Accounting for the Troubled Starlet: Medicalization and Femininity in the Age of News Punditry

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ACCOUNTING FOR THE TROUBLED STARTLET: MEDICALIZATION AND FEMININITY IN THE AGE OF NEWS PUNDITRY

by

Mallary Allen

B.A., University of Montana, 2007

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts.

Department of Sociology
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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ACCOUNTING FOR THE TROUBLED STARLET:
MEDICALIZATION AND FEMININITY IN THE AGE OF NEWS PUNDITRY

By

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in the field of Sociology

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March 22, 2011
This article examines contributions of television news media to the dominant cultural dialogue regarding young women’s deviance as demonstrated by pundit commentary concerning the criminal behavior of young female celebrities. Using a case study of actress Lindsay Lohan, I examine the accounts that pundits offer for the deviance of these young women and whether medical and psychological explanations enter discourse in a significant way. Additionally, I examine the extent to which feminine mental health issues contribute to the creation of a cultural stock character evocative of tragic, female literary archetypes. I find that mental and psychological health dialogue is pervasive in pundit discourse surrounding Lohan’s criminal deviance and that features of a tragic stock character are evident.
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INTRODUCTION

Consuming celebrity gossip is a popular pastime in the United States, home to the Hollywood film industry as well as a uniquely American brand of criminal justice. Crime coverage on television news networks constitutes a form of entertainment for many Americans and influences our perceptions of crime, criminals, and victims (Britto and Dabney 2010) as well as our understandings of the criminal justice system (Fox et. al. 2007). When celebrities are the perpetrators in such stories, Americans turn to television to keep abreast of legal proceedings and to discern the blameworthiness of the stars involved. Networks pander at length to celebrity crime stories as the combination of popular persona and deviance bolster viewership (Fox et. al. 2007).

In this article, I examine the contributions of television news media to the dominant cultural dialogue regarding young women’s deviance as demonstrated by pundit commentary concerning the criminal behavior of young female celebrities. Using a case study of actress Lindsay Lohan, I examine the accounts that pundits offer for the deviance of these young women and whether medical and psychological explanations, such as addiction or depression, enter discourse in a significant way. Additionally, I examine the extent to which feminine mental health issues contribute to the creation of a cultural stock character evocative of tragic, female literary archetypes. I find that mental and psychological health dialogue is pervasive in pundit discourse surrounding two legal events involving Lohan (more than three years apart) and that features of a tragic stock character are evident in the first period much more so than in the latter.

To this end, I begin by first examining literature which describes the modern preponderance of news punditry and celebrity gossip as well as literature which analyzes
media portrayals of criminal deviance. I next theoretically align my work with literature regarding deviance accounting, medicalization, the feminization of mental illness, and sympathetic narratives (of which I propose that a tragic, feminine literary archetype is one).

I next describe the methods by which I analyzed news transcripts following two legal events in the life of actress Lindsay Lohan in order to ascertain themes in accounts offered for her deviance, particularly the pre-established categories of medicalization, psychology, and tragic femininity. I then describe my findings in two parts, one each for transcripts following the two legal events. These parts are further divided into sections which address the pre-established categories discussed above. I find that all of these categories, manifested as more specific concepts such as alcoholism and parent-blame, emerge as significant themes in the data. I conclude with a discussion of my findings, including the salience of alcoholism (an example of medicalization), lack of compassion for Lohan in the latter broadcast era (and other limitations of the nonetheless evident tragic stock character), and considerations for further research.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Depictions of Crime in New Media

Britto and Dabney (2010) observe that major news networks have become increasingly homogenous over the past two decades and now uniformly devote a majority of broadcasts to long-running, high-interest crime stories. The typical presentation format of such broadcasts involves a panel of media personalities whose primary functions are advocacy and establishment of facts (“getting to the bottom” of cases still in progress) (Britto and Dabney 2010). Fox et. al. (2007) attest that America has entered an era of “tabloid justice” and agree that news punditry is among its central characteristics.

Television news programs have become an important source of not only information regarding crime in our culture, but also of accompanying raced, classed, and sexed messages regarding innocence and accountability. Meyers (2004) found that news broadcasts of violence against African American women in Atlanta held local lower class black men less accountable for sexual assault by implicating women in their own victimization and presenting them as immoral; students of elite black colleges received positive and minimal coverage when they were suspects in the same kind of cases. Many researchers point to disproportionate coverage of black male suspects in general, usually accompanied by sinister portrayals (e.g., Chiricos and Eschholz 2002).

Other studies point to an overwhelming emphasis on stories concerning white, female victims and their assailants at the detriment of other crime representations (for example, Britto and Dabney 2010). And Grabe (2006) finds that female perpetrators receive chivalrist or sympathetic treatment in the news, but only when their crimes do not violate gender norms. Grabe (2006) observes much harsher treatment of woman, as
compared to men, when their crimes violate feminine gender expectations. Instances where women are violent offenders, especially in crimes against children, best illustrate this phenomenon (Grabe 2006).

Cultural narratives play a significant role in the portrayal of celebrity criminality as well and are my primary concern in the forgoing research. Previous studies have emphasized the role of media in the generation of racial messages about celebrity crime in particular. Markovitz (2006) for example, points to a media preoccupation with black male sexuality, specifically threatening representations, in the coverage of criminal cases involving celebrities such as O.J. Simpson, Michael Jackson, and Kobe Bryant.

Studies have not examined the role of cultural narratives in media portrayals of deviant female celebrities, however – particularly young ones. While the crimes of ordinary women serve as strong messages about the consequences of gender transgressive deviance (Grabe 2006), celebrity involvement has the potential to make these messages even more potent. Public familiarity with celebrities establishes these figures as quasi in-group members for most Americans and transforms their bad behavior into powerful rhetorical examples (McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002). For this reason, a sizable cohort of young, deviant women can easily solicit public familiarity if news media first lump, package, and even attempt to brand them.

*Young Hollywood’s Gendered Meltdown*

In recent years, tabloids have ushered in a new era of fascination with the crimes of the rich and famous in its preoccupation with the legal troubles of young, female celebrities. Where the 1980s saw media preoccupation with the bad behavior of young actors often referred to as the “Brat Pack,” young women is Hollywood are receiving this
type of treatment today. Such celebrities as Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, and Amy Winehouse, to name a few, comprise focal points for ongoing media sagas surrounding what one network has dubbed “Young Hollywood’s Meltdown” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 30, 2007).

But while legal proceedings themselves may be points of interest in each of these instances, these celebrities’ non-criminal deviance, such as substance abuse, dramatic haircuts, flashing of private body parts, and hospitalizations for addiction and psychosis, keep these stories afloat for months and even years at a time. In these cases, tabloids descend on the paradox of feminine icons whose deviant behavior transgresses the prescribed boundaries of femininity.

Celebrity gossip exemplifies a significant boundary-distinguishing function of deviance within our society, but media do not stop at simple condemnation when stars are caught engaging in deviance. Instead, pundits transform periodic incidents into news serials by engaging in a dialogue of motives and accounts surrounding celebrity crime and related misconduct.

*Mental Illness as an Account for Troubled Starlets*

The need for linguistic tools to realign a social situation in the face of a problematic performance (Stokes and Hewitt 1976), or in the present case, a crime, exists in news broadcasts as well as in the interpersonal realm. Individuals rely on a vocabulary of motives to explain their own breaches in conduct as well as to understand the deviance of others (Mills 1940). By offering accounts for behavior, we attempt to frame unexpected and unacceptable behavior as consistent with a familiar or understandable
explanation, thus diminishing the accountability of the offender and alleviating the anxiety of those around (Scott and Lyman 1968).

The types of motives that pundits can provide for deviant celebrities are constrained by a culturally specific repertoire of acceptable motives. Recently, illness and psychological dysfunction have become especially salient accounts employed within the broader culture. Mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety, ushered in by psychoactive drug commercials, have entered our cultural repertoire in the past twenty years (Conrad 2007) and are culturally available lenses for understanding problematic behavior like that previously discussed in reference to “troubled” starlets. Broad familiarity renders the pathology motive an available tool for pundits in their accounting for celebrity deviance. The presence of doctor and psychologist news pundits further signals the applicability of such explanations.

Problems now widely understood as medical and involving brain chemistry, like alcoholism, addiction, anxiety, and concentration problems, presently constitute Lyman and Scott’s (1968) category of the biological excuse for deviance. Psychological accounts, which largely draw upon unfortunate biographical narratives, often accompany mental illness claims and serve to neutralize deviance as part of the “sad tale” accounting tactic (Lyman and Scott 1968). Thus, successful medicalization (Conrad 1997, 2007) increasingly allows individuals to deflect accountability for a variety of deviant episodes.

For women, however, a successful claim of certain mental or psychological pathology may serve an additional purpose. In the case of the troubled starlet, a femininized ailment like depression or a personality disorder has the potential to align

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1 This is an appropriate label, given the media prevalence of the term itself as well as the previously cited interpretation of the women as having a “meltdown.”
gender transgressions with identifiably feminine characteristics. Jimenez (1997) observes that certain psychiatric diagnoses have fluctuated in propensity over time and that the characteristics of these disorders reflect the moral and gendered social values of a given era. Dependence, for instance, is stereotypically feminine characteristic of “women’s” maladies (Jimenez 1997). Today, women are diagnosed with depression, eating disorders, and self-injury more often than men (Conrad 2007), and the features of several other disorders all but exclude men from diagnosis (Jimenez 1997). Due to gendered understandings of mental illness, gender transgressive behavior can align a woman with femininity precisely because the behavior is symptomatic of a female malady.

But real women are not the only ones for whom femininity can be aligned through mental illness. The femininity of literary characters, whose psychologies and motives are by definition more apparent than those of living women, is also frequently – and more easily – accomplished and aligned by employing afflictions like depression and hysteria. In fact, their one-dimensionalism and cultural resonance perhaps makes literary characters’ association with such maladies important examples to be reproduced. Their narratives also provide a lens through which to interpret the accounts of real women.

Tragic Femininity as a Means of Alignment

As a widespread and gendered phenomenon, certain feminine maladies may now be a part of certain “institutionally preferred narratives” (Loseke 2007). Like the blameless victim archetypal character (Loseke 2007), the troubled starlet can also rely on cultural narratives, in this case, that of feminine mental illness, to deflect blame and elicit sympathy. While such a character has not been discussed specifically in reference to delinquent female celebrities, a tragic, feminine template is essential to literature and
drama, has been borrowed by popular psychology\textsuperscript{2}, and extends easily to the actresses who comprise the modern dramatic community. Characteristics of the tragic-feminine persona are youth, beauty, sadness, emotionality, fatalism, and self-destruction and are evident in the works of writers from William Shakespeare to Naomi Woolf, particularly in the form of the suicidal woman.

Cultural narratives are useful tools in our society in a number of ways. Loseke (2007) discusses the cultural narrative as a template for recognizing oneself and others as victims deserving of sympathy, services, or redress. Media is a key source of these narratives. Social sciences research has not yet determined whether and to what extent popular culture provides a basis for aligning femininity through the use of medical or psychological accounts and narratives. Nor has literature established an archetype representative of these relationships, a tragic character who is less culpable for her actions due to her psychic suffering.

The following research is an attempt to describe dominant cultural understandings of young female deviance through examination of pundit commentary surrounding their crimes. It is also an attempt to discern the extent to which tragic femininity informs a framework for understanding what is potentially a culturally preferred narrative archetype – the troubled starlet.

\textsuperscript{2} Mary Pipher’s best-selling 1997 book, \textit{Reviving Ophelia}, which discusses the troubles of adolescent girls, notably demonstrates this theme.
METHODS

I examined the actress Lindsay Lohan as a case study of the journalistic discourse surrounding young, female deviance in Hollywood. At the time of this study, Lohan was a popular and highly paid actress whose career appeared endangered by mounting legal trouble. She offers a similar range of deviant episodes as the troubled starlets in her cohort (previously mentioned), and these incidents have been well chronicled in the media. Lohan’s biography inevitably contains unique combinations of components, each of which she shares with similarly “troubled” female stars in a general way. These components include: childhood celebrity, highly publicized family problems, and a majority of deviant episodes comprised of or attributed to use of controlled substances.

In order to examine the discourse surrounding Lindsay Lohan’s deviance, I performed a search of television news transcripts stored in the LexisNexis database using one search parameter, “Lohan, Lindsay.” This search yielded transcripts from network and cable news broadcasts in the United States. I selected only national news broadcasts, and, as a result, encountered primarily broadcasts from programs such as “The Today Show,” “Showbiz Tonight,” and “On the Record with Greta Van Sustren.” While these programs are lengthier and embody the pundit format more often than not, I also encountered brief transcripts in the database coming from programs such as ABC “Nightly News”.

I examined every transcript in this pool which discussed Lindsay Lohan for up to six weeks following two legal incidents, capping transcripts at around the first 20 following each focal event. These events were Lohan’s first arrest on May 26, 2007 for driving under the influence and possession of cocaine, and her most recent legal event at
the time of data collection, a court order to remain in drug rehab on September 24, 2010, following a probation violation (a failed drug test).

I chose to focus on these two events amid a pool of nearly 1,000 news transcripts regarding Lindsay Lohan from 2003 to present, because I believe they most efficiently demonstrate the progression of discourse regarding a star who has been involved in multiple deviant acts. Because later programs following her most recent court action may illustrate little more than an accumulation of frustration, I wanted to examine discourse from an early incident as well – although Lohan’s first arrest certainly was not her first deviant discussion piece (two previous car accidents, an incident of genital flashing for paparazzi, or her parents’ own legal and marital problems may have been).

I established the linguistic themes of “medicalization,” “psychology,” and “tragic femininity” prior to doing research. These categories are rooted in the theoretical literature previously discussed and are of interest to me for a number of reasons. As a third semester Master’s student in the Fall of 2010, I took a graduate seminar in the Sociology of Deviance where several assigned readings that I encountered represented a social constructionist framework for interpreting deviance and its consequences. It was in this course that I became familiar with accounts literature and interested in medicalization (Conrad 1997, 2007). Medicalization and, more specifically, the relationship between gender, deviance, and mental illness are especially interesting to me as a female who entered adolescence in the 1990s, a decade in which several behaviors gained recognition as female psychopathologies. Adler and Adler (2007), for instance, note that self injury achieved lay awareness in the 1990s when it was pathologized as a psychologically disordered behavior practiced primarily by affluent, white, young
females. Widespread awareness of self injury and other behaviors, such as eating disorders and promiscuity, was likely facilitated by the popularity of several books\textsuperscript{3} which helped to name such behaviors as not only feminine (some of them explicitly invoking elements of the tragic heroine) but rampant. Feminine pathology remains an important theme in cultural discourse surrounding young female deviance, and my examination of some of this popular rhetoric seeks to determine how prevalent a medical and/or psychological understanding of young women’s deviance remains.

In analyzing the news broadcast data surrounding Lindsay Lohan’s 2007 and 2010 legal events, I made note of themes which fit the previously discussed categories (medicalization, psychology, and tragic femininity) as well as themes which emerged, such as comparisons to other celebrities, or identification of behavior unbecoming for a woman. I also recorded instances of pundits and the professional credentials (such as lawyer, doctor, author, etc.) of these contributors.

I designated the medicalization category for aligning actions employed in broadcasts which are instances of “defining a problem in medical terms, using medical language to describe a problem, adopting a medical framework to understand a problem, or using a medical intervention to ‘treat’ it” (Conrad 1992: 211). Alcoholism is a primary example.

In the psychology category, I put any aligning actions and other discussion containing psychological and therapeutic concepts (such as “denial,” “narcissism,” or “true self”) and concepts related to developmental theories (such as the detriment to child

development of certain parenting strategies or cause and effect statements such as “abuse makes people do drugs”).

Next, I designated the category of “tragic femininity” for any discussion of Lindsay Lohan as embodying the literary-based features of youth, beauty, sadness, emotionality, fatalism, and self-destruction. Finally, I designated a spillover category of “other aligning actions,” to record all motives and accounts offered for Lindsay Lohan’s deviant behavior which do not include medical, psychological, or tragic female themes.

As there is considerable overlap in themes (accounts often combine the medical and the psychological; femininity is often attributed to psychology), I sometimes categorized data under more than one category. But because many conditions attributed to personal psychology have been medicalized, the categories of “medicalization” and “psychology” were potentially most problematic. While I solved this problem by cross-referencing on occasion, when human conditions were referenced, I generally put personality pathologies in the psychology category and ailments now considered to have a biological basis, like depression, in the medicalization category.

I analyzed the transcripts making note of each theme that occurred in the broadcast discussions of Lohan’s legal problems. Although I do not quantify my research (apart from a tally of the professional identities of pundits), I reached a satisfactory level of saturation in themes by examining two weeks of broadcasts following each focal event. This is evidenced by the thoroughly repetitive nature of subject matter from one transcript to the next early in data analysis.

In the transcripts I analyzed, certain themes emerged as significant and pervasive – alcoholism and the idea that Lohan needs to take alcohol treatment seriously stand out.
Themes also emerged as distinct to each incident, such as blaming of Lohan’s parents for her poor socialization in the first era and criticism of Lohan’s physical appearance in the second era. The following is an examination of these findings and others for each individual time period.
FINDINGS: 2007 TRANSCRIPTS

Medicalization

The most prominent theme I observed under the broader category of medicalization was alcoholism and addiction as disease, although pundits avoided directly calling Lindsay Lohan an alcoholic or addict. (Instead, they tended to discuss people who have alcoholism or addiction in general.) The most pervasive way that this idea manifested in transcripts from this time period was in pundit conversations that suggested an existence of common knowledge about how alcoholism and addiction should be medically treated. These conversations pointed to agreement that alcoholism and addiction are best treated in residential rehabilitation settings (“rehab”) and that such institutions should have certain standards and features.

Pundits who specialize in addiction dominated these transcripts. I noted 17 medical and addiction-related specialists during this period of observation, the two week period following Lohan’s first arrest for DUI, most of whom discussed drug rehabilitation programs. However, journalists, lawyers, and other non-medical contributors accounted for much of the discussion of these background expectancies surrounding rehab.

The most prominent claim made in reference to rehab was the idea that it is the appropriate solution for crime and other problems associated with substance abuse, that it is the appropriate sanction for Lindsay Lohan, and that people who abuse substances need help in the form of rehab rather than incarceration. A legal analyst, for instance, suggests, “Put her into rehabilitation, because that’s what she can really profit from. She can actually change her life that way. Putting her in jail, what, putting her in jail for 30
days, 45 days, 90 days, that’s not going to do it” (Fox News Network “The Big Story with John Gibson,” May 28, 2007).

Anchors and non-specialist pundits also attested at length to the “common knowledge” of the conditions which make a drug treatment program effective. As one pop culture correspondent asserts, rehab should not be “a place like a hotel [where] you could check in and out,” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 29, 2007). A defense attorney pundit in another segment agrees, “[Lohan] needs to go into a very serious rehab, not the kind she went into before, which really was created to be a mockery of what any rehab should be” (CNN “Nancy Grace,” May 29, 2007). This pundit went on to reflect the recurrent idea that one needs to stay a minimum amount of time in rehab for it to be effective, and that Lohan would not benefit by committing to it superficially and in brief stays. Other ideas that demonstrate the common knowledge nature of rehab as an appropriate solution for substance-related deviance are that most people fail the first few times they attempt treatment, and that rehab is difficult or “painful work” (e.g., CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 29, 2007).

While journalists and their contributors avoided directly labeling Lohan an alcoholic or addict in most cases, transcripts revealed a significant volume of references to the features of alcoholism. Pundit doctors and non-specialists alike frequently discussed the genetic nature of alcoholism. A pundit identified as a Hollywood publicist, for instance, states:

You know one of the things we haven’t been talking about much is the genetic component to the disease of alcoholism. You know that it’s often children of alcoholics end up being alcoholics…[S]he comes from two
admitted alcoholics, and there’s a strong genetic likelihood that she’ll end up an alcoholic. (Fox News Network “The Big Story with John Gibson,” May 30, 2007)

A psychiatrist pundit demonstrated the pervasiveness of popular abstinence approaches to substance abuse treatment in the Unites States by asserting in two CNN programs that people with substance abuse issues should never use any amount of the substance. The following exchange, between a psychiatrist (Saltz) and a CNN “Showbiz Tonight” host (Hammer) is one example of this theme:

HAMMER: Is it ever a good idea for anybody being treated for alcohol addiction to even step foot near a club?

SALTZ: No. It’s a terrible idea. I mean, basically, you know, if you’re an alcoholic, if you are a substance abuser, you cannot use the substance. Again, period, you can’t have part of a drink, half a drink. (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 30, 2007)

All types of pundits attested to the seriousness of alcoholism and its potentially dire consequences. Celebrity doctor and frequent “addiction specialist” pundit Drew Pinsky states, “[Lohan is] going to die of this. Her prognosis is worse than most cancer patients…” (CNN “Nancy Grace,” May 29, 2007). A pundit identified as a public relations specialist echoes this theme in another program, stating, “…[T]his is life or death we’re dealing with…We have a real chance for something really tragic to happen here” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 30, 2007).

The least pervasive, but nonetheless evident, themes in the medicalization category were one reference each to depression, anxiety, ADD, and eating disorders. All
diagnoses except for eating disorders were brought up as potential explanations for Lohan’s illegal actions and then refuted in favor of the substance abuse explanation for these incidents.

Psychology

References to matters of psychology constituted the majority of themes I observed in the data from the 2007 transcripts. Within this broader category, claims about the impact of parenting for child and adolescent development were very prominent. The entire spectrum of journalists and pundits discussed Lohan’s upbringing, but non-specialists provided assessments of its quality as often as did doctors and psychologists. For instance, a legal analyst on Fox News Network “The Big Story with John Gibson” observes that Lohan grew up with “no role models” (May 28, 2007). The same program the following day is titled “Are Lindsay Lohan’s Parents to Blame for her Erratic Behavior?” Here Gibson states that Lohan “has the double whammy of party girl mother and out of control father,” while his guest, a psychologist asserts, “She is the byproduct of poor parenting” and “her behavior is really the logical consequence from her childhood,” (May 29, 2007). Lohan’s mother is further discussed as setting a bad example, and references are made to her father as a felon, addict, and perpetrator of domestic violence. Days later, Gibson suggests on his program that Lohan’s mother has “ruined” her (June 4, 2007).

A CNN anchor situates parental responsibility for Lohan’s criminal behavior within the larger phenomena of deviance among her young and famous cohort. Before launching into a discussion with several pundits regarding Lohan’s parents, the program’s host begins with this introduction: “So who is to blame for all these Britney [Spears],
Lindsay [Lohan], Paris [Hilton], Nicole [Ritchie] messes? A lot of people are pointing their fingers right at these kids’ parents” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 30, 2007).

Distinctive psychological language pertaining to Lohan’s relationship with her parents is also abundant and, again, leveled by specialists and non-specialists alike. Claims include that the family’s dynamics are “dysfunctional,” (e.g., CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 30, 2007) and that her parents “enable” her (e.g., Fox News Network “The Big Story with John Gibson,” May 30, 2007). In one instance, a pundit representing a tabloid magazine dubs Lohan’s relationship with her mother, “not normal” (Fox News Network “On the Record with Greta Van Susteren,” May 29, 2007).

Almost as pervasive as the theme of pathological family dynamics as a cause for deviance is the idea that Lohan has been mistreated in general and that these experiences have led her to substance abuse. This includes discussion that the people surrounding Lohan are “enablers,” and that she has been “exploited” and “manipulated” (e.g., Fox News Network “The Big Story with John Gibson,” May 28, 2007). A claim made by Lohan’s father, Michael Lohan, that her friends regard her as “the goose that laid the golden egg,” is aired in several programs (e.g., CNN “Nancy Grace,” May 29, 2007) and suggests that Lohan’s friends abuse her celebrity without regard for her well-being. Lohan is called “narcissistic” by multiple pundits, one of whom, a psychologist, claims that she and others like her feel “invincible” in part because they are surrounded by “people who say there are no rules.” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 29, 2007).

An overwhelming theme which suits the category of both psychology and tragic femininity is the reference to Lohan as “troubled” (e.g., NBC “Today,” May 30, 2007) and related descriptions. Lohan is often discussed as in pain, as having issues, as lost, as
having a meltdown, and as being a mess. One anchor, for instance, discusses Lohan as
being “on the road to self-destruction” (Fox News Network “The Big Story with John
Gibson,” May 28, 2007). An anchor for another program says that Lohan is “heading for
this inevitable disaster” and discusses her deviance as a “cry for attention” (CNN

Pundits of the expert and non-expert persuasions offer accompanying
prescriptions for this psychological trouble. Claims that Lohan needs love and support
were significant. A psychologist pundit appearing on two programs demonstrates the
idea that Lohan needs to find her true self. He suggests that Lohan “find the core of who
[she is],” (Fox News Network “The Big Story with John Gibson,” May 28, 2007), and
not “run away from [her] personal truth” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 30, 2007). A
psychiatrist on another program, too, prescribes the remedy of finding one’s true self and
admonishes Lohan to stop “using the substance abuse mask” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,”
May 29, 2007).

This therapeutic language also includes claims that Lohan is “in denial” (e.g., Fox
News Network “The Big Story with John Gibson,” May 31, 2007), that she needs therapy
(e.g., CNN “Nancy Grace,” May 31, 2007) and that she “needs to be honest with
[herself]” (CNN, “Showbiz Tonight,” May 29, 2007). In one instance, a pundit identified
as a “PR guru,” extends similar therapeutic admonishment to Lohan and her peers,
saying:

I think all four or five of these women are right up there the list. None of
them have really shown the judgment that they’re willing to accept their
problems, accept that they have things to overcome. Until they do, they’re
going to keep getting in the same kind of trouble. (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 30, 2007)

Tragic Femininity

Reflections of a tragic, feminine stock character are evident in transcripts following Lohan’s first arrest in 2007, as some themes discussed under the category of “psychology” suggest. However, all psychological accounts (both those which demonstrate typically feminine qualities and those which are generic) are roughly equal to the presence of medical accounts in these transcripts.

Several references are testament to the youthful standard of this archetype. Not only is Lohan frequently referenced as a young woman, young actress, young starlet (all of which are, of course, accurate descriptions of Lohan in 2007 at the age of 20), and not only is she called a “girl” frequently (as women in United States often are), she is also referred to as a “child” on multiple occasions (for instance, a psychotherapist pundit says, “This child is sick” (CNN “Nancy Grace,” May 29, 2007)). As I noted previously, journalists on CNN coined the term “Young Hollywood’s Meltdown” to refer to Lohan and her female peers’ deviance (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 30, 2007). Lastly, lengthy discussion of Lohan’s need for supervision (e.g. “Where are the adults?” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 29, 2007) and “She needs a minder, a monitor” (CNN “Nancy Grace,” May 29, 2007)) suggests that media pundits do not view Lohan as an adult.

References to Lohan’s beauty or pleasantness are rare but present and contribute to the composite of tragic femininity. A handful of references include Lohan as a “beautiful girl” (Fox News Network “The Big Story with John Gibson,” May 31, 2007), “very sweet,” and “a nice person” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 30, 2007) – all valued
female attributes. In her self-titled legal news program, Nancy Grace even reminisces with a guest pundit about appeal that Lohan has supposedly lost:

GRACE: …I’ve got a question, Anne. What happened to “Parent Trap”?

Remember that cute little girl that everybody loved?

ANNE BREMNER, TRIAL ATTORNEY: Yes, adorable.


As discussed previously, the idea that Lohan is “troubled” was significant throughout the broadcasts and is evidence of the depression, helplessness, and self-destruction of the tragic feminine character. References to her “pain” and to the actress herself as a “mess” – in one case “an official mess” (Fox News Network “The Big Story with John Gibson,” May 29, 2007) – dominate discourse. References to Lohan as being “lost” (in one instance, a label employed in a video clip by Lohan herself (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 29, 2007)) or as “spiraling out of control” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 30, 2007) also speak to the helpless components of this archetype. Furthermore, reporting which mentions past eating disorders (CNN “Nancy Grace,” May 29, 2010) and suicide attempts (Fox News Network “On the Record with Greta Van Susteren,” May 31, 2007), mentioned by a reporter and a magazine correspondent respectively, provide important narrative components.

Finally, pundits conceptualize the tragic feminine stock character when they articulate the dramatic components of this construct. References to Lohan’s “real life drama” (NBC “Today,” May 28, 2007) are not uncommon. One celebrity pundit talks at length about Lohan’s troubles as “a very sad thing,” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” May 30, 2007). The host of a political talk show states, “I feel bad for Lindsay Lohan and all of
these women” and made reference to Lohan as a “young woman in dire trouble” (Fox News Network “The O’Reilly Factor,” May 29, 2007).

But while gender discourse was certainly evident in the accounts that pundits provided for Lohan’s behavior, not all constructions were sympathetic. Pundits often discussed the actress’s behavior as unbecoming for a woman. Of these references, the labels “party girl” and “bad girl” were most frequent. Host John Gibson, for instance, in addition to calling Lohan a “partygirl,” asserts that she is a “spoiled brat and a jerk” (Fox News Network “The Big Story with John Gibson,” May 29, 2007). An anchor on ABC dubs her a “hard partying wild child” (ABC “What’s the Buzz?” May 30, 2007). While criticism of unbecoming behavior was frequent, it was not as prevalent as more sympathetic portrayals of Lohan as distressed and suffering. Occasionally, in fact, critical labels like “party girl” were used in conjunction with more sympathetic understandings of her deviance.

*2007 Findings Summary*

Alcoholism as a medical condition and various psychological explanations for Lindsay Lohan’s 2007 arrest on charges of driving under the influence of alcohol and possession of cocaine dominated news transcripts following the incident and were offered by a variety of pundits. Accompanying the alcoholism account for Lohan’s criminality were also specific understandings of the course of action the actress should take to recover – namely a lengthy admission to a rigid rehabilitation program.

Psychological accounts for Lohan’s behavior consisted of a variety of accounts, most pervasively the themes of parental responsibility for her destructive habits and the damage that being exploited by others near her on account of her early stardom has
caused her. These themes are also relevant to a persisting therapeutic ethos (Davis 2005) which accompanied psychological talk – for instance, the idea that Lohan needs love and support or to embrace her inner child.

Lastly, depictions of Lohan consistent with a tragic, feminine archetype were evident in this broadcast era and overwhelmed more negative appraisals of Lohan’s gender performance. Discussion of Lohan’s suffering, sadness, and self destruction as well as of her feminine beauty and youth contributed to the construction of a pathological but sympathetic character in the 2007 broadcasts. Furthermore, references to Lohan as a member of a troubled female cohort demonstrated this construct’s cultural resonance.
FINDINGS: 2010 TRANSCRIPTS

Medicalization

In 2010, addiction as a medical condition was by far the most pervasive theme in broadcast transcripts regarding Lindsay Lohan and her most recent legal event – a court order to remain in a rehabilitation facility after a failing a drug test while on probation. Again, rehab is discussed as the appropriate solution to problems involving substance abuse. And again, rehab was discussed as preferable and more beneficial for Lohan than prison. A guest on one program, a celebrity news correspondent, for instance, states that, by ordering Lohan to stay in rehab rather than sending her to jail, “the judge did the right thing” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” October 22, 2010).

This time, however, Lohan was directly labeled an alcoholic and/or addict by journalists and pundits, of whom lawyers and legal analysts comprised the largest group (ten is comparison to six doctors and one psychotherapist). Broadcasts often centered around Lohan’s recent sentencing, and the judge’s sentiments to Lohan (“You are an addict. You know that, right?”) were quoted and discussed on several programs (e.g., NBC “Today,” November 8, 2010). And, with Lohan established as an addict, doctor and psychologist pundits in particular, once again proceeded to direct prescriptions at her. Most pervasive among these messages was to take rehab seriously. In one example, a guest doctor states, “…[W]hat she really needs is a bigger commitment to her therapy” (NBC “Today,” September 28, 2010).

In these transcripts, however, pundit cynicism about rehab was quite relevant. Pundits stated, for instance, that Lohan’s voluntary admission to rehab was strategic in avoiding a prison sentence (e.g., NBC “Saturday Today,” October 23, 2010). Pundits...
also discussed the public’s frustration with celebrities avoiding harsher consequences by seeking treatment (e.g., NBC “Today,” September 27, 2010), which was a very minor theme in the 2007 broadcasts.

Other, non-medical, accounts for Lohan’s deviance were more popular in 2010 transcripts than previously and contended for significance but were still not as pervasive as medical accounts. These include pundit sentiments like, “She needs a swift kick in the tush,” expressed by a pundit identified as a former prosecutor (ABC “Good Morning America,” September 24, 2010). One anchor suggested that Lohan was avoiding reality by going to treatment. He states that, by appearing in court, “Lindsay took a break from rehab to face the music…” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” October 22, 2010).

Psychology

Themes meeting the criteria of the “psychology” category were far fewer in the later broadcasts as compared with 2007 broadcasts. Discussion of Lohan’s parents was minimal in comparison with earlier broadcasts, although her mother appears as a guest commentator, discussing her family as “co-dependent” in regard to Lohan’s addiction, on one program; this program also discusses her as being in denial about her daughter’s problems and points out Lohan’s father’s criminal record (NBC “Today,” November 8, 2010). In another program, an anchor discounts the relevance of comments Lohan’s father has made to the press, saying of he and Lohan, “They’re estranged,” (NBC “Today,” September 27, 2010).

Apart from the recurrent claim that Lohan is troubled (or even “a very troubled young woman,” according to one program host (CNN “Issues with Jane Velez-Mitchell,” September 24, 2010), other psychological accounts for Lohan’s behavior are this time
minimal. They include that, according to one reporter, she “continues to wrestle with a
dark side,” (NBC “Today,” October 22, 2010) and is, according to a guest radio host,
“work[ing] on herself,” (CNN “Showbiz Tonight,” October 22, 2010). One program host
claims Lohan has “got a real issue,” and is “going through a very, very hard struggle”
(NBC “Saturday Today,” October 23, 2010). In another program, an anchor states
sincerely, “…[T]his is a girl who clearly has had a very, very hard life” (CNN “Nancy
Grace,” September 24, 2010).

Tragic Femininity

A feminine quality of accounts for Lohan’s behavior is again significant in this
period of broadcasts. This time, however, themes are not nearly as useful for
accomplishing a sympathetic stock character.

While references to her youth (in this period she is 24) are still present (the word
“young” is a frequent descriptor), they are mostly references to immaturity and
irresponsibility (e.g. “wild child” (CNN “Issues with Jane Velez-Mitchell,” September
24, 2010)). Other accounts provide the childlike assessment of Lohan as “misbehaving”
(for example, ABC “Good Morning America,” September 25, 2010). A singular
reference is again made to Lohan as needing supervision, this time by her father in a
video clip aired in the course of a news program (CNN “Issues with Jane Velez-
Mitchell,” September 24, 2010). Conversely, one anchor states that a consequence of her
“hard life” is that she “looks like she’s, like, three or four…times older. She looks like
she’s, like, in her 30s or 40s. It’s a hard 24 years” (CNN “Nancy Grace,” September 24,
2010).
Pundits again make references to Lohan’s beauty, but these references are overwhelmingly facetious this time. For instance, her attire for court appearances is scrutinized in many broadcasts. For example, a pundit identified as representing a celebrity crime-watch website says:

…[Y]ou should maybe wear navy blue or a suit to court. Not Lindsay Lohan. She started off with $1,200 shoes…They’re really expensive. They’re very fancy shoes. So her mom actually took them out of the courthouse with her. Lindsay wasn’t allowed to wear them into [rehab]. She had a lovely little skirt, a kind of a sheer black blouse and a long jacket. (CNN “Nancy Grace,” September 24, 2010)

Other pundits demonstrate agreement that Lohan’s appearance in court signified a lack of reverence for the gravity of the proceedings. Many programs feature descriptions of Lohan as “dressed to the nines” (for example, NBC “Saturday Today,” September 23, 2010). One reporter jokes, “…[S]ome might find her dress a little less than saintly, even if it did match her alcohol monitoring bracelet,” and later he teases, “Freedom cost Lohan $300,000 and once again she has to wear that not-so-fashionable monitoring bracelet” (NBC “Today,” September 28, 2010).

Pundits provide evidence of the sad, fatalistic, and self-destructive categories of the dramatic archetype once again, but, apart from the word “troubled,” these references are minimal in 2010. They include the descriptors discussed and cited under psychology of Lohan as “wrestling with a dark side,” “suffering,” “struggling,” and having a “very, very hard life.” One anchor called Lohan “her own worst enemy” (ABC “Good Morning America,” September 24, 2010) while an anchor on another program reports that “the
actress wept opening in court…” (NBC “Today,” October 22, 2010). However, no other references to behavior which would connote feminine sadness or self-destruction appear.

2010 Findings Summary

Pundits in this period of broadcasts consistently label Lohan as an alcoholic and/or addict, but are far less sympathetic in regard to her deviance. Psychological accounts are evident in 2010, but are much less relevant as compared with the medical account of addiction. A tragic, feminine stock character is also evident in these latter transcripts, but much less relevant in pundit accounts. More pervasive are cynical depictions of Lohan, primarily that she is not taking her crimes seriously as evidenced by her repeated deviance, her flashy court attire, and her exploitation of various rehab programs in hopes of securing lighter sentencing.
DISCUSSION

Alcoholism has been thoroughly medicalized in our society and is extensively chronicled in literature (Conrad 1997). Medicalization of problematic substance use has been helpful in removing much of the stigma of alcoholism and interpreting this condition as medical rather than moral or criminal (Trice & Roman 1970, Schneider 1987). Pundit discourse surrounding Lohan’s use of substances employs this illness-as-account model and often demonstrates the sentiment that individuals should be treated medically for addiction rather than imprisoned for crime. Of further significance, medical, psychological, and addiction specialists are not the only sources of this perspective in modern punditry. The language of addiction as illness has become common knowledge, or a background expectancy, in the construction of aligning actions in popular culture.

Psychological accounts were also offered for Lohan’s deviance, especially during the first broadcast period, following her first arrest. These accounts are evidence of the increasing acceptance for psychology in our culture and its role in explaining personal outcomes. Blaming Lohan’s parents for how she “turned out” or attributing substance abuse to subconscious pain is an example of this faith in psychological rhetoric. Psychological accounts are testament to the increasing medicalization of private troubles as well, and pundits demonstrate this trend when they prescribe psychological remedies (such as therapy, finding love and support, and getting in touch with one’s true self) for psychic pain, struggling, and suffering.

Psychological accounts also contributed to the construction of a tragic female stock character during the first broadcast period, where Lohan was portrayed as young,
naïve, thoroughly troubled, and somewhat helpless and unaccountable for her deviance, of which she was a prime victim. This persona is consistent with Loseke’s (2007) stock character as it situates the troubled starlet in an institutionally preferred narrative and constructs a victim contest in which she is ultimately successful.

Though femininity was an important component is broadcast discourse regarding Lohan’s deviance in the latter broadcast era, the sympathetic quality of the tragic woman archetype was not as pervasive. Instead, boundaries of acceptable femininity were used to scrutinize Lohan (e.g. that a woman should be attractive but not use her appearance to attract inappropriate attention, as pundits claimed she did in court) while fewer psychological accounts were employed to realign (e.g. that depression makes women less culpable for their behavior).

By examining broadcast transcripts from both poles of Lohan’s criminal timeline, I saw evidence of how accounts for others’ deviance in popular discourse changes over time. It is likely that the occurrence of multiple drug and alcohol-related incidents following Lohan’s first arrest accounts for waning pundit employment of the tragic-feminine stock character and, in its place, increasing frustration. A defense attorney pundit made clear the fine line that Lohan walked between pitiable and pathetic, saying, “Lindsay now needs to be known as Lindsay lost or Lindsay loser” (CNN “Nancy Grace,” September 24, 2010). Clark (1987) provides a probable explanation for this dwindling compassion in the form of a bank account metaphor for sympathy; in this case, Lohan’s public sympathy account has been overdrawn by years of deviance and multiple legal episodes.
However, Lohan’s inability to maintain a high level of pundit compassion for her troubles is not at all inconsistent with the tragic female stock character; Lohan herself may be, however, as she continually returns to tax public sympathy. The tragic narrative component which best demonstrates the literature-based archetype, after all, is the feminine suicide. Characters like Shakespeare’s Ophelia are unable to demand sympathy for subsequent tragedies because, often, the most moving thing they do is die before they can become too obnoxious. Lohan tests public willingness to remain interested in her tragedy by frequently reviving her public persona and subsequently re-submerging into deviance.

Further research should incorporate a larger body of discourse, including print and televised discussions of Lohan as well as young, female celebrity deviants like her. This study examined only a few weeks of broadcast transcripts revolving around legal events in Lindsay Lohan’s criminal timeline. Discourse surrounding the deviance of young female celebrities of color should also be examined, as racial understandings of deviance permeate American culture (e.g., Markovitz 2006) and pervasive, negative images of black women in particular (Collins 2009) are likely to influence the types of accounts which will be accepted for their deviance.

Additionally, examination of broadcasts which discuss non-criminal events, such as Britney Spears’s shaved head or Paris Hilton’s sex tape, will likely yield different accounts than those offered in reference to Lohan’s arrests and court orders. As non-substance related deviance, these events and others will likely yield more psychologically based discourse as well as medical discourse other than that which concerns the overarching themes of addiction and alcoholism.
Discussion of non-substance related deviance may also provide better case studies for psychology as an effective aligning mechanism in regard to femininity. Substance abuse, unlike depression and personality disorders, is not a feminine medical phenomenon, although Chesney-Lind (1989) suggests that any deviance attributed to women is more offensive to society due to more constraining expectations of female behavior. Nonetheless, as an account, addiction does not necessarily contribute to the construction of a tragic female character who evokes sympathy in the wake of her deviant acts. The fact that this archetype emerges in transcripts regarding Lohan’s substance abuse-related crime is significant in itself and suggests that this character may be even more pronounced in discussion of female deviance which does not involve substances.
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*The broadcast transcripts which comprise the data for this project were accessed using LexisNexis Academic.*
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