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Women At Work: An Analysis Of The Portrayal Of Female Characters In The Workforce On Prime-Time Television Sitcoms

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WOMEN AT WORK: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE WORKFORCE ON PRIME-TIME TELEVISION SITCOMS.

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May 1, 1998
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the
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May 1st, 1998
Women at Work: A study of the portrayal of female television characters in the work force on prime-time television sitcoms.

This study looks at the depiction of female characters in the workforce on prime-time television sitcoms. There appears to be a gap in the research on the subject of the portrayal of women in the workforce on television, with the most recent published studies researching the television programming of the late 1980's. This study will use a coding schema developed by Vande Berg and Trujilo (1989) to determine the occupational identity of main and sub-main characters on each of the television sitcoms broadcasted during the prime-time hours. An adapted version of a coding schema developed by McNiel (1975) will be used to determine how substantially occupational role is integrated into the identity of both male and female characters, compared to marital status, and parental status.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

During my sophomore year in high school, television character Murphy Brown became an unwed mother. At the time, Brown’s pregnancy looked like a symbolic strike against the stigma attached to motherhood status in the work place. At a time when the media was prophesizing a mass exodus of female employees from the fast track to the “mommy-track,” one of television’s leading female characters was going to “have it all.”

A strong and successful female character would be shown balancing a brilliant career with motherhood responsibilities – and she would do it all on her own. And in her footsteps would follow other female characters capable of managing career and family in a visible manner.

However, the real impact of Murphy Brown’s motherhood status on the portrayal of female television characters has not been quite as major as predicted. In fact, since the birth of the baby, motherhood has not figured largely into the plot line of “Murphy Brown”. Rather, Brown’s situation since giving birth to her son seems to support the rationale employed in the depiction of female television characters with invisible careers: A female character can be depicted with both a successful career and family life only if one of these elements remains largely hidden (Faludi, 1991). However, while for most female characters currently on television the peripheral element in their character depiction is work, for Brown the focal element of her character is work, while the peripheral element is family.

Moreover, the networks did not rush to jump on the bandwagon to develop shows emphasizing the ability of women to manage both a visible career and a functional home
life. Rather, for most female characters, work continued to be a peripheral theme in their television portrayal. It is with this phenomenon in mind that I began my research into the current status of the women portrayed in the work force on prime-time television sitcoms.
CHAPTER 2: PROBLEM AND RATIONAL

The Media as a Source of Influence on the Public

It is important to explore the messages television is sending to the public because of the preponderant influence this form of media has on all sectors of society. Television is the most far-reaching form of media consumed by the American public with 89 percent (18-54-year olds) to 94 percent (over 55) of the public tuning in daily (Television Bureau of Advertising, cited in Wood, 1994). Television viewing consumes more time than any other activity for children in elementary school through high school. For adults, television viewing falls only behind working and sleeping in terms of time spent (Wallack, 1990).

Television has a significant influence on the public. In its portrayal of the world (however realistic or unrealistic) television sends messages about the norms and rules of society and depicts behaviors which people then add to their repertoire (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Research has linked television viewing to such negative consequences as increasing amounts of violence and crime, and such positive consequences as increased health awareness (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995). Television viewing has also been liked to public perception of gender roles. With its central role in American society, television cannot help but be a significant source of influence on our cultural understanding of gender roles (Ivy & Backlund, 1994). In fact, Wood (1994) described the mass media influence on public perception of gender as “the most pervasive and one of the most powerful” of all sources of influence (Wood, 1994, p. 244).
The Media’s Portrayal of Women in the Workforce

The workplace has long been a source of gender inequality. Women have suffered discrimination, stereotyping, sexual harassment, and a lack of representation in the upper-echelons of organizational life. With its important role in socializing the public to gender roles, it becomes important to understand what, if any, messages are being communicated by television to which might help sustain gender inequality in the workplace. In 1988, women represented 57 percent of the workforce, however, only 35 percent of the workforce on primetime television were women (Vande Berg & Streckfuss, 1992, p. 204).

As the 1990s draw to a close, there is evidence that the position of women in the workplace is improving to a certain degree. Linda Meric, spokeswoman for the 9 to 5 National Association for Women, noted that, “women make up an increasing percentage of the workforce, and with that more of management” (Vasquez, 1997, p. 27A). These trends indicate that women are playing an increasing, and permanent role in nearly all sectors of the workforce. Thus, research indicates that although women have been a significant part of the workforce, their contributions through the 1980s have not been accurately reflected on television.

However, these trends do not mean that the problem of gender inequality in the workplace has been solved by any stretch of the imagination. With the battles over gender inequality that still remain in mind, it is important to examine how television is portraying the increasing role of women in the workforce. This study does not identify
whether television that reflects reality, or television that reflects equality would be the best way to foster improvement of the situation of women in the work force in real life. The current literature, reviewed in Chapter 3, indicates that television’s portrayal of the work force under-represents the role women play in it – thus, it does not reflect reality or equality. This study is an attempt to see if, and how, television programming has changed in the last decade with respect to the visibility of female characters in organizational life. Whether the end goal is reality or equality in television programming, it is important to gauge current programming in order to determine how the portrayal of current female sitcom characters compares to the portrayal of female television characters in previous research.

This study is warranted because the bulk of the literature on the television’s portrayal of women in the workforce looks at television programming from the end of the 1980s – making the data nearly a decade old.

This study is looking only at prime-time situational comedies. The study attempts to identify how substantially occupational role is integrated into the identity of female television characters by examining the organizational images of female characters. As home and family life have been dominant features in the portrayal of female television characters in prior decades (according to previous research outlined in chapter 3) the variables of marital status and parental status are examined in this study in order to compare the portrayal of female characters in prior television programming with current programming. Male characters are examined for the same variables in order to provide a basis for comparison.
The study involves coding for all major, sub-major, and supporting characters depicted in the sample of sitcoms. Vande Berg and Trujilo's (1989) coding schema is used to identify the occupational identity of each character (occupational role, industry, and hierarchical role). McNeil's (1975) instrument will be used to classify the portrayal of employment for each character. An adapted version of McNeil's instrument was developed and is employed in this study to classify the portrayal of marital status and parental status.

Before discussing the methods for this study in more depth, a review of the findings of pertinent, prior research is warranted.
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Women have been inaccurately portrayed in television situational comedies on several accounts. In organizational life on television, the portrayal of women can be characterized by four main themes: under-representation, relegation to lower-status occupations, restriction to a limited variety of roles, and poor integration of their occupational identity into their character portrayal. The research also indicates that for female characters, whether married or single, marital status is a much more significant element of their character than their male counterparts. Finally, television has been overwhelmingly negative in their portrayal of the working mother – depicting women who are not particularly competent in the home or the workforce.

Occupational Portrayal

Under-Representation

Historically, women have been under-represented in the work place on television. Women were under-represented on television in general by a three-to-one ratio of male to female characters until the end of the 1970’s (Dominick, 1979; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). This theme of under-representation, combined with a very limited range of roles that women have been depicted in on television – in their roles as workers, wives, and parents, has prevented the portrayal of female television characters from approaching a resemblance to the population that exists in the real world.
As under-represented as women are in the general population on television, they have an even smaller presence in the workforce portrayed on television. During the 1960s research found, “Among the televised workers, 83.9 percent were males and only 16.1 percent were females” (DeFleur, 1964, p. 65). It was not until the 1970s that the influx of women into the workforce in real life even began to be reflected by television programming. Wood (1994) noted the appearance of shows such as “Maude” and “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” during this decade. These shows portrayed independent, successful women, without long-term romantic relationships.

However, some researchers argued that the 1970s still did not see a very dramatic departure from previous decades in the portrayal of women in the workforce on television. Women were still under-represented by a more than two-to-one margin (Dominick, 1979; McNeil, 1975). The occupational distribution of female characters on television still did not even approach mirroring the occupational distribution of women in the real-life workforce (Dominick, 1979). Tedesco (1974) found that female characters were almost twice as likely to be portrayed as unemployed than male characters. Even when women were portrayed in an occupation, their occupations rarely played a visible role in show plots compared to male characters (McNeil, 1975).

**Lower Occupational Status**

As well as being numerically under-represented, female television characters are also largely relegated to lower status positions in their organizational life as portrayed on television. During the 1970s female characters were predominantly portrayed in occupations that have been traditionally filled by women. Additionally, female
characters were typically depicted on television in positions where they were subordinate to men, and were twice as likely to be depicted in low-prestige jobs than male characters (McNeil, 1975). Tedesco’s (1974) study found that of the 33 percent of female characters who were portrayed as employed, only 17 percent were portrayed as professionals; by contrast of the 64 percent of male characters who were portrayed as employed, 24 percent were portrayed as professionals.

It was not until the 1980s that women were significantly more visible as members of the workforce on television. During the 1980s, 30 percent of the families on prime-time television sitcoms contained a female who worked outside of the home (Moore, 1992), compared to seven percent in previous decades (Butsch, 1992). A number of researchers described this shift in the role of women on television as a sign of progress. Petersen-Perlman (1986, cited in Pearson, West, & Turner, 1995, p. 242) claimed, “women are often portrayed as professional and independent.” Additionally, Butsch (1992) argued that women were being portrayed positively as workers. “Working wives appeared not as indicators of economic necessity but as professional successes in their own right... Mothers who were single parents were often shown not struggling to make ends meet but rather pursuing successful and interesting careers” (Butsch, 1992, p. 390).

Despite the appearance of improvement though, it must be noted that the majority of the research on television programming in the 1980s did not agree with this positive diagnosis. Most research identified little improvement in the depiction of female characters since the 1950s. Women were still under-represented on television to the same three-to-one degree that they were in the 1950s (Basow, 1992; Davis, 1990; Ferguson, 1990; Pearson, West & Turner, 1995; Wood, 1994). When female characters were shown
in the workplace, they were generally in positions subordinate to male characters (Steeves & Smith, 1987). Additionally, it was discovered that women are much more likely to be portrayed in lower-level professional staff occupations and less likely to portray higher level professional staff occupations than men are (Vande Berg & Streckfuss, 1992). Moreover, the depictions of working women on television shows during the 1980s did not reflect the experiences of the majority of working women - “the majority of women who work in lower-paying, sex-segregated clerical and/or service positions” (Steeves & Smith, 1987, p. 58).

**Limited Roles**

The research finds that female characters are limited in the scope of roles they are portrayed in on television programs. Sexual objectification has been a constant theme in the portrayal of women on television in general. In the workforce, female television characters are also limited in the scope of occupations they hold, and their relegation to interpersonal rather than work-oriented functions.

In the 1970s, research indicates female characters were depicted in a less independent, less competent, more social manner (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; McNeil, 1975, Tedesco, 1974). One study found, “male characters are more powerful, smart, rational, tall, and stable, while females are more attractive, fair, sociable, warm, happy, peaceful, and youthful. Females are less powerful, rational, smart, or stable than males” (Tedesco, 1974, p. 122).
More recent studies still found that for female characters there was still a great deal of emphasis being placed on traditional female characteristics such as physical appearance and interpersonal skills. Wood (1994) noted that the media depicts women as “sex objects who are usually young, thin, beautiful, passive, dependent, and often incompetent and dumb” (p. 235). Beauty, sexuality, and emotional nurturing are the still the dominant characteristics of female television characters (Davis, 1990; Ferguson, 1990; Steeves & Smith, 1987). Additionally, female roles tended to still be focused around the home (Ferguson, 1990; Steeves & Smith, 1987; Wood, 1994). Faludi (1991) observed that in 1990 only two of the 33 new television shows introduced were about women with jobs. “On the rest they were housewives, little girls, or invisible” (Faludi, 1991, p. 147).

In addition, Tedesco’s (1974) study showed that men and women were portrayed in different kinds of jobs in the prime-time television programming of the 1970s. Women who were portrayed on television as employed held jobs in entertainment (54 percent), health (16 percent), and education (14 percent). By comparison, male characters were portrayed in a much more diverse range of industries: entertainment (27 percent), health (24 percent), government (15 percent), education (14 percent), and business (10 percent) (Tedesco 1974). A 1974 study by Busby (cited in Lowery & DeFleur, 1995, p. 368) discovered television portraying men in 42 different jobs while women occupied only nine different jobs.

Furthermore, Vande Berg & Streckfuss (1992) argued that women are not portrayed very positively as employees on prime-time television. Television shows featuring men and women at work tend to emphasize the work done by males, while de-
emphasizing work done by female characters. "Proportionately, women were far more likely to be portrayed performing interpersonal functions in organizations, while males were far more likely to be seen fulfilling informational, decisional, political, and operational functions in organizations" (Vande Berg & Streckfuss, 1992, p. 203-204).

Poor Integration of Occupational Identity

Despite some changes in the portrayal of female characters, some significant problems remain in attempting to integrate occupational identity into female characters (Japp, 1992). Although female characters on television during the 1980’s were depicted in high-status professional occupations, "typically, a woman’s occupational status was uneasily layered atop an otherwise stereotypical woman, effecting few changes in either characterization or plot development" (Japp, 1992, p. 49). Japp identified four different ways in which 1980s television women are portrayed as workers, none of which successfully integrate the role of worker into the identities of female characters.

The first theme that Japp (1992) discovered is “The Working Woman at Home: Woman and Work in Place” (p. 59). This strategy depicts women in the home. Although these female characters do have occupations outside of the home, their occupational role is invisible and they are seldom shown outside of the domestic setting. Ferguson (1990) cited some examples of this tactic. ‘Claire Huxtable of “The Cosby Show”, and Elise Keaton of ‘Family Ties,’ for example, are visible as wives and mothers, and relatively
invisible as a lawyer and an architect. This home-work duality generally does not hold for their professional husbands, however" (Ferguson, 1990, p. 219).

A second theme Japp (1992) found in the portrayal of female television characters is “Woman’s Workplace in the Home: Displacement of Work” (p. 61). In this strategy for integrating women and work, the work place is the home. Women maintain an occupational identity without having to leave the home. In programs using this strategy, work-related topics seldom dominate the story line. “The women, while defined as working remain tied to the site (the home) and its associations; their work remains subordinate to personal, relational, and domestic concerns. Thus, work effects few changes in the nature of the domestic environment, or in the image of woman” (Japp, 1992, p. 62).

A third strategy Japp (1992) observed in the portrayal of female television characters is “Displacement of Woman and Workplace: Work on the Run” (p. 63). In this strategy, women conduct work neither at home, nor in an organizational setting. “Although work sites exist, activity usually takes place in more neutral settings” (Japp, 1992, p. 63). This strategy is typically used in action/adventure series. However, even though these women have been taken out of the home, the worker role has not been successfully integrated. “In this strategy also, women’s work is de-emphasized, serving primarily as a background for concentration on feminine themes of romance and sexual tension” (Japp, 1992, p. 64).

The fourth trend Japp (1992) identified is “Woman in the Workplace: Woman Displaced” (p. 64). This strategy actually places female characters in the workplace as employees. Occupational settings are still depicted as predominantly masculine.
Therefore, the women who appear in the workplace appear out of place and a contaminant to the setting. "However successful, women characters often seem fragmented, dislocated, without integration of masculine and feminine, head and heart, home and work" (Japp, 1992, p. 66). In conclusion, Japp (1992) described these unsuccessful attempts to portray women in work settings as depicting "a woman who just happened to be a worker, rather than a worker who just happened to be a woman" (Japp, 1992, p. 67).

In the end, the research on the portrayal of female characters in the work force suggests that significant limitations still exist for female television characters. Female characters on television are under-represented, limited in their roles, and relegated to lower-status positions. Moreover, there has been a great deal of difficulty in successfully integrating occupational identity into the portrayal of female characters.

As home life, including marital status and parental status, plays such a large role in the portrayal of female characters, it is important to discuss the research on these two areas.

Marital Status Portrayal

Studies indicate that the female characters on television are primarily defined by their role within a family (Dominick, 1979; McNeil, 1975). "Women on prime-time television are portrayed in a much narrower range of roles – primarily as wives and mothers – than are men" (Smythe, 1954 cited in Vande Berg & Streckfuss, 1992, p. 195). Moore’s (1992) study on prime-time television programs from 1947-1990 discovered that
women were not portrayed simultaneously as wives/mothers and holding jobs outside of the home until the 1970s. "Wives and mothers across the decades were predominantly shown as home centered and supported by their husbands and fathers" (Moore, 1992).

In the television programs of the 1970s, Tedesco (1974) found that more than one half of female characters on television were married, compared to less than a third of male characters. By the 1980s, this gender gap had narrowed. Davis (1990) discovered that 11.5 percent of male characters were married compared to 19.5 percent of females. However, Davis (1990) argued that the marital status of male characters was much more likely to be indeterminable, suggesting that whether married or single, the marital status of female characters played a much more significant role in defining a female television character than a male character.

After discussing the research on organizational portrayal and marital status portrayal for female characters on television, it is also important to include some discussion of the portrayal of parental status for female characters on television.

**Parental Status Portrayal**

The television industry has been seemingly reluctant to depict working mothers (Faludi, 1991). However, this same industry has been quite willing to portray men who simultaneously work outside the home and are parents (even single parents). Moore (1992) and Cantor (1990) found that, of the single-parent households portrayed on television across the decades, an overwhelming number of them were headed by males. In the 1960s widowed fathers on shows like 'The Andy Griffith Show,' 'The Courtship
of Eddie’s Father’, and ‘My Three Sons’ were able to balance job responsibilities and parental duties with little trouble. More recent shows like ‘Full House’ and ‘My Two Dads’ portray this same phenomenon. Faludi’s (1991) analysis showed that the 1980s saw the rise of households depicted without adult females. In the 1987-‘88 season two thirds of the children on television lived with only their father, or a male guardian – compared to 11 percent in real life (Faludi, 1991).

As well as dealing with the conundrum of portraying working mothers by making them invisible, the television industry has tended to depict working mothers in unflattering ways. The homemaker wives and mothers of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were given, on the whole, very positive depictions as competent and efficient in their tasks around the house, and wise and nurturing in their role as a parent (Butsch, 1992; Cantor, 1990; Moore, 1992). By comparison, the working mother of more recent sitcoms is portrayed as having a more negative effect on the household. The working mothers of 1980’s sitcoms were frequently portrayed as incapable around the house, and their lack of housekeeping skills served as the source of jokes and derision by family members (Butsch, 1990; Faludi, 1991; Japp, 1992).

One example of this negative portrayal of a working mother is Angela on ‘Who’s the Boss.’ Angela is an advertising executive and a single parent who is so inept around the house that she bungles even the most elementary chore and requires the help of her live in male housekeeper Tony to provide nurturing and stability for her son (Butsch, 1990). Then there is Maggie on ‘Growing Pains’ whose brief stint as a homemaker during a period of unemployment was so disastrous that her husband and children were relieved when she finally got out of the house and back to work (Japp, 1992). Faludi
(1991) cited the example of the sitcom ‘Blossom’, where Blossom’s mother was not only terrible around the house, but also eventually abandoned her family to pursue her career. Japp (1992) suggested that this portrayal depicts working women as “not really a worker, neither is she really a woman. She is given neither the status of a serious working professional, nor the dignity of a skilled homemaker” (p. 61).

Research on the portrayal of women in the work force on television from the 1950s through the 1980s reveals some disappointing trends. First, the research shows that women are underrepresented on television, and especially in the work force. The representation of women in the workforce does not reflect the distribution of women in the workforce in real life. Second, on television women are predominantly limited to lower-status subordinate positions. Third, female characters are still predominantly portrayed in the traditional role of wife and mother. Even when employment status is defined in a female character on television, her occupation largely remains an invisible, peripheral theme in her television portrayal.

Considering the continued growth of women in the work force, and the influence that television has on public perception of women and men in real life, one might expect further research on the organizational portrayal of women in television programming. However, the research available seems to have stopped with the programming of the late 1980s. No studies have been found addressing the role of women in the work place in the television programming of the 1990s. Can we expect to see any change in television’s depiction of working women? Answering the following research question is justified to assess the current status of women in the work force on prime-time television situational comedies.
RQ: How substantially is occupation depicted in female characters in prime-time television situational-comedies of 1997?

After reviewing the relevant previous research, it is important to describe the methods employed in this study.
CHAPTER 4: METHODS

The data for this research consists of a sample of 34 episodes of prime-time television network situational-comedies (sitcoms) representing one week of programming for each of the three major U.S. networks (NBC, ABC, and CBS). The sample is restricted to regularly scheduled sitcoms — excluding all news, televised sporting events, specials, and movies. The episodes were video recorded during one week in October 1997. Sitcoms missed due to interruptions in network programming, or other reasons, were made up by recording another episode of the same series on a later date.

Variables

Determining an answer to the research question calls for an examination of ten variables that will analyze the portrayal of occupation, marital status, and parental status for each character. The ten variables are: character status, gender, marital status, and parental status, occupational industry, occupational role, hierarchical position, occupational portrayal, marital status portrayal, and parental status. The purpose of assessing these variables for the characters in the sample are to identify the general characteristics of the population portrayed in prime-time sitcoms, determine the characteristics of the occupations held by the characters, and establish which of the three character elements (occupation, marital status, and parental status) are the most salient within each character’s portrayal on television.
In order to understand the ten variables being coded for, the following is a full description of the research instruments used for this study.

**Demographic Information**

The first demographic variable is character status, which categorizes sitcom characters according to how significant their roles are in the sample programs. This variable is being examined to determine if there is a difference in the portrayal of foreground female characters in comparison to more peripheral characters. Television characters being coded consist of all major, sub-major, and supporting characters. The coders classify these characters according to McNeil’s (1975) definitions. Major characters are those characters who “appeared throughout the program and were deeply involved in the main action” (McNeil, 1975, p. 270). Sub-major characters are those characters who “appear less frequently but were involved in some depth with the main plot or any important sub-plots” (McNeil, 1975, p. 270). Supporting characters consist of those characters who “appeared in at least two scenes and spoke at least 10 lines” (McNeil, 1975, p. 270).

All the characters who are coded for this study will be assessed for some basic demographic information based on the observations of the participants watching the sample of sitcoms. First the characters are classified by gender into a male or female category. Second, they are coded according to their marital status as married, single, divorced, or widowed. Third, characters are also classified according to their parental status as having children, or not having children.
Occupational Identity

Next, the characters are coded according to their occupational status using a coding instrument developed by Vande Berg and Trujilo (1989) that classifies a character's occupational industry, occupational role, and hierarchical position.

Industry

First, the characters are classified according to their industry. For this variable the characters' occupations are categorized into one of six industries taken from the U.S. Department of Labor's Standard Industrial Classification Schema and adapted by Vande Berg and Trujilo (1989). The six industries are service (including health, legal, hotel, private investigation, newspaper, amusement, miscellaneous, and educational); public administration (justice, public order, national security); retail trade (including restaurants and bars); finance; transportation/communication; no industry; other (including agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and wholesale trade)(Vande Berg & Trujilo, 1989).

Occupational Role

Next the characters are classified according to their occupational role. To code for the occupational role variable, each character is placed into one of the following
Hierarchical Position

The final occupational variable is hierarchical position. For this variable characters are classified according to their hierarchical position within their organization. The character’s organizational position is coded into one of the following categories: CEO/board; executive/top manager; middle manager; first-line manager; upper level professional staff; lower level professional staff; staff; workers; laborers; customer/patient; small business owner; other (Vande Berg & Trujilo, 1989).

Character Portrayal Variables

Finally, the characters are coded according to which elements of their identity are most significantly depicted. These three character portrayal variables categorize the portrayal of the each character’s occupation, marital status, and parental status.

Organizational Portrayal

The organizational portrayal variable identifies how substantially occupational identity has been integrated into the portrayal of each character. For this variable the portrayal of organizational life for each character will be classified into one of McNeil’s three categories – “mentioned only,” “briefly or indirectly portrayed,” or “substantially
portrayed.” “Mentioned only” is defined as “the character was never depicted at the job location or was never performing the job function” (McNeil, 1975, p. 271). “Briefly or indirectly portrayed” is defined as “the character was depicted working only briefly, or at the job location but not working, and the job was not a significant plot element” (McNeil, 1975, p. 271). “Substantially portrayed” is defined as “the character was depicted working for more than a brief time or when the job was a significant plot element” (McNeil, 1975, p. 271).

Marital Status Portrayal

The marital status portrayal variable determines how substantially the character’s marital status is portrayed in the sample episodes. This variable is established by coding each character according to the portrayal of his/her marital status. McNeil’s (1975) above-mentioned classification instrument has been adapted for this study to classify the portrayal of marital status for the characters. “Mentioned only” is defined as the characters marital status is never visibly portrayed. “Briefly or indirectly portrayed” is defined as the character’s marital status is only briefly visibly portrayed and not a major plot element. “Substantially portrayed” means the character’s marital status is visibly portrayed for more than a brief period of time, or when the marital status is a major plot element.
Parental Status Portrayal

The characters were coded according to the portrayal of their parental status. McNeil’s (1975) above-mentioned classification instrument was adapted for this study to classify the portrayal of parental status. “Mentioned only” is defined as the character’s parental status is never visibly portrayed. “Briefly or indirectly” portrayed is defined as the character’s parental status is only briefly visibly portrayed and not a major plot element. “Substantially portrayed” is defined as indicating that the character’s parental status is visibly portrayed for more than a brief period of time, or it is a major plot element.

Reliability

Data was collected through coding. Two coders watched the entire sample of sitcoms and coded the characters based on their observations of the episodes contained in the sample. The coders participated in a two-hour training session before beginning their observations to ensure that they understood the categories and the information being classified.

Reliability was calculated during the coder training session. Coding for demographic information produced an inter-coder reliability coefficient of 1.0. The classification of character status also produced an inter-coder reliability coefficient of 1.0. Coding for occupational identity resulted in an inter-coder reliability coefficient of .87. The classification of the portrayal of marital status, occupational identity, and marital status produced an inter-coder reliability coefficient of 1.0.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

Analysis of the results from this study illustrates some discernible patterns regarding the portrayal of male and female characters in television situational comedies. In this chapter, each of the variables (parental status, marital status, industry, occupational role, hierarchical role, occupational portrayal, marital status portrayal, and parental status portrayal) compared by gender. By comparing these variables as they were identified in male and female characters some of the differences found in the portrayal of men and women on sitcoms emerge.

Character status is the only variable which will not be discussed. The character status variable was intended to further explore possible difference in gender portrayal by comparing gender representation for major characters, submajor characters, and supporting characters. However, the character sample size produced for this study was small enough that to further break it down would not produce any useful patterns.

The following is a description of the results discovered after comparing the nine variables in male and female characters identified in the sample of sitcoms used for this study.

Gender Representation

In the sample of prime-time television situational comedies analyzed for this study, the data appears to indicate that the proportion of men to women is nearly equal. Of the 108 television characters coded in this study, 57 (53 percent) of them were men, and 51 (47 percent) of them were women.
The findings from this study indicate that the patterns of marital status on television for male and female characters are very different. Of the 51 female characters coded in this study, more than half (57 percent) were single. Eleven (21 percent) female characters were married; one (2 percent) was divorced and none were widows. Another nine (18 percent) were of an undetermined marital status. Of the male characters coded in this study, the largest number of them 23 (45 percent) were single, eight (16 percent) were married, two (3 percent) were divorced, and two (3 percent) were widowed. Another 17 male characters (32 percent) were of an undetermined marital status. (See Figure 1.)

By examining parental status by gender, this study found that the percentages of male and female television characters who have children, and do not have children are
very similar. Of the male and female characters coded for this study, approximately the same number of each gender had children (12 men, 13 women). Additionally, male and female characters were identified in nearly equal numbers as not having children (19 women, 18 men). However, a much larger group of men (37 percent) than women (29 percent) had an undetermined parental status.

Gender and Industry

Of the sample of television sitcoms used for this study, the characters identified were employed in only a small range of industries. In the sample of prime-time situational comedies, characters were identified as employed in 5 of the eleven industry categories developed by Vande Berg and Trujillo (1989). Of the 51 female characters coded, 10 percent (5) worked in the transportation and communication industry; 8 percent (4) worked in retail trade; 21 percent (11) worked in the service industry. An additional 60 percent (30) of them were placed in an undetermined “other” category. Of the 57 male characters identified in the sample, 12 percent (6) worked in the transportation and communication industry; 9 percent (5) worked in retail trade; 20 percent (10) worked in the service industry; and 4 percent (2) worked in public administration. In addition, 50 percent (29) male characters were classified in the “other” industry category. (See Chart 1.)
Chart 1. Gender Representation Across Industries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transport. &amp; Communication</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Trade</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Admin.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender and Occupational Role

This study discovered that female characters are less often represented than male characters in most areas of the workforce portrayed in television sitcoms. In the sample of prime-time television sitcoms used for this study, characters were identified in eight of the 16 occupational role categories developed by Vande Berg and Trujillo (1989). Of the 51 female characters coded, 9 percent (5) worked as professionals; 4 percent (2) in sales; 14 percent (7) in service; and 6 percent (3) were students. Another 49 percent (28) female characters were placed in an “other” role category. Of the 57 male characters identified, 9 percent (4) worked as professionals; 1 percent (1) held a clerical position; 4 percent (2) worked in a sales role; 19 percent (10) in a service role; 10 percent (5) as students; and 4 percent (2) were retired. Additionally, 49 percent (25) were placed in an “other” role category. (See Chart 2.)
Chart 2. Occupational Roles By Held by Male and Female Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational Role</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Percent Men</th>
<th>Number Of Men</th>
<th>Percent Women</th>
<th>Number of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender and Hierarchical Role

The findings from this study suggest that women are still largely absent from the highest level positions within organizations depicted in television sitcoms. In the sample of television sitcoms used for this study, male and female characters were identified in nine of the eleven hierarchical role categories developed by Vande Berg and Trujillo (1989). Of the 51 female characters identified, one percent (1) worked as a middle-level manager; one percent (1) worked as a first-line manager; eight percent (4) worked as upper-level professional staff; 13 percent (7) worked as lower level professional staff; eight percent (4) worked as staff; two percent (1) worked as laborers; and nine percent (5)
were small business owners/self-employed. Additionally 61 percent (30) of the female characters coded were placed in an “other” hierarchical role category. Of the 57 male characters coded, three percent (2) were top managers; three percent (2) were middle-level managers; seven percent (3) were upper-level professional staff; eight percent (4) were lower-level professional staff; eight percent (4) were staff; 12% percent(6) were small business owners/self-employed. Another 58 percent (29) were placed in an “other” hierarchical role category. (See Chart 3.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hierarchical Role</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive/Top Manager</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Manager</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Line Manager</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Staff—Upper level</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Staff—Lower Level</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Business Owner/Self-employed</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Occupational Portrayal and Gender

The characters for this study were coded to determine how significantly their occupation is portrayed in the sitcom in the sample. These findings indicated that
occupational life is more likely to be substantially portrayed for male characters than female characters in television sitcoms. Of the 51 female characters, 40 percent (24) were placed in the “mention only” category; 10 percent (5) were classified in the “briefly or indirectly portrayed” category; 49 percent of women were placed in the category of “substantively portrayed.” Of the male characters, 34 percent were categorized as “mentioned only,” 8 percent were in the “briefly and indirectly portrayed” category, and 59 percent were “substantively portrayed.”

Marital Status Portrayal and Gender

Additionally, the characters were coded to determine how significantly their marital status was portrayed. Examination of this variable by gender suggests that the percentages of male and female sitcom characters with highly visible marital status are very similar. Of the female characters, 49 percent (25) were placed in the “mentioned only” category; 7 percent (4) were in the “briefly or indirectly portrayed” category; and 31 percent (16) in the “substantially portrayed” category. Of the men, 62 percent (35) of them were in the “mentioned only” category; 7 percent (4) of them went into the “briefly or indirectly portrayed” category; and 32 percent (18) in the “substantially portrayed” category.

Parental Status Portrayal and Gender

Finally, the characters were coded according the portrayal of their parental status. The findings from this study indicate that female characters are more likely than male
characters to have an identifiable parental status. Of the 51 women coded, 58 percent (30) were coded into the mentioned only category, 2 percent (1) were placed in the “briefly and indirectly” category, and 30 percent (15) were in the “substantially portrayed” category. Of the men, 72 percent (41) were coded into the mentioned only category. Additionally, 6 percent (3) were coded into the “briefly and indirectly” category, and 22 percent (13) were coded as “substantially portrayed.”
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The findings generated by this study uncovered some revealing trends about the portrayal of men and women on television situational comedies. Some of these patterns show a movement towards more visible portrayal of women in a greater variety of roles. Some of the patterns uncovered in this study indicated a continuation of the limited scope of roles that has historically characterized television's portrayal of women.

This study found an increase in the equality of gender representation within the sitcom episodes contained in the sample. The relationship between gender, marital status, and parental status identified in this study suggests that the identities of female characters are still tied to home and family life much more than male characters. Analysis of the findings regarding occupational for the characters in this sample illustrate that there is still some gender segregation in organizational life on television. Finally, an exploration of the findings on how substantially occupation, marital status, and parental status are portrayed in the sample of characters reveals that organizational life is an increasingly important dimension in female sitcom characters.

Specific findings regarding gender representation and the areas of family status, occupational identity, and character portrayal are now discussed.

Increasing Equality in Gender Representation on Television

One of the most visible changes from previous research uncovered in this study is the increase in equality of representation in prime-time television programming of female
characters. Under-representation of women has historically been a dominant trend in television programming. Female characters have been outnumbered on television by male characters across all decades through the 1990s by a three-to-one margin (Davis, 1990; Dominick, 1979; Ferguson, 1990; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Steeves & Smith, 1987; Wood, 1994). The findings from this study indicate that there has been significant movement toward the equality of representation of female characters (in terms of numbers) in the television sitcoms of 1997. Of the 108 characters identified in the sample of sitcoms (including major, submajor, and supporting characters) 47 percent (51) characters were identified as females. The remaining 53 percent (57) of the characters were identified as males. While male characters do still outnumber female characters, the margin by which they do is nowhere near as large as in previous decades.

Gender and Family: A Women’s Place is Still in the Home

In looking at the trends of marital status and parental status on television for male and female sitcom characters, it appears that there has been some change compared to the trends found in previous research. Yet at the same time, some of the patterns uncovered in prior research still persist in 1997. The findings from this study concerning marital and parental status are now discussed in detail.

Marital Status

The findings from the current study on marital status for male and female characters do support some of the trends on this subject discovered in earlier research.
Previous studies have found that in television programming, women are more likely to be portrayed as married than men. In the 1970s, Tedesco (1974) found that more than half of female characters on television were married compared to less than one third of male characters. Davis (1990) discovered that in the television of the 1980s married women still outnumbered married men. The current study also finds that married women outnumber married men on television with 21 percent (11) of women identified as married, and 16 percent (8) of men identified as married.

What is even more revealing in this study is that in general more female characters had an identifiable marital status than male characters. As noted above, a greater percentage of female characters were identified as married than male characters. Moreover, a larger percentage of female characters (57 percent) than male characters (45 percent) were identified as single. However, the percentage of male characters with an unidentifiable marital status (32 percent) was much larger than the percentage of female characters with an unidentifiable marital status (18 percent). These findings suggest that marital status is much more visible in the portrayal of female characters than in male characters in television sitcoms today.

Parental Status

The percentages of male and female characters on television identified as having children were very similar (25 percent of women, 24 percent of men). A larger percentage of female characters (41 percent) than male characters (36 percent) were identified as not having children. However, the largest percentage of men (37 percent) in
the sample of sitcom episodes did not have an identifiable parental status, compared to only 29 percent of women in the sample without an identifiable parental status. This finding indicates that much like the previously mentioned findings on marital status from this study, that the parental status of female characters (whatever it may be) is likely to play a more visible role for male characters than it is for female characters.

The findings on marital status and parental status for prime-time television sitcoms in 1997 suggests that, much like previous research across all decades has uncovered, the identity of female characters is still much more connected to family and home life than the identity of male characters.

Occupational Identity: The Glass Ceiling Exists on Television

Occupational Industry

Characters in the sample of sitcom episodes for this study were identified in five of the eleven categories identified by Vande Berg and Trujillo (1989). While in most industries portrayed in the 1997 sitcoms, gender representation approached equality, in almost every industry there was a larger percentage of men than women. In the transportation and communication category and the service category male characters outnumbered female characters by approximately 55 percent to 45 percent. Women were not present at all in the public administration industry category. The only industry category where women were present in a greater percentage than men was in retail trade (52 percent to 48 percent) – a lower status industry. On the whole, these findings are a
cause for optimism because while most of the identified industries did have higher percentages of men than women, it appears that the gender gap is narrowing to a certain extent.

**Occupational Role**

The analysis of the gender patterns in the occupational role categories illustrates that television still strictly segregates the organizational roles typically held by male characters and those held by female characters. Women in the television programming of 1997 are remarkably less represented in every role category compared to men (except the professional, and sales categories where there are equal percentages of men and women.) Women are outnumbered three to one in managerial roles. Of the characters identified as students in this study, 62 percent were male, and only 38 percent were female. Women were entirely absent from clerical positions in the television programming analyzed for this study. No women were identified as retired. In service roles, male characters outnumbered female characters 58 percent to 41 percent.

These findings illustrate that female characters are still limited in the occupations that they hold on television. The under-representation of women in managerial roles, student roles, and clerical roles indicates that female television characters are not being depicted in positions that female employees hold in real life. Perhaps even more significant though is the absence of retired women in the sample of 1997 sitcoms used for this study. This finding highlights the invisibility in television programming of older
female characters who have held careers in their own rights and now are in a role where it is apparent (visible) that they did work even though now they do not.

Hierarchical Role

In television organizational life, much like in real organizational life, women are under-represented, and sometimes even absent from the highest level positions. In the sample of television sitcoms used for this study, there were no female executives or top managers. In middle management positions, female characters were outnumbered by male characters three to one. However, in other positions (and even some fairly high status positions) women were not as dramatically outnumbered. Of the 15 characters identified as upper-level professional staff, half of them were women, and half were men. Of the nine characters identified as lower-level professional staff, 56 percent were women, and 46 percent were men. In the small business owner/self-employed category, 45 percent of the characters identified were female, 56 percent were male.

The high levels of representation of female characters in upper-level professional staff positions and small business owners in the 1997 sample does indicate a trend that puts working women on television in more higher level positions than they have ever been before. However, this trend is offset by the absence and under-representation of women in the highest levels of management in organizational life portrayed on television sitcoms.
Character Portrayal

**Occupational Portrayal**

This research instrument was used to determine how substantially occupation is portrayed on television for each identified character in the sample of sitcoms used for this study. Of the female characters identified in this study, 40 percent had their occupation identified as “mentioned only,” compared to 34 percent of male characters. However more males (59 percent) were identified as having their occupation “substantially portrayed.” Women on television are more likely to have their occupations considered a peripheral element of their character than men, and less likely to have their occupation considered an important aspect of their character than men.

**Marital Status Portrayal**

In determining how substantially marital status is portrayed for both male and female characters on television this study discovered that male characters (62 percent) are much more likely to have their marital status identified as “mentioned only” than female

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1 For occupational portrayal, 40 percent of the female characters were categorized in the “mentioned only” category, 5 percent were categorized in the “briefly or indirectly portrayed” category, and 49 percent were categorized in the “substantially portrayed” category.

2 For occupational portrayal for male characters, 34 percent were categorized in the “mentioned only” category, 8 percent were categorized in the “briefly or indirectly portrayed” category, and 59 percent were categorized in the “substantively portrayed” category.
characters (49 percent). However, almost the same percentage of men (32 percent) and women (31 percent) had their marital status categorized as “substantially portrayed.”

Although women are much less likely than men to have their marital status portrayed as a negligible element of their character, it is encouraging to see men and women depicted with highly visible marital status in the same ratio.

Parental Status Portrayal

Of the 108 characters on television identified in this study, male characters had their parental status identified as “mentioned only” (78 percent) much more frequently than female characters (58 percent). However, the fact that parental status is a much more visible characteristic for female television characters is evidenced by the fact that a greater percentage of woman (30 percent) were identified as having a “substantially portrayed” parental status than men (22 percent).

In summary, the findings from the current study paint a picture of television programming in 1997 that is largely consistent with the research presented in earlier studies about television programming in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. This study finds that there has been an increase the visibility of female characters to the point where

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3 For marital status portrayal for female characters, 49 percent were placed in the “mentioned only” category, 7 percent in the “briefly or indirectly portrayed” category, and 31 percent in the “substantially portrayed” category.
4 For marital status for male characters, 62 percent were placed in the “mentioned only” category, 7 percent in the “briefly or indirectly portrayed” category, and 32 percent in the “substantially portrayed” category.
5 For parental status portrayal for female characters, 58 percent were placed in the “mentioned only” category, 2 percent in the “briefly or indirectly portrayed” category, and 30 percent in the “substantially portrayed” category.
6 For parental status portrayal for male characters, 72 percent were placed in the “mentioned only” category, 6 percent in the “briefly or indirectly portrayed” category, and 22 percent in the “substantially portrayed” category.
they make up nearly half of the population on television situational comedies. Within some sectors of the work force portrayed on television the gender gap has been narrowed as well. However, female characters sitcom characters are still noticeably absent or under-represented in many sectors of the work force – specifically in the upper-levels of management. Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that female characters are still less connected to public life, and still largely defined in terms of their role in home and family life.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Summary of Chapters

Chapter One introduces the topic area under investigation by discussing the situation of television character Murphy Brown as a working mother and a single parent. Brown’s pregnancy and the controversy that ensued spotlighted the absence in television programming of women with visible careers and home lives.

Chapter Two identified the need for further research on television portrayal of women in the workforce. Television is a preponderant source of influence on people’s beliefs about appropriate gender roles for men and women. Historically, the increasing role that women have played in the workforce has not been reflected in television programs. However, with the problems that still face women in the workforce (sexual harassment, discrimination), it is important to understand what images of working women are being constructed by the media.

Chapter Three explored the previous research that has been conducted on the subject of the portrayal of women on television. In general, the research on the depiction of women in the workforce on television has identified four main themes that describe the organizational life of female characters – under-representation, relegation to lower status positions, limited variety of roles, and poor integration of occupation into the character’s portrayal. Additionally, female characters are portrayed much more frequently in the realm of family and home life than in organizational life.

Chapter Four described the research methods used for this study. The characters were coded for ten variables; gender; marital status; parental status; character status;
occupational industry; occupational role; hierarchical role; occupational portrayal; marital status portrayal; and parental status portrayal. The three occupational variables were coded for using a research instrument developed by Vande Berg and Trujillo (1989). The portrayal of occupational identity, marital status, and parental status was coded for using an adapted version of McNeil’s (1975) coding schema.

Chapter Five detailed the findings produced by this study. The variables of marital status, parental status, character status, occupational industry, occupational role, hierarchical role, occupational identity portrayal, marital status portrayal, and parental status portrayal were cross-referenced with gender in order to determine the gender representation in each category.

Chapter Six discussed the implications of the findings from this study. In general it appears that although there is an increased percentage of female characters in television programming, and increased female representation in some sectors of the workforce, the trends discovered in this study indicates that limitations on the portrayal of female television characters still exist. In general, female television characters are absent from the highest level jobs in sitcoms from 1997. Additionally, female characters are portrayed much more in a home and family environment on television than an organizational environment.

Limitations

The findings from this study are subject to some areas of limitations. These areas include sampling issues, and limits on the statistical results uncovered in this study. These areas will now be considered in greater detail.
The findings produced by this study provide only a partial glimpse at the images television creates of women in the workforce. This study only looked at one genre of television programming – the serial situational comedy. This study did not include serial drama or action programs, news programs, or television movies in the research sample.

Moreover, this sample only looked at programming from the three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC). There are numerous cable channels with serial situational comedies and other types of programming that were not included in this sample. If more exhaustive findings on the portrayal of women in the workforce on television are to be generated, then the research sample must include genres other than situational comedies and programming from cable television channels.

There are also limits on the statistical data generated by this study. For the three occupational identity variable coded for in this study, more than half of the characters identified were placed in an undetermined “other” category. The preponderance of the population in the “other” category has two significant implications on the data that was produced by this study. First, it resulted in only a very small population of characters with an identifiable occupational industry, role, and hierarchical role from which the findings of this study are based on. Second, there is a large population of characters identified in the sample of programs used for this study whose occupational industry, role, and hierarchical role were not considered in the findings for this study because they were not able to be identified.
Future Research

This study uncovers a few possibilities for future research in related areas. First, this study only examined television situational comedies in the United States. It would be very worthwhile to examine television portrayal of male and female characters in other cultures. Second, it is necessary to examine other genres of television (news, dramas, mini-series, and TV movies) as well as major motion pictures to get a more complete idea of gender portrayal in all forms of media.

As well as examining television messages in terms of content, it becomes extremely important to look at these messages in terms of the effects they have on viewers. Continued research into how television portrayal of gender affects public perception of gender roles can help researchers and mass media practitioners to understand the impacts of the programs aired on television. Obviously the idea here is not to enforce standards for gender portrayal (this is not only unfeasible but also inhibits free speech). Rather the hope is that research in this area will raise the awareness of both the general public, and those in the television industry who are responsible for the programs that get aired, to the stereotypes television presents of men and women.

Implications for Practitioners

This study offers two recommendations to mass media practitioners to consider when developing television situational comedies.
First, the world created on television does hold implications for the real world. Chapter Two discusses the preponderant influence that television has over people as the most popular mode of mass media. Television is currently the most widely used form of media (Lowery & DeFleur, 1994). As opposed to other forms of media, television has been linked to individual behavior and beliefs (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). In particular, television is known to influence beliefs about gender roles (Wood, 1994). Mass media practitioners need to be careful of the messages they send about gender (among other issues) because those messages do manifest themselves in public opinion and effect peoples' ideas about the roles men and women should hold in real life.

Second, although there have been some departures from the limitations of television's portrayal of women in the workforce, many of these limitations are still intact. Female television characters are largely absent from many sectors of the workforce -- in particular the absence upper-level management. The fact that there are no female characters who can be identified as retired is very telling. While older men on television who used to work retain their occupation as part of their identity, for older female characters any job that they might have held is invisible in their character portrayal. Moreover, female characters are still largely relegated to private life, with family playing a larger role in their character portrayal than occupation.

The messages the media sends about men and women must be understood in the context of the difficulties faced by people in the real work force -- both men and women -- face everyday. The problems faced by working parents regarding childcare continually poses the question of how to balance one's obligations at work and at home. Many working women face discrimination because employers question the commitment of female employees who are also mothers, or believe that a woman's place is with the
children (Wood, 1994). At the same time, men are also pressured to fulfill their obligations at home through their job – by being a breadwinner not a caretaker (Wood, 1994). Women also confront a multitude of other problems (the glass ceiling, unequal pay, and sexual harassment) in the workforce on a daily basis.

This study attempts to answer the question “How substantially is occupation integrated in to the role of female characters on prim-time television sitcoms?” The findings from this study, as well as the findings from the previous research, indicate that the portrayal of men and women in television sitcoms reinforces gender stereotypes in the workplace by continuing to portray employment as a peripheral theme for female characters, and excluding female characters from high level positions.
References


