she was viewed by UK citizens when she was Prime Minister (see Yates, 2019).

[xi] Our thanks to Caroline Bainbridge for this observation.

[xii] YouGov Poll on Liz Truss: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/explore/public_figure/Liz_Truss, Accessed, 2/10/22.