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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Female Role Models on Television

A Report submitted to the
University Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree
with University Honors

Department of Communication Studies

by

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Throughout the years, changes in the status of women have somewhat paralleled the way women have been portrayed on television. In the fifties and sixties, women on television were either housewives or secretaries. If they were secretaries, they were young and single, but expected to marry as soon as possible. It was practically unthinkable that a woman should be without a man. Take for instance June Cleaver (**Leave It To Beaver**), Harriet Nelson (**The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet**), and Margaret Anderson (**Father Knows Best**). All three were stereotypical "perfect" housewives. Their homes were always immaculate, their children mischievous but adorable, and their husbands were forever understanding (probably because they never had ring around the collar and could always find their socks).

These days, however, times have changed. Women on television are now everything that any American woman could be. On any given evening, one could flip on the set to see role models ranging from "Supermoms," like Clair Huxtable (**The Cosby Show**) who is a lawyer, wife and mother, to Sam Russel (of the show **My Sister Sam**) a single, San Francisco based photographer who takes in her teenage sister and all the problems that come with her. Viewers can also tune into "Golden Girls." A sitcom about four mature women who themselves are of the generation that believed a woman was not complete without a man. The interesting thing is, however, that they're getting along very well on their own, and when a man does enter one of their lives, chaos reigns.

Today's television series cast women in a whole new light. Even though Laura Holt (**Remington Steele**), a detective in her own right, created the image of a suave private investigator to foil the public and increase her case load, viewers still know she is intelligent and the driving force behind Remington Steele Investigations. ABC's **Moonlighting**, starring Cybill Sheperd as Maddie Hayes, has promoted the fact that blondes do have brains and are capable of trading quips with witty male counterparts. **Cagney & Lacey** is another show that might surprise the June Cleavers and Harriet Nelsons of yesterday. Its subject matter is the working relationship between two tough women who happen to be New York City cops. These women have different personalities and different priorities, but the the same goals. Mary Beth Lacey is a "people person." She knows how to relate to others as individuals. Christine Cagney, on the other hand, tends to treat people as though they are all as driven as she is. Chris knows the book. She knows the rules and how to bend them a little . . . if necessary. These characters complement each other almost completely: one's strengths make up for the other's weaknesses.

Neither of these characters depicts a truly traditional woman. Christine is a constantly emerging personality with a wide variety of values drawn from many different ideologies. Mary Beth, as portrayed by Tyne Daly, displays more of those characteristics typically ascribed to the traditional woman. For example, in her role as wife and mother, Mary Beth feels

guilty when she puts her job before her family. Society tells us that family comes first, so she feels guilty because society tells her to feel guilty. Thus, the values of our culture have already mapped out much of Mary Beth's personality for her. Even though somewhat high-strung, Mary Beth consistently behaves in a warm, motherly fashion. The only times her stable foundation was visibly shaken was during the few episodes in which she was forced to deal with having cancer. Throughout these episodes, Mary Beth wasn't being completely honest with her feelings. Usually it's Christine who has trouble sorting emotions while Mary Beth is predictably calm and reassuring. Perhaps it's Mary Beth's predictability that makes Christine seem so complex. Christine is the new woman of the eighties. Unlike Mary Beth, she isn't tied to a family. Her first responsibility is to herself, then to her career. Christine has many choices to make. The only time society gives her any guidance is on the job. Our culture requires police officers to behave according to a certain code, so when she's at work Chris knows what's expected of her. This could be why she loves her job so much.

Every faithful viewer knows that actress Sharon Gless portrays Christine Cagney as ambitious, determined, loyal to her career and unfaithful to her emotions but, in spite of it all, nice and warm-hearted. Cagney can deal with "nice," but she does her best to keep that warm-hearted nonsense under wraps. It might spoil her image. She wears a suit of

armor and very rarely do viewers catch a glimpse of the softie inside. However, even Cagney knows she's not as unfeeling as she'd like others to believe. When Mary Beth was held hostage in a railroad yard, Christine refused to leave the scene. Lieutenant Samuels approached the obviously distraught Christine:

SAMUELS: Cagney, how are you?

CHRIS: It's Mary Beth who has the problem.

SAMUELS: You should see yourself.

CHRIS: I thought it was a pretty good act.

In another episode, Mary Beth confesses to Christine that she has fully recovered from cancer but has decided not to return to the force. Mary Beth feels she has been granted a second chance at life and must spend more time with her family. Without a family of her own, the feeling Mary Beth is experiencing is something Chris cannot fully understand. Mary Beth says, "Christine, I have my priorities and I need for you to respect them." Cagney does not respond to this directly. Instead, she looks down at her plate (they were at lunch) and continues to eat. It was painfully obvious. We know she wanted to ask, "What about me? Isn't our partnership one of your priorities?" This, however, would have betrayed too much emotion. Later in the same episode she tells Mary Beth, "I think it's damn selfish to throw away what we have going for us." She got her point across with a remark that was less damaging to her hard-shelled image. The

writers did a terrific job of handling that episode. Chris displayed a lot of emotion but managed to stay in character. Once Mary Beth said to a somewhat grumpy Christine, "You got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning." Cagney summed it all up herself when she replied, "See, there you go understanding me again. I hate that!"

It is often difficult to attribute the development of character traits to either the writers or to the talent. Tyne Daly and Sharon Gless are both fine actresses and their interpretations of their roles have almost as much bearing on the personalities of Mary Beth Lacey and Christine Cagney as does the writing. In addition to what viewers can learn about a character from what that character says, a lot of information can be drawn from the character's gestures and facial expressions. It is difficult to determine how much of that is directed in the script and how much can be credited to interpretation. Certainly, Daly and Gless' jobs are made much easier by the superb scripts with which they are provided. Dialogue like that quoted earlier gives viewers insight into the characters' personalities.

In an effort to examine behavior patterns and personalities of current female television characters, I have chosen to compare and contrast the two strong female leads of **Cagney & Lacey**. I have selected twenty-five episodes of this series as background for this endeavor.

The behavioral characteristics represented by these two women can be divided into five major categories, four of

which have been subdivided into a list of emotions to provide a more complete definition. These categories can be outlined as follows:

I. NURTURING BEHAVIOR

- A. Maternalism
- B. Concern
- C. Empathy
- D. Compassion
- E. Tenderness

II. VULNERABILITY

- A. Nervousness/Fear
- B. Frustration
- C. Grief/Sorrow

III. ANIMATION

- A. Surprise
- B. Elation

IV. AGGRESSIVENESS

- A. Assertiveness
- B. Anger
- C. Hard-heartedness
- D. Disgust

V. EXPRESSIONS OF HUMOR AND/OR SARCASM

Each time the women displayed one of these emotions it was posted on a tally sheet for the character to which it applied. Verbal and physical expressions of each emotion were recorded. Displays of humor and/or sarcasm were primarily verbal; therefore, it was not necessary to split this category into two divisions of expression.

It should be noted that only expressions out of the mainstream of the characters' behavior were accounted for on the tally sheets. For example, nothing was recorded when Cagney or Lacey read a suspect his rights. Aggression in that type of situation goes with the job. However, if either detective displayed an unusual amount of hostility toward a particular suspect, that hostility would be recorded. The results of this survey are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF CHARACTER EXPRESSIONS

CHRISTINE CAGNEY				MARY BETH LACEY		
VERBAL	PHYSICAL	TOTAL		TOTAL	VERBAL	PHYSICAL
NURTURING BEHAVIOR						
4	2	6	MATERNALISM	36	11	25
6	2	8	CONCERN	14	12	2
8	2	10	EMPHATHY	11	9	2
8	8	16	COMPASSION	8	6	2
18	10	28	TENDERNESS	26	15	11
44	24	68	TOTAL	105	63	42
VULNERABILITY						
6	5	11	NERVOUS/FRIGHT	19	13	6
9	5	14	FRUSTRATION	18	11	7
7	9	16	GRIEF/SORROW	13	8	5
22	19	41	TOTAL	50	32	18
ANIMATION						
5	5	10	SURPRISE	8	4	4
10	7	17	RELATION	11	5	6
15	12	27	TOTAL	19	9	10
AGGRESSIVENESS						
31	21	52	ASSERTIVENESS	49	31	18
60	34	94	ANGER	36	28	8
14	3	17	HARD-HEARTEDNESS	4	3	1
1	6	7	DISGUST	11	8	3
106	64	170	TOTAL	100	70	30
HUMOR/SARCASM						
		67	TOTAL	29		

DISCUSSION

NURTURING BEHAVIOR

Mary Beth scored much higher than Christine in this category. The total figures imply that Mary Beth always displays more nurturing behavior than Chris. However, if the maternalism category is eliminated, their scores for this premise would actually be quite close. Because of her status as wife and mother, Mary Beth has become conditioned to look out for others first, putting herself second. Chris, who's single, is responsible for herself first and then for others. Also, scripts are written to show Mary Beth interacting with her family at home. Thus, she has more opportunity to score marks for maternalism. Christine is not often shown outside working hours and does not have the same opportunity to exercise maternalistic behavior.

VULNERABILITY

Mary Beth also scored higher in this category, though not by so wide a margin as in the **Nurturing Behavior** category. Considering their profession, both women have ample justification for occasional pangs of vulnerability. Mary Beth's somewhat higher score can be explained by her ability to express her emotions. Chris finds sorting her emotions difficult and, in an effort to avoid dealing with them, suppresses them. Cagney has put much effort into establishing her tough, no-nonsense image and tries not to admit to feelings of vulnerability that could tarnish that

sturdy reputation. Despite her attempted cover-up, the audience can see what Chris is feeling, and Mary Beth can usually break through her partner's shell.

ANIMATION

Chris has the ability to read and interpret facts which complements Mary Beth's ability to read people. Chris can walk into any given predicament and immediately sort out circumstances but, not having the capacity to extract pertinent information from people on the scene, she sometimes becomes frustrated. Mary Beth has the ability to put herself in another's place, and can predict what she would do in the same situation. Thus, she is not as easily surprised by the outcome as Chris tends to be. Also, Mary Beth reserves extremes of emotion for her family. Her husband and her sons serve as a buffer for her mood swings. Because of her wide range of experience in dealing with her family, she is very rarely taken unaware. Mary Beth is usually very stable. Chris lives alone and doesn't have a family to buffer her mood swings. She displays a full spectrum of emotions in a variety of situations. She becomes elated each time a new man enters her life, or even when she finally buys a new sweater she's been wanting. Since her colleagues don't provide the same buffer as a family would, she is prone to extremes of behavior while at work. While Mary Beth remains calm and collected, Cagney rides an emotional roller coaster.

AGGRESSIVENESS

When it comes to playing the role of good cop or bad cop, the outcome is predictable. Chris, in an effort to uphold her tough image, always assumes the guise of the bad cop. Maintaining an aggressive demeanor is very important to Sgt. Cagney. She values her tough reputation. In one episode, Christine and Mary Beth were working with a rebellious teenager. Chris empathized with the girl and her situation, and felt she could reach the girl and help her deal with her anger. The dialogue that gives insight to Chris' attitude about herself is as follows:

CHRISTINE: Nobody is as tough as that kid thinks she is!

MARY BETH: Except you, my partner!

CHRISTINE: Damn right!

In another episode, after receiving performance evaluations, Cagney is upset at being termed "brusque." Her tirade concerning this portion of her evaluation is directed to Mary Beth.

CHRISTINE: What's that? Would you look at this?
Communication skills -- he says I'm brusque!

MARY BETH: There are eleven categories on this report and you got the highest rating in ten of them and the second highest in the other one.

CHRISTINE: If I were a man he wouldn't call me brusque, he'd call me aggressive!

Chris is proud to be a tough, aggressive lady, and she wants

the world to know it. She is a good cop in what is primarily a man's profession and has not sacrificed any of her femininity.

Mary Beth is aggressive in a much different manner. She takes the initiative when her partner's anger makes Christine counterproductive. Lacey is able to rely upon her "people skills" to calm the situation. The majority of Mary Beth's displays of aggression are directed to those close to her, usually her husband Harvey or Christine.

EXPRESSIONS OF HUMOR AND/OR SARCASM

Chris displays more than twice the amount of humor and/or sarcasm as does Mary Beth. Mary Beth's humor is consistent with her character, down-to-earth and even-keel. She does not display the same biting sarcasm, nor is she as boisterous as her unmarried partner. Mary Beth would never tell an off-color joke in mixed company. Chris enjoys being the center of attention. Mary Beth tends to be more reserved than Christine and, on occasion, takes literally something that Chris intended to be humorous. Chris, on the other hand, has a rollicking sense of humor and a carefree spirit that is not restrained by family responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

Cagney and Lacey represent the fullscale evolution of womens' roles in television. The contrast in the complexity of their personalities as opposed to those of June Cleaver, Margaret Anderson, and Harriet Nelson is overwhelming. Television is now dealing with real women.

The research effort of this paper has concentrated on the expressions of two strong female characters, Christine Cagney and Mary Beth Lacey. The behaviors of these female role models in television have been discussed in terms of five major categories:

- I. Nurturing Behavior
- II. Vulnerability
- III. Animation
- IV. Aggressiveness
- V. Expressions of Humor and/or Sarcasm

The categories were further defined and applied to twenty-five episodes of Cagney & Lacey. Each time the detectives displayed one of the emotions that operationally defines a category, it was recorded on a tally sheet. Totalling up the tally marks, one sees the frequency with which the ladies expressed one of the targeted emotions could be established. Given the results, each category was reviewed and discussed to conclude that:

1. The scripts provide a basis for Mary Beth's

displays of nurturing behavior.

2. If Chris were not so determined to cover up her emotions, their scores for vulnerability would be even closer.
3. Chris, because she doesn't have a family with which to interact, displays much more animation during working hours than Mary Beth, who takes her mood swings home to Harvey and the children.
4. Chris is portrayed as being more aggressive than Mary Beth.
5. Mary Beth's sense of humor is more reserved than Christine's. Chris has a capacity for biting sarcasm which she often uses to promote the aggressive image she values.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the major differences in Christine Cagney and Mary Beth Lacey's personalities can be explained by the different values they have as a result of marital status: the contrast between the more traditional working mother and the single woman of the eighties. Chris feels the need to display a certain amount of aggression as opposed to Mary Beth, who feels no need to promote a tough cop image, but only that of a loving wife and mother. Chris and Mary Beth's partnership works because their values, and therefore, their behavior patterns complement each other. As Lieutenant Samuels said to Mary Beth, "Some teams make it, some don't. The ones that do are almost always made up of opposites. Cagney eggs you on, you

slow her down. But between the two of you, you get the job done."

REFERENCES

All dialogue is quoted directly from episodes of Cagney & Lacey, an entertainment product of Columbia Pictures Television.

All data were gathered from twenty-five selected episodes of Cagney & Lacey, an entertainment product of Columbia Pictures Television.

APPENDIX

The following table was used as a tally sheet to record the data collected from twenty-five selected episodes of Cagney & Lacey, an entertainment product of Columbia Pictures Television.

CHARACTER: _____			
		VERBAL	PHYSICAL
			TOTAL
NURTURING BEHAVIOR			
	Maternalism		
	Concern		
	Empathy		
	Compassion		
	Tenderness		
VULNERABILITY			
	Nervous/frightened		
	Frustration		
	Grief/sorrow		
ANIMATION			
	Surprise		
	Elation		
AGGRESSIVENESS			
	Assertiveness		
	Anger		
	Hard-heartedness		
	Disgust		
HUMOR/SARCASM			