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Constructing Gender Stereotypes Through Social Roles in Prime-Time Television

Martha M. Lauzen, David M. Dozier, and Nora Horan

Using a sample of 124 prime-time television programs airing on the 6 broadcast networks during the 2005–06 season, this study examined the social roles enacted by female and male characters. The findings confirm that female characters continue to inhabit interpersonal roles involved with romance, family, and friends. In contrast, male characters are more likely to enact work-related roles. Moreover, programs employing one or more women writers or creators are more likely to feature both female and male characters in interpersonal roles whereas programs employing all-male writers and creators are more likely to feature both female and male characters in work roles.

According to screenwriting guru Syd Field (1994), characters inhabit professional and personal roles. A character's professional life reveals what that character does for a living. A character's personal life reflects her or his romantic relationships and friendships. Through the enactment of these roles, prime-time characters reveal their most basic social functions as breadwinners, spouses, and friends. Social role theory suggests that knowledge of these basic roles provides the content for gender stereotypes (Eagly & Steffen, 1984).

A substantial body of research has documented the gendered way in which female and male characters play social roles (Signorielli, 1982; Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001). This study updates this research by examining the enactment of interpersonal and work roles on prime-time programs airing on the six broadcast networks during the 2005–06 season. The current study also extends previous research by examining how the gender of writers and creators working behind the scenes may be related to the gendered social roles of characters.

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Building Gender Stereotypes Based on Social Roles

Stereotypes offer generalizations “about people on the basis of their group membership” (Donelson, 1999, p. 40), often maintaining and reinforcing the power of the in-group while subordinating members of out-groups (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999). Traditional gender stereotypes posit that men represent the ideal or norm against which women are judged. As such, women become the perpetual other, valued primarily in their relations to others, men in particular (Donelson, 1999). When multiple programs across the broadcast and cable spectrum repeat these gendered roles, they assume the air of truth and credibility (Merskin, 2006). Traditional portrayals of women thus serve the dual purpose of seeming “natural and normal,” while simultaneously perpetuating the gender hegemony (Merskin, 2006, p. 5).

Social roles are the things “people do in daily life” (Eagly & Steffen, 1984, p. 735). These roles range from childcare and other domestic chores to workplace activities. Prior research has examined how fulfillment of these roles signals predispositions toward communal versus agentic goals (Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). “Agentic qualities are manifested by self-assertion, self-expansion, and the urge to master, whereas communal qualities are manifested by selflessness, concern with others, and a desire to be at one with others” (Eagly & Steffen, 1984, p. 736). Prior research reveals that observing women in lower status positions than men in workplace and domestic settings feeds these stereotypes (England, 1979; Scanzoni, 1982).

The social role perspective argues that the “observed distribution” of women and men into social roles such as interpersonal and work roles underlies gender stereotypes (Eagly & Steffen, 1984, p. 749). “Because the content of gender stereotypes arises from perceivers’ observations of people’s activities and these activities are determined primarily by social roles, gender stereotypes . . . arise when women and men are observed typically to carry out different social roles” (p. 749). This approach suggests that social roles provide the substance, at least in part, of gender stereotypes (Eagly, 1987). In an experimental study, Eagly and Steffen found that only differences in social roles (homemaker vs. employee) accounted for the subjects’ beliefs that women are particularly concerned with the well-being of others or communal and men are more assertive or agentic. In their study, “even extremely general information about a person’s employment status caused subjects to revise their estimates of women’s and men’s communal and agentic qualities” (p. 750). Thus, knowledge of an individual’s social role can profoundly influence gender stereotypes regarding that individual.

When applied to prime-time television programming, this literature suggests that the basic social roles assigned to female and male characters by storytellers are tremendously important contributors to the construction and maintenance of gender stereotypes. Whether the mechanisms of stereotype construction and maintenance are achieved through the cumulative processes articulated by cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986; Signorielli, 1982; Signorielli

& Kahlenberg, 2001) or through the saturated exposure and identification process posited by the Drench hypothesis (Reep & Dambrot, 1989), the basic social roles enacted by characters contribute to viewer expectations and beliefs about gender. Morgan (1982) found a relationship between television portrayals of gendered ambition and success in the workplace and children's attitudes regarding gender and work. Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2001) noted that rigid gender stereotypes regarding appropriate domestic and work roles may be especially taxing for women wishing to experience both work and family lives. "Through long-term exposure to television, viewers' career choices may suffer. . . . The message seems to be that women cannot have higher status and better paying jobs and maintain a successful marriage" (p. 20).

The Portrayal of Gender and Social Roles in Prime Time

A substantial body of literature has examined the gendered portrayals of occupational and marital roles in prime-time television (Signorielli, 1982; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001; Tedesco, 1974). Overall, the findings indicate that female characters are more likely to have identifiable marital roles whereas male characters are more likely to have identifiable occupational roles.

In a study of prime-time programming airing on the major networks, Signorielli (1982) found that female characters were largely found in programs about home and family. Further, the marital status of female characters was more likely to be known than the marital status of males. The author noted, "notions of marriage, home, family and romance are important aspects of the way characters are portrayed and tend to be much more developed in female characters than male characters" (p. 589).

In their analysis of prime-time television programming airing on CBS, NBC, and ABC in 1986–87, Vande Berg and Streckfuss (1992) examined the types of behaviors enacted by female and male characters in the workplace. Unlike prior studies that simply noted the occupation of characters, these authors focused on the actual behavior enacted by characters in the workplace. Vande Berg and Steckfuss were clearly aware that the placement of characters in a work setting does not necessarily mean they are actually seen performing work-related tasks. The researchers found that female characters performed "more interpersonal/relational actions (motivating, socializing, counseling, and other actions which develop worker relationships) and fewer decisional, political, and operational actions than do male characters" (p. 205). Although women were present in the workplace, they continued to play domestic and interpersonal roles.

More recently, Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2001) analyzed prime-time programming airing on the broadcast networks from 1990 through 1998. They found that male characters were more likely than females to work and that males held a wider variety of occupations than females.

Building on this previous research, the current study examines whether female and male characters continue to inhabit traditionally sex-typed roles. Such analysis is important in light of the fact that popular press accounts regularly boast about the rapid evolution of the portrayals of gender in prime time. For example, when the short-lived series *Commander in Chief*, about the first woman president of the United States hit the small screen, television reviewers across the country suggested that a new, more progressive type of female character was becoming commonplace. Zurawik (2005, p. 1E) noted that this new female character belied “depictions of women that have dominated prime-time television for more than 50 years” relying more on “intellect and competence” than on “physical beauty or her relationship to men.” Certainly the portrayal of a woman as the president of the United States was an example of a female character in a nontraditional social role. However, it should be noted that Mackenzie Allen represented just one character out of literally thousands. Such media reports focusing on high-profile series and actors distort one’s understanding of the realities of gender representation in prime time. Ongoing research tracking portrayals of women provides checks on these enthusiastic though oftentimes misguided popular musings.

On-Screen Portrayals and Women’s Employment Behind the Scenes

On-screen portrayals represent the culmination of creative and business decisions made by storytellers, network executives, and advertisers. Previous research has posited the elastic sphere model to explain that prime time’s storytellers function at the center of a complex and highly elastic web of organizational and cultural constraints (Lauzen & Dozier, 2004). Within their “elastic creative sphere . . . creators of entertainment content make a wide range of creative and aesthetic decisions with regard to story, plot, characters, and production values” (Lauzen & Dozier, 2004, p. 486). According to this perspective, writers and creators expand their sphere of influence by producing programming that generates ratings and, to a lesser extent, critical acclaim. The ability of these storytellers to generate hits produces the perception that they are able to navigate the highly uncertain waters of network television. In contrast, writers and creators just starting out or those without a substantial resume of recent hits are more likely to encounter greater interference from network executives (Lauzen & Dozier, 1999). In this case, executives impose more control over the creative process in an attempt to counter the inexperience or middling prior performance of these storytellers.

Prior research consistent with or employing this framework has explored the relationship between the gender of powerful individuals working behind the scenes and on-screen portrayals of female and male characters. In a study of prime-time programming airing on the broadcast networks, Glascock (2001) found that the employment of at least one woman as writer or executive producer was positively

and significantly related to the number of female characters on screen. Lauzen and Dozier (2002) examined the employment of women writers and use of on-screen appearance comments on prime-time network programs airing during the 1999–2000 season. The authors found that the employment of at least one woman writer on a prime-time program was related to the reduced use of on-screen insults and an increase in comments regarding character appearance. Lauzen and Dozier commented, “Writers bring their life experiences to the scripts they create. Women are socialized to place a premium on appearance, and so women write what they know, interweaving appearance as an important and even central aspect of the lives of both female and male characters” (p. 435).

To date, the elastic sphere model has provided an explanation of how those working behind the scenes are situated within the larger structure of the television business. In addition, the model has generally described how the gender of prime time’s storytellers may be related to on-screen portrayals. However, the model has not articulated the psychological processes that might influence how women and men writers and creators bestow basic social roles on female and male characters. Literature on the coping strategies that women employ in exclusionary or male-dominated cultures may shed light on this process (Cassell & Walsh, 1997; Sheppard, 1989).

Prime-time television has a long history of underrepresenting women in powerful behind-the-scenes roles. In a study of prime-time programming airing on the broadcast networks in spring 1990, Steenland (1990) found that women accounted for 25% of all writers, 9% of directors, and 15% of producers. More recently, Lauzen (2006a) examined the representation of women working on prime-time series airing on the six broadcast networks and found that women comprised 28% of writers, 20% of creators, 11% of directors, 33% of producers, 18% of editors, and 3% of directors of photography. When considered together, women comprised only 24% of individuals employed in powerful behind-the-scenes roles (Lauzen, 2006a). Clearly, men continue to outnumber women in creative positions on prime-time programming airing on the broadcast networks.

Prior research suggests that when located in such male-dominated work environments, women use a number of psychological coping strategies intended to “manage the contradictions they face” (Cassell & Walsh, 1997, p. 225). These *gender management strategies* moderate women’s behavior “in order to compensate for their femaleness in a male-dominated organization” (Cassell & Walsh, p. 227). As outsiders or “immigrants,” the employment of these strategies enables women to manage their femaleness in a mostly male world (Sheppard, 1989).

Sheppard (1989) identified a number of gender management strategies including *blending in*. Using this strategy, women attempt to balance “being simultaneously business-like enough and feminine enough” (Cassell & Walsh, p. 225). This strategy is counter to *rightful place*, in which women remain “ever vigilant against the possible exploitation they may endure as a result of being female” (p. 225). Sheppard (1989) suggested that gender management strategies exist on a continuum. “At one end is acceptance of the organizational status quo vis-à-vis male dominance, and at

the other is a rejection or challenging of this status quo" (p. 145). Producer Judith James discussed the balancing act performed by many women working in film and television.

We have to pick our battles ... when you're trying to get through the working day, you have to decide if you're going to listen to the joke or the metaphor or the "truth" that is so male-oriented you could take it as an insult. Or you say to yourself, "Maybe this is a chance to remind them that fifty percent of the people in the world are women." (Gregory, 2002, p. 354)

Anecdotal evidence suggests that women working in the film and television industries use the blending-in strategy with greater frequency than the rightful place strategy (Gregory, 2002; Seger, 1996). The use of such a strategy is most likely due to the relationship-oriented nature of these businesses. People hire others they like and with whom they are comfortable working. An anonymous woman writer/producer described her initial experiences in the business. "I went in there the first day thinking of myself as a writer. They saw me as a woman. I never wore a dress after that. I was afraid to do anything to accentuate my gender" (Steenland, 1990, p. 58). Another woman noted that women in the industry "have taken on the coloration of men. It's sort of like the hostage thing where the prisoners take on qualities of the guards. Some are more like men in their attitudes" (Gregory, 2002, p. 363).

Television writer Jill Soloway commented on the importance of fitting into the organizational culture on situation comedies.

The ethos of the writers' room is very much like a pickup basketball game: You have to pick up the ball, make a shot, and not give a shit what happens. ... There are few women who can hang in that type of environment. You have to be willing to go to the net with a joke and not be scared of what people will think. There really are not a lot of women with as hard a sense of humor as I have. I don't think it's because men won't let them, women just aren't like that. (LaPorte, 2006, p. 50)

One specific marker indicating that a woman is trying to blend in occurs when women distance themselves from their sex and choose instead to be identified solely by their work role. Writer Janis Diamond commented, "I'm not a female writer; I'm a writer who happens to be a woman" (Gregory, 2002, p. 315). According to television and film director Victoria Hochberg,

It's a form of marginalization. Telling a director she has a "woman's voice" is telling her that her experience is unique, but in the movie business that usually means it's not good unique, it's who-cares unique. Can you imagine how absurd it would be to create other "voices," or categories, like "short-male voice"? No matter how you rationalize or justify it, being called a "woman" anything in this culture is not a compliment. I have a director's voice. That's it. (Seger, 1996, p. 121)

Another specific strategy enabling women writers and creators to blend in with the male-dominated culture of television entails performing to gendered industry expectations. The conventional wisdom in the television and film industries suggests that women excel at writing about certain topics, such as relationships, but have difficulty writing action and science fiction (Seger, 1996). Writer/director Robin Swicord commented on Hollywood's double standard.

There aren't that many women on the Hollywood A-list of writers. The women on that list are not offered the Elmore Leonard novels; they're offered movies about dogs and horses and mermaids and genies coming out of bottles. . . . It's very limiting. (Gregory, 2002, p. 321).

An annual study tracking the employment of women in the film industry reveals that women are much more likely to work on romantic comedies and dramas than on science fiction, action, or horror features (Lauzen, 2006b). Whereas women comprised 27% of individuals working on romantic comedies and 23% on romantic dramas, women accounted for 14% of those working on science fiction features, 13% on action features, and 8% on horror features (Lauzen, 2006b).

Although the television and film industries employ differing business models, they share common cultural values regarding gender. As executives, writers, producers, actors, and others flow freely between the film and television businesses, the cross-fertilization of cultures is now seamless. Thus the narrow expectations expressed by those working in film are also present in television. As a result of these expectations, women may consciously or unconsciously write about and create stereotypically "female" fare, such as relationships, to keep their jobs or earn kudos from network executives. In other words, the current study argues that women write and create to the unspoken expectations regarding their talents and range.

When considered in the context of social roles, this argument suggests that programs employing at least one woman writer or storyteller will be more likely than all-male teams to place both female and male characters in interpersonal roles. Programs employing mixed-sex teams will be less likely than all-male teams to place both female and male characters in work roles.

Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are posited:

- H₁: Female characters in prime-time programs are more likely than male characters to enact interpersonal roles centered on family, friends, and romance.
- H₂: Male characters in prime-time programs are more likely than female characters to enact roles centered on work.
- H₃: Mixed-sex teams of creators and writers are more likely than all-male teams to feature female and male characters in interpersonal roles.
- H₄: Mixed-sex teams of creators and writers will be less likely than all-male teams to feature female and male characters in work roles.

Method

This study examined one episode of every situation comedy, drama, and reality program airing on the six broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, UPN, WB) during the 2005–06 prime-time season. A total of 128 programs were included in the initial sample.

A stratified random sample of episodes was drawn over the entire season. The 128 programs defined the strata, with sampling elements within each stratum consisting of all episodes of that program broadcast during the 2005–06 prime-time season. One case was randomly sampled from each stratum, as follows. Each program was assigned a unique identification number. A table of random numbers was then used to select a set of four program episodes each week during the 2005–06 season. When a program was added at midseason, that program was assigned an identification number and added to the sample frame. Four series experienced early cancellations before they were selected for the sample. Thus, episodes from these series were excluded from the sample, yielding a final total sample of 124 programs.

Data Coding

The coding instrument was developed using prior studies examining the relationship between behind-the-scenes employment and on-screen representations. The first and third authors coded the episodes. During the initial training period, the coders carefully studied the coding protocol book to become familiar with variable definitions and schemes. As a pilot study, the two coders independently reviewed episodes not included in the final sample. Coders then compared notes to discover discrepancies. During this initial training period, in cases when the coders disagreed, the segments were viewed together, discussed, and differences were resolved. The coders then independently coded the episodes included in the sample. Consistent with prevailing standards in content analysis, intercoder reliability was calculated by double-coding approximately 10% of the characters in the sample (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). All intercoder reliability coefficients were above .80, the minimum specified as acceptable by Krippendorff (2004).

Data analysis included all characters who spoke at least one line. Each character was coded as either major or minor. Characters deemed essential to the development of the central or ancillary plots were coded as major characters. According to this coding scheme, guest stars that were not regular cast members but were essential to plot development were coded as major characters. Among the 2,027 characters, 1,342 or 66% were major and 685 or 34% were minor. All statistical analyses were restricted to major characters only. Scott's pi intercoder reliability for type of character was .92.

Of the 1,342 characters analyzed, 805 or 60% were male and 537 or 40% were female; Scott's pi reliability for character gender was .99.

Coders identified up to four social roles enacted by each character. Following Vande Berg and Streckfuss (1992), in order to be coded as enacting a role, a

character had to perform that role on screen. When characters merely talked about enacting a role, the role was not coded. For example, in order to be coded as fulfilling the interpersonal role of sibling, a character had to actually be seen interacting with a brother or sister in a scene. In order to be coded as fulfilling a work role, a character had to actually be seen performing his or her work. Roles enacted by characters were grouped into interpersonal and work roles. Interpersonal roles included familial roles such as sibling, grandparent, parent, daughter or son, niece or nephew, mother-in-law or father-in-law, sister-in-law or brother-in-law, and daughter-in-law and son-in-law. Interpersonal roles also included romantic roles such as wife and husband, and girlfriend and boyfriend. The role of friend was also included in this category. The number of familial, romantic, and friendship roles enacted was summed for each character. Scott's pi reliability coefficient for interpersonal role enactment was .90.

Work roles included white collar, blue collar, service, and professional. The role of coworker was also included in this category. The number of work roles enacted was summed for each character. Scott's pi reliability coefficient for work role enactment was .90.

To test relationships between individuals working behind the scenes and roles enacted, the gender of individuals working behind the scenes was coded. Behind-the-scenes credits were coded at the beginning and end of each episode. When the first name of a behind-the-scenes individual was gender ambiguous, the production office of the series was contacted and asked to identify the gender of the individual in question. This study focused on creators and writers as they assign social roles to characters. Creators generate the concept for the series, create the majority of major characters complete with demographic and oftentimes psychological descriptions, and initial episodes of the series. Writers work with these already established characters frequently taking them in new directions and introducing new characters. If a program had no women listed as writers or creators, then the program was categorized as having an all-male team working behind the scenes. If a program had at least one woman working behind the scenes as a creator or writer, then the program was classified as a mixed-sex team. Scott's pi reliability coefficient for this variable was 1.00.

The test of statistical significance was set at $\alpha = .05$ for all tests. Since chi-square tests of statistical significance involved 2×2 tables, Yates corrected chi-square (continuity correction) was used. Because hypotheses specified the direction of the relationships posited, one-tailed tests of significance were used.

Results

The first hypothesis stated that female characters would be more likely than male characters to enact interpersonal roles centered on family, friends, and romance. On average, female characters enacted 1.18 and male characters enacted .89 interpersonal roles. The difference is statistically significant, confirming Hypothesis 1 (see Table 1).

Table 1
Average Number of Interpersonal and Work Roles Enacted
by Major Male and Female Characters

Gender of Character	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>
Interpersonal roles					
Female characters	1.18	537	29.91	1, 1,340	<.01
Male characters	.89	805			
Work roles					
Male characters	.74	805	21.94	1, 1,340	<.01
Female characters	.60	537			

Hypothesis 2 stated that male characters would be more likely than female characters to enact work roles. Male characters enacted an average of .74 work roles. On average, female characters enacted .60 work roles. The difference is statistically significant, confirming Hypothesis 2 (see Table 1).

The third hypothesis stated that mixed-sex teams of creators and writers would be more likely than all-male teams to feature female and male characters in interpersonal roles. On programs with mixed-sex teams, female characters enacted an average of 1.36 interpersonal roles. On programs with all-male teams, female characters enacted an average of 1.05 interpersonal roles. The difference is statistically significant (see Table 2). On programs with mixed-sex teams, male characters enacted an average of 1.05 interpersonal roles. On programs with all-male teams, male characters enacted an average of .79 interpersonal roles. The difference is statistically significant (see Table 2). These findings confirm Hypothesis 3.

Table 2
Average Number of Interpersonal Roles Enacted by Major Characters
on Programs With All-Male and Mixed-Sex Creators/Writers

Female Characters	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Behind the scenes					
All-Male teams	1.05	305	12.65	1, 535	<.01
Mixed-Sex teams	1.36	232			
Male Characters	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Behind the scenes					
All-Male teams	.79	506	15.02	1, 803	<.01
Mixed-Sex teams	1.05	299			

Table 3
Average Number of Work Roles Enacted by Major Characters on Programs
With All-Male and Mixed-Sex Creators/Writers

Female Characters	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Behind the scenes					
All-Male teams	.67	305	8.93	1, 535	<.01
Mixed-Sex teams	.52	232			
Male Characters	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Behind the scenes					
All-Male teams	.79	506	11.64	1, 803	<.01
Mixed-Sex teams	.66	299			

Hypothesis 4 stated that mixed-sex teams of creators and writers would be less likely than all-male teams to feature female and male characters in work roles. On programs with mixed-sex teams, female characters enacted an average of .52 work roles. On programs with all-male teams, female characters enacted an average of .67 work roles. The difference is statistically significant (see Table 3). On programs with mixed-sex teams, male characters enacted an average of .66 work roles. On programs with all-male teams, male characters enacted an average of .79 work roles. The difference is statistically significant. The findings confirm Hypothesis 4 (see Table 3).

Discussion

Some limitations and assumptions of this study should be noted. The content analysis conducted in this study is cross-sectional in nature and cannot isolate cause-and-effect relationships. However, it seems logical that behind-the-scenes employment and on-screen content exist in a reciprocal relationship. In other words, those working behind the scenes influence on-screen characterizations and current and recent television content influence the type of content writers and creators produce.

In addition, no assumption was made that all women working behind the scenes hold a similar ideology regarding positive or progressive portrayals of female characters. Based on their own personal and professional experiences, some women writers and creators may be more inclined than others to place female and male characters in more innovative gender roles.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that female characters in prime-time

television continue to enact interpersonal roles involved with romance, family, and friends. In contrast, male characters are more likely to enact work-related roles. Moreover, programs employing one or more women writers or creators are more likely to feature both female and male characters in interpersonal roles; programs employing all-male writers and creators are more likely to feature both female and male characters in work roles. In the context of previous research, these findings suggest that female characters continue to be portrayed in roles that emphasize communal traits focusing on relationships and concern with others. Female characters were more likely to be seen interacting with others in familial and romantic roles. In contrast, male characters were more likely to inhabit work roles exhibiting more agentic goals including ambition and the desire for success. Such portrayals illustrate the ongoing tendency of network television to paint characters in the broadest of gender strokes.

Perhaps these findings are not surprising given the commercial demands imposed upon the creative product of series television. Industry norms dictate that television characters, more so than film characters, be likable or somehow sympathetic. As prime-time characters appear in viewers' living rooms and bedrooms daily, they must have traits that are interesting enough to entertain, yet familiar enough to be recognizable and comforting (Sconce, 2004). The association of female characters with interpersonal roles focusing on romance, family, and friendship is gender-consistent and thus familiar. The association of male characters with work roles is similarly consistent. Programs featuring characters in gender-inconsistent social roles must address how a female could occupy a work role commonly thought to be inconsistent with female capabilities (i.e., *Commander in Chief*). In other words, nearly every episode in these series must be consumed with explaining how a female or a male could possibly fill such a role, how the character came to find herself or himself in this role, how they navigate this less-traveled road, and other characters' reactions to this role reversal. For example, in the opening episodes of *Commander in Chief*, viewers learned how Mackenzie Allen accidentally became the first woman President and how she dealt with the gendered expectations of her professional colleagues as well as family members. This type of premise can lead to overly repetitive and thus often unsuccessful series. Future research should explore this high-wire act that television characters, and their creators and writers, must fulfill in order to gain tenure in prime time.

The findings of this study counter popular media reports claiming that well-worn stereotypes of female characters have been supplanted by "the New Woman" (Zurawik, 2005), identified as a more progressive type of character. In their zeal or perhaps desperation to find a new angle for reporting on television programming, critics and writers often overstate the magnitude of change in portrayals. In a *Variety* article, Schneider (2005) proclaimed that "women are back" and "the broadcast webs have rediscovered the joy of the fairer sex" (p. 24). Such reports often rely on high-profile yet anecdotal examples of the fortunes of just a few programs, such as *Grey's Anatomy*, to make their case (Schneider, 2005). Such articles fail to reflect ongoing issues of representation found in this study.

The findings also document a relationship between the gender composition of the creator/writer team and the types of social roles enacted by female and male characters. Scores of screenwriting books and courses instruct creators and writers to create what they know. However, it seems overly simplistic to suggest that such portrayals simply reflect the real-life experiences of storytellers. This explanation ignores the cultural expectations of network executives and the larger television industry that award jobs to women based on stereotypical expectations of the types of stories they are able to tell (Gregory, 2002). Through anecdotal evidence, women working in the high-pressure world of network television confirm that they try to mold their talents to the requirements of the desired job (Gregory, 2002).

On a theoretical level, these findings can be understood in terms of the elastic creative sphere. This model treats the commercial success of creative products as profoundly uncertain. Writers and creators expand their spheres of influence regarding creative decisions when they reduce uncertainty through one or more hit programs. In the contested space of creative decision making, women and men storytellers are posited to expand their influence with regard to story, plot, character, and production values when they are on their own "turf." The power-control perspective (Pfeffer, 1978, 1981; Robbins, 1990) suggests that power accrues to organizational members controlling scarce and valued resources when members have actual or perceived specialized expertise. For all-male teams working behind the scenes, their perceived expertise lies in telling stories about work and work-related roles. For mixed-sex teams, that perceived expertise skews toward stories about relationships. Over time, systems of organizational rewards and punishments shape the sphere of influence for individual writers and creators. Writers and creators, it seems, write not only what they know but also what they have been rewarded for producing within the creative sphere. Future research might explore the systems of organizational rewards and punishments that encourage all-male teams to emphasize work roles and mixed-sex teams to emphasize interpersonal roles.

Further, future research might explore the gender management strategies employed by women working in television. Whereas this study discussed the propensity of some women to divorce their work role from their gender and to adapt their creative work to conform to industry expectations, women probably use additional strategies to blend in to television's male-dominated culture. What are these strategies and how frequently are they enacted? Knowledge of these mechanisms would shed light on the construction of gender stereotypes through the assignment of social roles in prime-time television.

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