Dissecting Grey’s Anatomy: Stereotypes in Television Media

Television in today’s society arguably fulfills a niche in the everyday lives of individuals. Television’s constant availability makes it accessible to everyone regardless of age, race, sexual orientation and geographic location. This causes everyone to be exposed to the same visual and verbal messages created by different stereotypes portrayed on television. The universality of television mediates its role as a pivotal part in socialization as it exerts a powerful influence in shaping multiple aspects of society. For many years now, television has been accused of supporting negative social messages by reinforcing stereotypical traits in regards to race, gender, and other characteristics. Specifically, the popular television show Grey’s Anatomy portrays various stereotypes within the programs’ storyline. The show chronicles the lives, both personal and professional, of surgical interns and their supervisors as they navigate through the fictional Seattle Grace Medical Center. Throughout the pilot season, as well as season 4 of Grey’s Anatomy, viewers will note that there are numerous amounts of stereotypes centered around specific gender roles that influence not only their perception of men in a hierarchical standpoint, but also negatively portrays women of authority in the workplace, and feeds into women’s insecurities.

Through examining gender role messages presented in Grey’s Anatomy, this show has revealed the presence of a hierarchy among the characters, men of course being at the top. As medical
professionals, all of the major characters are shown to be equally competent in their roles, however the men seem to be portrayed as more powerful and holding more authority than women due to the way the male characters are shown interacting with the female characters. For example, three out of the four attending surgeons as well as the Chief of Surgery, are men. The men are depicted as incredibly skilled and show the ability to remain focused in stressful situations, while women are shown as shaky and have the tendency to crack under pressure. In episode 10 of Season 4, “Crash Into Me,” a critical piece of medical equipment crashes and Rose, the nurse assisting Doctor Shepard, identifies the issue and goes on to fix the disconnected wires. However, when Rose has a problem connecting the wires correctly due to what she claims as “shaky hands” (s.4, ep. 10), Dr. Shepard comes in with his sturdy man hands and corrects the wires. This scene in the episode points out the stereotype that men are more capable of doing handy work than women. Shonda Rhimes, the show’s creator, utilizes this stereotype to portray men as the “knight in shining armor” or protectors. As stated in Lippe Green’s article, “Teaching Children How to Discriminate,” men are meant to be seen as “heroes with bulging necks (421)” who at the end of the day are going to save the “doe-eyed heroines (421).” This scene is an example of how Green’s claim is meant to keep with the misconception that women are helpless and unable to do the simplest of tasks due to their unstable emotions. Society is easily influenced by the stereotypes television puts out for viewers because of the lack of significance they see behind them. By showing men as the protector, it is portraying women as weak and ultimately reliant on men.

Going along with the concept of men portrayed as the more superior sex, the gender stereotypes used in Grey’s Anatomy also work to influence how viewers look at women in authority. Although the show is filled with both men and women working hard in their individual roles, women who
hold an occupation that put them in authority are portrayed as bossy and authoritarian, while men in the same position are seen as leaders. Examining *Grey’s Anatomy*’s pilot episode, “A Hard Day’s Night,” provides a glaring example of this sort of gender stereotyping. In this episode, Dr. Bailey, the chief resident, is collectively referred to as “Nazi” as a direct reference to her strict regime and unwavering demands and expectations. According to Amy Long’s article, “Diagnosing Drama: *Grey’s Anatomy*, Blind Casting, and the Politics of Representation,” this gender stereotype serves to “obscure the structural underpinnings of racial oppression and the experiential specificities those structured inequalities produce” (pg 1070). Shimes prides herself in refraining from the use of racial stereotypes in *Grey’s Anatomy*, however, she says nothing about portraying characters in other genres of stereotypes such as authoritarian women. This negative generalization sends the audience a message that women in power are modeled after a “Nazi,” which in society is perceived as a symbol of racism and antisemitism.

To correspond with Long’s reasoning behind the stereotypes used in the show’s pilot episode, Green argues that the dominant stereotype that follows women is the belief that they are rarely seen “working outside the home and family (p. 87).” Women have felt the unfair assumption to cook, clean, do housework, take care of the family, and do the shopping because of the gender roles society has adopted. Green implies that women are almost nonexistent in the workplace, therefore there would be no reason for them to be in a position of authority. However, the way Rhimes depicts Dr. Bailey’s character completely goes against Green’s claim because it shows women coming out from behind the scenes and making a life for themselves, shining a bit of positivity on the negative portrayal of women in the workplace.

Though Rhimes attempts to display powerful women in a powerful light, there is still the lingering
assumption, which she illustrates in *Grey’s Anatomy*, that makes women appear as sex objects causing some women to divulge their own flaws. The concept of being a sex object entails fulfilling each characteristic that attracts the typical American male. The characters in *Grey’s Anatomy* who are seen getting the most attention from the opposite sex are usually in their mid to late twenties, skinny, and has perky breast. Male attention is what each female character in the show desires because of the stereotype that all women want love, however in order to be loved, *Grey’s Anatomy* is implying that as a female you must be America’s definition of attractive. In episode 10 of Season 4, Dr. Karev and Dr. Sloan are constantly shown having sexual relations with the skinny, blonde nurses, who are likely insecure about themselves. This results in the nurses making themselves available to any man giving them an ounce of attention in the effort to fill the void of not being in a relationship. On the other hand, both Dr. Grey and Dr. Yang proclaim that they “screw boys like tequila,” which refers to them sleeping around with various men. The way that these two characters carry themselves stereotypes women as needing men to feel secure about themselves and in order to get a man, they need to be skinny, young, and blonde. Shimes uses this type of stereotype to unmask women’s anxieties about looking good enough to find a romantic partner. Because of the accessibility of television around the world, the western culture has distorted individual’s view of beautiful women which has resulted in many women feeling insecure about their appearance. In Ella Goodman’s piece, “The Culture of Thin Bites Fiji,” she notes that the portrayal of women in American television has played a key role in the cause of eating disorders among young women. *Grey’s Anatomy* does stay consistent in keeping with gender stereotypes by showing almost every woman who fits the generalization of “beautiful” pursuing or having sexual relations with an equally attractive co-worker, and for female viewers of this show, they could
become impressionable and believe that they need to alter their own lives so that they too can participate in having sexual relations.

By examining Episode 10 of Season 4, as well as Season 1 Episode 1 of *Grey’s Anatomy*, it is evident that Shonda Rhimes, the show’s creator, builds the background of each individual character based on gender stereotypes. *Grey’s Anatomy* conveys social gender messages that exposes women’s insecurities, portrays authoritative women as dictators, and puts men at the top of the gender pedestal. Based on the writings by both Ella Goodman and Amy Long, the stereotypes in *Grey’s Anatomy* have altered the way viewers perceive beauty and the ability to be socially aware of how popular culture displays gender, sex and race. While the stereotypes mentioned in the articles show significant relevance to what is occurring in present day society, Lippe Green’s claim fails to persuade readers to believe in the consequences of the use of gender stereotypes in *Grey’s Anatomy* because her argument primarily focuses on the stereotypes in Disney films which do not directly correlate with this television show. Ultimately, this popular television show does not dispel any gender stereotypical behaviors in that each character holds true to at least one gender stereotypical trait.
Works Cited


