

A Dissection of Grey's Anatomy

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This paper, qualitative study, used field observation to acquire data and published data to assert findings. The author watched a ubiquitously popular television show in the United States and compared results from a 2003 book entitled "Women, Men and Society," in which authors found a disproportionate amount of female television roles to be sexualized and only cast by good looks, to find a linkage between statistical facts of the turn of the century and current findings based on past data. This paper observed four episodes and analyzed all major stereotypical roles ascribed to each actor and later the author compared data in a 2003 book.

Television questionably ful-fills a niche in our everyday lives. Renzetti and Curran (2003) report that the average American spends more time watching television than any other leisure activity-more than socializing, reading, or participating in outdoor activities combined. In 2000, it was estimated that Americans per capita watch 1591 hours of television (Renzetti and Curran 2003). While these statistics are quite alarming, perhaps the substantial amount of time we reserve for television viewing can be considered less of a surprise if we are to consider some of the special reasons for its appeal. ¹Television can be watched at little or no cost, as well as requiring no skills or expertise to watch, and is

readily accessible to watch without leaving the comfort of one's own home (Renzetti and Curran 2003).

Television's ubiquitous availability makes it an effective medium of socialization; it is accessible to everyone regardless of their age, sexual orientation, class, race, and geographic location, therefore every-one is exposed and susceptible to the same visual and verbal social messages. Thus, the unsuspecting universality of television mediates its role as a pivotal agent of socialization as it exerts a powerful influence in shaping gender roles. Television has long been accused of espousing negative social messages by reinforcing stereotypical gender traits and behaviors (Renzetti and Curran 2003). In order to further investigate this claim, it is important to evaluate the content and the messages television broadcasts to its viewers.

I will use content analysis to evaluate "Grey's Anatomy". Starting

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with face value, the prestigious career statuses' of the cast characters, which not only includes both men and women but also individuals of different ethnic backgrounds, makes a case for its progressiveness; this superficial observation will be put to the test. "Grey's Anatomy" airs on ABC Thursdays nights at 9 pm and is currently in its 4th season. While I am an avid watcher of the show beginning in its 2nd season, I have chosen to evaluate four more recent episodes, starting with 4.9 "Crash into Me—Part 1", 4.10 "Crash into Me—Part 2", 4.12 "Where the Wild Things Are", and 4.13 "Piece of My Heart".

"Grey's Anatomy" chronicles the lives both personal and professional—of a group of surgical interns and their supervisors face as hospital staff on a daily basis. The show specifically focuses on a group of five interns: Meredith Grey, Cristina Yang, Isobel "Izzie" Stevens, Alex Karev, and George O'Malley, as they navigate their way through the residency program at the fictional Seattle Grace Medical Center. Their supervisors include the Chief of Surgery, Dr. Richard Webber, the various attending surgeons, Dr. Derek Shepard, Dr. Erica Hahn, and Dr. Mark Sloan, as well as the senior residents; Dr. Miranda Bailey and Dr. Callie Torres. Although the plot of the show is based truly on its collection of cast members, the show's name and the fact that every show begins with a voice-over conducted by Meredith Grey seems to suggest she is the protagonist of the show. While the interns, with exception of George, have been promoted to second-year residents in the 4th season, Lexie Grey, Meredith's half-sister and a

current first-year intern also has a recurring role this season; most likely due to her close relationship with Meredith.

Such a large cast necessitates a few disparate plot lines; the current major plotlines include Meredith and Derek's efforts to cope with the consequences of their break-up, Callie's newfound friendship with Dr. Hahn, Alex's convoluted romantic relationship with married former patient Rebecca, and Christina's unappreciated endeavors to win Dr. Hahn's good graces in her pursuit to practice cardiothoracic surgery.

An examination of gender role messages presented in this show will be evinced including presence and appearance/age of the male and female characters and the gender stereotypes conveyed by the show's authors.

According to *Women, Men, and Society*, women characters on prime-time television account for 39% of all major characters (Renzetti & Curran 2003). In order to evaluate this finding for this particular show, I have defined all major characters as those characters that were present in least three out of the four episodes I analyzed. With this particular definition in mind, there are a total of 14 major characters: five are male and nine are female. Thus, the books findings do not hold true for this particular show: women account for 64.3 % of all major characters.

In keeping with the show's medical theme, the hospital is the major hub of the action. As medical professionals, all of the major characters are shown at work and are shown to be equally competent in their roles—that is, each character is shown working, inter-

acting with patients, and performing medical procedures. Interestingly, while there are more female major characters, the positions of power and authority are disproportionately held by men. For example, three out of the four attending surgeons, including the Chief of Surgery, are men. However, while males occupy the top of the hierarchy, and are depicted as being incredibly skilled (as they should be for surgeons of their caliber), they resolve less of the surgical issues. Indeed, problem solving is equally divided between men and women and for the most part, it is collaborative. For example, in episode 4.10, an important piece of neurosurgical navigational equipment has crashed. The nurse, Rose, with her limited knowledge of computer science, identifies a problem involving the wires but cannot connect them together correctly due to what she claims are her “shaky hands”. Dr. Shepard, the neurosurgeon, then steps in to fix the problem as he has famously steady hands— with being a neurosurgeon and all—and, indeed, once the wires are mitigated, the machine comes back to life. Another such example exists in episodes 4.12 and 4.13 when Meredith diagnoses a patient with a currently untreatable brain tumor and formulates a radical treatment plan in the form of a clinical trial. However, being a less experienced resident, she needs the attending neurosurgeon to approve the plan and perform this new surgery, all of which Dr. Shepard executes. While it is not lost on me that the above two examples could be construed to mean that, while a woman is more than capable of identifying a problem, a man is needed to “finish the job”. I have watched enough episodes of this show to

know that such a claim is not representative of the show as a whole, and many examples exist where a woman is completely capable of “finishing the job”; this situation was just not evident in the four analyzed shows. Invariably and realistically, most of the surgeries featured on the show are truly synergistic efforts on the part of the medical team, which consists of any proportion of attending surgeons, residents, interns, and nurses, both male and female.

Women, Men, and Society also report that female characters are more likely to be thin or physically attractive; specifically, 46% of women compared with just 16% of men are thin or very thin (Renzetti & Curran 2003). This finding does not coincide with my findings for “Grey’s Anatomy”. Of the 9 female characters, 6 are thin or very thin (67%). If we take this finding alone, it would seem that it parallels the book’s finding. However, of the 5 male characters, 3 are athletic /physically fit (60%). Interestingly, the males’ physical appearances are emphasized by the charming monikers of Dr. Mc Dreamy and Dr. Mc Steamy, attributed to Dr. Shepard and Dr. Sloan, respectively. Thus, for this show, while it is true that a large proportion of females are physically thin, it would seem that the standard of attractiveness in terms of physical body types is applied equally to members of both sexes.

The book relates that the characters played by women are, on average, younger. Two-thirds of female characters are in their twenties and thirties, while 12% are in their forties; 22% of male characters are in their forties for prime-time television

(Renzetti & Curran 2003). Based on my observations primarily of the appearances of 'Grey's Anatomy' cast members my findings parallels the authors findings: 77% of major female characters are in their twenties and thirties whereas a substantially smaller proportion (22%) are in their forties. A greater proportion of males (60%) are in their forties or older. On the whole, the male cast of characters reflect a wider age range (i.e. the youngest men are in their late twenties and the oldest man is in his late fifties) with the proportion of males in each age category being fairly equal—that is, two men are in their twenties and thirties, two men are in their forties, and one man is in his fifties. For the female characters, the age range is narrower; no female character is shown older than her forties. A comparison of the number of women in each age category reveals a severe imbalance with a significantly greater number of women in their twenties or thirties.

The book also reports that gender stereotypes are prevalent in television. According to this study's analysis, "Grey's Anatomy" is rather variable in propagating and dispelling these stereotypes. For example, males are stereotyped as being chauvinistic womanizers. The characters of Alex Karev and Dr. Sloan certainly live up to this reputation. Alex sleeps around and, in episode 4.11, he juggles two girlfriends. Dr. Sloan is portrayed as promiscuous; indeed one character refers to him as a man-whore. However, this blatant reinforcement of gender stereotypical behavior is tempered by the presence of Dr. Shepard, a man who wants to settle down and get married,

which challenges the stereotype. The show also opposes the stereotype's applicability to men only by depicting the women as equally apt to sleep around. Christina and Meredith proclaim that they "screw boys like whores on tequila".

The show preserves the female "bossy boss" and male leader dichotomy. To get what they want, the women in positions of power are authoritarian. Dr. Erica Hahn's constant sarcasm and arrogance render her cold, imperious, and rude. Knowing Christina Yang's penchant for forging intimate relationships with her male supervisors/mentors, Dr. Hahn bluntly informs Christina that she cannot be manipulated when Christina attempts to get on her good side. Dr. Miranda Bailey, the chief resident, is well-meaning but most definitely bossy. She is collectively referred to as the "Nazi", probably a direct reference to her strict regime and unwavering demands and expectations. Conversely, Dr. Webber, the Chief of Surgery, is portrayed as a true leader, benevolent and omniscient. His mentor-like qualities render him likeable and approachable to his colleagues and subordinates alike. Thus, the negative portrayal of female bossiness shows that, while women can assert their power and gain respect, they are punished for their behavior.

Females are reputed to be more consumed with discussing romantic life and relationships, and for the most part, this stereotype is maintained. Meredith and Christina rarely often conduct "shrink sessions"—that is, Christina plays the shrink while Meredith talks out her problems—that revolve around Meredith's relationship or lack thereof

with Dr. Shepard. Rebecca keeps returning to the hospital because she always “wants to talk” and sort out her relationship with Alex, but is continually rebuffed. The show moves away from the stereotype in that it also shows men engaging in relationship discussions. Just as Meredith continuously talks about her relationship with Derek to Christina, Derek also extensively discusses the details of his relationship with Meredith, most notably with Dr. Sloan or George.

Interestingly, the show also presents a woman as the breadwinner in the family. Miranda Bailey is shown as a workaholic, so much so that her husband becomes a stay-at-home dad to raise their son. A recurring plotline delineates her husband's mounting resentment of her career and her constant absence from the home and frustration with what he perceives to be his limited role, which severely strains their relationship and culminates in their estrangement. So, while the show presents the possibility of a wife in capacity of the primary money-maker, it certainly does not paint it as a positive experience.

Additionally, the races of the characters of the characters were evaluated in the context of the book finding that minorities are still under-represented in television. *Women, Men, and Society* noted over 80% of characters on prime-time television are White, 12% are Black, 2% are Asian and 1% are Hispanic (Renzetti & Curran 2003). Of the fourteen major characters, ten are Caucasian (71%), two are African-American (14%), one is Asian American (7%), and one is Hispanic American (7%), which are greater than

the book's statistics. Despite their under representation, these minority characters occupy positions of power—specifically, Richard and Miranda who are African-American and are Chief of Surgery and chief resident-respectively. Callie Torres is Latina and is a senior resident, Christina Yang is Asian and is the most skilled and technically competent 2nd year resident—and contributes significantly to the plot development of each episode.

The findings derived from my analysis of “Grey's Anatomy” do not reflect the findings found in *Women, Men, and Society*. There are nearly twice as many major female characters than male characters. While a greater proportion of males are in positions of authority, problem solving is divided equitably between women and men. In general, male and female characters are held to similar standards of physical fitness, although men are given more leeway in terms of age. Although the show does mediate the prominence of gender stereotypes in television, it does convey messages that resist these stereotypes. It perpetuates the stereotype of rampant male sexuality, and reinforces the “bossy boss-leader” binary. Nonetheless, the show also presents promiscuous females, sensitive open to relationships problems males, and a woman as a primary bread winner. In addition, while minorities are still underrepresented, the ethnic characters' on this particular show offer positions of power which maximize their contributions to each episode.

“Grey's Anatomy” conveys social gender messages: both men and women are competent and can solve problems; both men and women can

attain power and authority, while men are reputed to be promiscuous women can also be promiscuous; while women are more concerned with relationships and do discuss them, men can also actively discuss relationships. In the end, the show does not dispel any gender stereotypical behaviors in that it does portray a particular gender as possessing its stereotypical trait; rather, the show conveys that the trait or behavior is not limited to only one sex. Females and

males are completely capable of doing what the other sex does, and by showing that women and men are not different at all, "Grey's Anatomy" is progressive.

REFERENCES

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