"Working 9 to 5": How Working-Class Women Experience Sexism in the Workplace and Understand Media Representations of Working-Class Women

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

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University of Virginia
December 2021

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between working-class women's experiences of sexism in the workplace and their perceptions and attitudes about media representations of working-class women. Historically, working-class women are grossly underrepresented in popular media, and existing portrayals often follow a set of pre-existing stereotypes and tropes. Moreover, working-class women's experiences of sexism are often overlooked in academic research and popular culture in favor of more middle-class, "corporate" feminist pursuits. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, I answer the following research questions: 1.) How do working-class women experience sexism and gender-based discrimination in their workplace environments? 2.) How do working-class women understand and perceive media representations of working-class women? 3.) How do media representations of working-class women impact working-class women's sense of self and the strategies they use to combat sexism in the workplace? Using these research questions and critical feminist theory as a framework, I argue that the ways in which working-class women experience sexism in the workplace are dynamic and largely dependent on their workplace environment and the amount of work experience that they have. Furthermore, I argue that working-class women have a messy and complicated relationship with media portrayals of working-class women, which reflects the complicated nature of today's American working class. Finally, while critical of media content, respondents with less work experience demonstrated a lack of class consciousness and alienation from their labor and from the self. Overall, no media representation of working-class women will ever fulfill the experiences and lived realities of working-class women. Yet, working-class women with less work experience do not identify with working-class characters not only because of their lack of time in the workforce but also because of the prevalence of middle-class hegemony in popular media; the history of social abjection of working-class characters; and these respondents' desires to achieve class mobility.

Acknowledgements

I'd first like to thank Dr. Christopher Ali for serving as my advisor on this project. Your feedback and guidance have been invaluable, and I am so grateful that I have had the opportunity to work with you. I'd also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Andrea Press and Dr. Andre Cavalcante. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time with you all throughout this program, and your research has inspired and continues to inspire me. And thank you to Dr. Amanda Flora, whose "Women, Work, and Wellness" course at UVA influenced much of this research.

I would also like to thank the members of my cohort for all of their support, comradery, and guidance throughout this process. I will certainly miss our time together, both in class and outside of class. I'd especially like to thank Harry Hudome— thank you for taking notes during my focus groups, for your never-ending support and friendship, and for your countless voice memos. And thank you to Julia Melton for all of your support both during and after our time together in the program.

I owe immense thanks to the love of my life, Nick Taylor. Thank you for proof reading all of my work, listening to me talk at length about my research, and for being my rock. And thank you to my loving parents, who have supported me through all of my academic and non-academic endeavors.

Finally, thank you to all of the strong women who participated in this study. Your resilience and bravery are incredibly inspiring, and I am grateful that you all shared your experiences with me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"I feel like they got away with it." Emily, a 27-year-old single mom and working-class woman, takes a deep breath as she continues her story. A former employee of hospice facilities, Emily has been sexually assaulted in the workplace by coworkers and family members of her patients— three times. With a solemn and defeated tone, she details how management and HR failed her after she reported one particular assault:

> I actually got corporate involved. And he was let go…. but it was strange because they never told him to apologize to me. They never explained to me what was happening. They never offered to press charges. You know, and I wasn't the only person that spoke up. But I think that again, what was messed up about it, was after I had...moved facilities, that company ended up hiring that guy back. (Emily, personal communication, Sept. 23, 2021)

Despite the many times Emily has faced inappropriate comments or sexual harassment and assault, she did not always feel as though she could speak up. Due to her negative experiences with HR, her desire to stay and professionally grow at a new job, or most importantly, her need to provide for her daughter, Emily has learned to choose her battles; to be assertive and set boundaries when necessary; but overall, keep moving, despite adversity. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, Emily's story is unfortunately one of many. In contrast to her middle-class counterparts, working-class women like Emily are often excluded from popular discourse, media representations, and research on workplace discrimination (Bettie, 1995; Fraser et al., 2019).

As a Latina woman with an Associate's degree and a profession in healthcare, Emily is representative of what a working-class person can look like in our current economic and sociopolitical environment— though she and other women like her are often not who come to mind when we think of the working-class American (Zweig, 2012).

Who is the Working Class?

The American working-class person[1] is often understood as a white, male, industrial worker, which is an image that has historically been popularized and proliferated by the media (Bettie, 1995). The recent rise of Trumpism in our political sphere has further reinforced this image, pushing the notion of the white working class that has been "forgotten" (MacGillis, 2016). As Andrea Press and June Deery (2018) note, "Trump's victory was immediately attributed to protest votes on the part of the White working class whose jobs are threatened by deindustrialization, immigration, and globalization" (Press and Deery, 2018, p. 22). In reality, only 30% of Trump's voter base in 2016 was white working class (Royster, 2020). Roughly 60% of this white working-class demographic did vote for Trump, but this demographic is not representative of the working class as a whole (Royster, 2020). According to the Pew Research Center, only 18% of non-white voters who do not have a college degree voted for Trump (Pew Research Center, 2018). While education is not the only marker of class, these statistics point to the fact that the working class is much vaster and more diverse than the white, male, industrial worker image.

Most Americans believe themselves to fall somewhere within the middle class— and while there exists some confusion as to how the working class is measured, Michael Zweig (2012)[2] argues that 63% of the labor force are working class (Zweig, 2012). The working class

[1] It is important to note that throughout this project, I will be discussing the United States working class. While I will invoke scholars such as Angela McRobbie and Beverly Skeggs to discuss issues of class, I will not be referring to the United Kingdom working class, which has its own unique dynamics and implications.

[2] Many articles that discuss the class breakdown in the United States do so by income or education only (Rowell, 2018; Wenger and Zaber, 2021; Picchi, 2019). Zweig does take education and income into account, however also factors in the power and autonomy one has over their living and working conditions, and the expansion of working-class jobs from manufacturing and "unskilled" service jobs to more "skilled" but underpaid jobs such as nursing and teaching (Zweig, 2012).

today "are skilled and unskilled, in manufacturing and in services, men and women of all races, nationalities, religions" (Zweig, 2012, p. 3). Despite the white, working-class stereotype, white men only make up 40% of the working class; 34.6% are people of color, and women make up 50.1% (Zweig, 2012).

Working-Class and Media

Despite this working-class majority, working-class people are grossly underrepresented in media, from the news to fictional television (Bettie, 1995; Martin, 2019). Martin (2019) notes that although "service-sector jobs account for 80.3 percent of US jobs" and "people of all races, genders, and political persuasions inhabit the working class," the working class "is invisible, deemed no longer newsworthy" (Martin, 2019, pp. 4-5). As labor union membership has declined over the past few decades (Press and Deery, 2018; Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2017), so has media coverage of working-class issues: "labor unions and the concerns of the working class went from being a normal, regular, respected part of journalism's coverage to an abnormal, misunderstood, and mostly invisible topic in the news media" (Martin, 2019, p. 17). When working-class people are featured in the news cycle, it is not always in a respectful and positive light. In recent years, working-class people and specifically working-class people of color have experienced "memeification," in which their account of a traumatic experience is overlayed with autotune, whimsical music, and liked, retweeted, and spread across social media platforms (Parker, 2016)[3].

[3] Notable examples of this "memeification" are Antoine Dodson, whose sister was almost sexually assaulted by a home invader, and Sweet Brown, whose apartment complex caught on fire. Both individuals were interviewed by local news channels, and their accounts were then overlaid with music and autotune and circulated online. "Bed Intruder," the "remix" to Antoine Dodson's interview, currently has over 20 million views on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEAKsaQOCpQ). "Sweet Brown Original Report and Autotune Remix" has over 67 million views on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nh7UgAprdpM).

In addition to reduced representation in the news media, working-class people and subsequently working-class women are underrepresented in entertainment media (Press, 1991; Bettie, 1995). Out of 262 television sitcoms that aired between 1945 and 1990, only "11 percent of the shows had blue-collar, clerical, and service workers as heads of households" (Bettie, 1995). This erasure is known as "symbolic annihilation," as working-class people's "invisibility implies that such people are not worthy of representation, uninteresting, boring, etc." (Butsch, 2018, p. 41). When working-class people are represented in fictional media, characters are unrepresentative of the diversity of the working class: "the media have contributed to the immiseration and marginalization of working-class people by failing to adequately represent the complexity, diversity, and richness of their lives and values" (Butsch, 2018, p. 21). As a result, fictional, working-class women characters often adhere to certain stereotypes and tropes (Rowe, 1995; Butsch; 2018). When the average American watches television for 3.1 hours per day and the content under-represents or misrepresents the working-class, it raises concerns about how society at large views working-class people, and how working-class people view themselves (Hubbard, 2021).

Women, Working Class, and Workplace Sexism

In addition to the working-class woman being excluded from popular media, the working-class woman is also often excluded from research addressing workplace sexism and gender-based discrimination (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015; Fraser et al., 2019). Recent sociological research has examined how women experience unconscious bias and other forms of "benevolent" sexism in the workplace (Glick, et al., 2000; Williams and Dempsey, 2014; Bohnet, 2016). Benevolent sexism "presumes women's inferiority" and expects women to "fulfill domestic roles" and "fulfill sexual intimacy needs" (Glick et al., 2000, p. 764). Furthermore,

feminist scholars have explored the ways in which women respond to sexism in the workplace, or in other words, what "strategies" they use (Liinamaa and Rogers, 2020). However, this research largely focuses on women working in a middle to upper-middle class office environment, excluding working-class women (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015; Fraser et al., 2019). Research that specifically addresses working-class women's experiences of sexism in the workplace has demonstrated that working-class women report less sexism than their middle-class counterparts, but these women's ability to recognize and report sexism could be influenced by their personal upbringing, their age, and the organizational culture of their management and H.R (McLaughlin et al, 2008; Stamarski and Hing, 2015; Andersson and Harnois, 2020). Despite working-class women reporting less sexism overall, when they do experience sexism, it is more severe and their health and well-being suffers, as they do not have substantial access to mental health resources (Andersson and Harnois, 2020). Emily again embodies this phenomenon, as she received little to no support from HR after being sexually assaulted in the workplace. Following this experience, she has never sought out counseling— she tries to "move on" and "leave [her] baggage at the door" for the sake of her career and her daughter.

Given that women like Emily experience sexism in their workplace environments, and the ways in which media representations of working-class people raise concerns about how the public views the working class and how working-class people view themselves, I aimed to understand how media representations of working-class women experiencing sexism may impact the strategies working-class women use in the workplace and their sense of self.

Research Questions

Emily is a working-class woman who embodies the very nature of the American working-class but is underrepresented and underdiscussed; who has experienced adversity but is

not heard; and whose media influences are scarce and unreflective of Emily's lived experiences. Women like Emily are the core of my research. Through this study, I aimed to hear from working-class women about their experiences of sexism, gender-based discrimination, or sexual harassment in the workplace; how they respond to this sexism; their attitudes about media portrayals of working-class women; and how these media portrayals may impact how they see themselves. Put more succinctly, the following research questions motivated this study:

RQ 1: How do working-class women experience sexism and gender-based discrimination in their workplace environments?

RQ 2: How do working-class women understand and perceive media representations of working-class women?

RQ 3: How do media portrayals of working-class women impact working-class women's self-identification and the strategies they use to combat sexism in the workplace?

It is crucial to note that the purpose of RQ 1 is to ascertain a baseline of sexual harassment for the larger media studies-oriented work of this project, rather than make a sociological or psychological claim. In order to answer these research questions, I conducted a series of semi-structured focus groups and in-depth interviews with working-class women between the ages of 21 and 48 in the Charlottesville area. During the focus groups, participants were shown a series of television and film clips that depict a working-class woman experiencing some kind of sexism in her workplace environment. Following the clips, participants were asked about what they saw; the character's appearance and traits; how the character responded to sexism; and whether they resonated with the character or found her representative of themselves or other working-class women they know. During the in-depth interviews, participants were asked questions about their experiences of sexism, gender-based discrimination, or sexual

harassment in the workplace. Participants also discussed how they reacted in these situations, and if they reported an encounter to HR or upper management, how it was handled.

Arguments

Based these research questions and methods, I first argue that the ways in which working-class women experience and respond to sexism in their workplace environments are dynamic and largely dependent on their workplace and their level of work experience. Second, I argue that the messy, dynamic, and complicated relationship that working-class women have with media representations of working-class women is reflective of the complicated and ever-evolving nature of today's American working class. Third, I argue that while all participants held a critical view of media, working-class women with less work experience are alienated from their labor and from the self. Finally, using Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model as a framework, I assert that working-class women experience this alienation based upon media's longstanding history of encoding negative connotations onto working-class characters and framing middle-class aesthetics as the cultural "norm" (Press, 1991; Bettie, 1995; Butsch, 2018). Working-class women with less work experience decode media texts based on these overarching ideologies and attitudes about class and their personal experiences. Because these women have less experience in the workforce and desire class mobility, they decode media in a way that favors middle-class aesthetics. This decoding influences their identity and their alienation from their working-class status. As these women continue in their working-class professions and experience the hardships and sexism that go along with these experiences, their identities may shift toward a stronger class consciousness, in the way that working-class women with more experience in this study reported changing over time. Subsequently, the ways in which they respond to sexism in the workplace and identify with media characters may also shift.

In order to support these arguments, I begin with a comprehensive literature review in Chapter 2 that outlines existing research on the American working class, media representations of the working class, working class and audience studies, and the working class and workplace sexism. In Chapter 3 I outline my methods, including sampling, data collection, and theoretical framework. I then provide my findings and analysis based on my participants' responses in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, and conclude with final thoughts and suggestions for future research in Chapter 7.

Women like Emily experience a plethora of daily hardships: low-wage jobs with little to no benefits; gender-based discrimination and lackluster HR solutions; and inaccessible childcare. At the end of a long day, these women watch media to be entertained and to escape. While representation does matter, as it is important to these women to see characters on screen that are more representative of who they are, realistic plotlines that reflect the daily hardships that these women face can be exhausting and, in some cases, triggering. We need to explore, how then, working-class women's experiences of sexism can impact how they view media and how they view themselves, and what further research or action can be taken to support and represent these women.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Evolution of the Working Class

In the introduction, we explored how the United States working class is much more diverse and expansive than the white, male, industrial worker stereotype. In the following section, I will briefly outline how the working class has evolved over the past few decades, and subsequently, how our understanding of class has shifted.

Prior to the 1970s and 1980s, the working class was made up of predominantly manufacturing and industrial workers (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2017; Press and Deery, 2018). In contrast to the ambiguity surrounding class association and a lack of class consciousness in our current economic environment, working-class people during this era often participated in labor unions and had strong ties and identification with their working-class status (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2017). As a result of privatization, neoliberalism, and outsourcing of industrial jobs in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the working-class landscape experienced a shift from manufacturing and industrial positions to "unskilled" service and retail positions with little to no benefits (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2017; Press and Deery, 2018). Furthermore, today we see less class mobility, a rising cost in higher education, and stagnant middle-class incomes (Press and Deery, 2018). All of these social, political, and economic changes led to classes that are more fluid and difficult to define.

Past Definitions

To define class is to cohesively bring together an array of moving parts that take economic, political, social, and cultural elements into account. The ever-evolving nature of class in the United States has made defining class increasingly complex. While one could explore an

entire thesis on the meaning of class, there are a few definitions that influenced this thesis, and ultimately the definition that I have chosen to use as a framework for my research.

Let's begin with the definition of class offered in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Class*. Its definition is simple but effective: one's class position is determined by "socioeconomic status and cultural tastes" (Polson et al, 2020). "Cultural tastes" is used to describe one's dress, behavior, and aesthetics in conjunction with their class position (Polson et al, 2020). This definition is distinctive in that it incorporates a cultural and social element of class, rather than focusing solely on profession, education, and income.

Fredrik Stiernstedt and Peter Jakobsson (2017) assert that "a person's formal position in relation to the mode of production is of primary importance in determining class position but also include a person's status, power and influence over his/her own as well as others living conditions" (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2017, p. 261). Stiernstedt and Jakobsson are drawing from Marx when discussing this economic component of class. Karl Marx (1848/2010) argued that under a capitalist system, the bourgeoise "has agglomerated production, and has concentrated property in a few hands" (Marx and Engels, 1848/2010, p. 6). As a result, those who do not own the means of production and must sell their labor power make up the working class (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2017). Stiernstedt and Jakobsson go on to elaborate that what distinguishes someone from the working class and from the middle class is the degree of autonomy they have in relation to production— or the extent to which they can influence their and others' working and living conditions (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2017).

Another Marxist thinker, Erik Olin Wright, presents a similar view but incorporates more cultural and social elements. To Wright, the working-class is made up of "those people (and their dependents) who do not own the means of production and who lack the official workplace

authority and/or scarce skills that would make them middle class" (Hesmondhalgh, 2017, p. 23; Wright, 1997). Wright is also careful to note that "the experience of being working class goes beyond workplaces, as complex cultural formations emerge, hugely inflected by ethnic, gender, and other dynamics" (Wright, 1997; Hesmondhalgh, 2017, p. 23). While Wright's definition succeeds in incorporating both economic and cultural elements, we are left with the issue of which of these elements take priority.

Andrea Press and June Deery's (2018) definition in *Media and Class* answered this question. They argue that "class membership is based on a combination of economic (income, wealth) and social factors (family background, education, occupation, social prestige), these of course being frequently interdependent (e.g., education is correlated with occupation and wealth)" (Press and Deery, 2018). For Press and Deery, these elements are stratified, with economic factors and social factors being the main identifier, with "lifestyle, values, behavior, manners, etc." emerging as a result of these economic and social factors. This definition succinctly encapsulates how class must be understood in the wake of privatization and neoliberalism, and largely influenced the definition used in this research project.

Defining Class

Building off of these scholars' contributions to literature, the definition that I have used for this research places socioeconomic status as the main identifier of one's class position. Based on the literature, there are three sub-categories that influence and are influenced by one's socioeconomic status: the degree of autonomy one has over their living and working conditions; their access to affordable higher education; and their cultural tastes and aesthetics, and the degree to which these tastes are regulated. This reciprocal relationship between socioeconomic status and these subcategories (with socioeconomic status being the main identifier) is illustrated in Figure 1. It is important to note that a person does not need to embody the characteristics typical to a social class in each of these subcategories— or "check all of the boxes"— in order to be considered a part of a certain class. The dotted lines between each of the subcategories and the main socioeconomic status/income box demonstrate that these categories can influence and be influenced by each other and by overlapping social identifications, such as race, gender, and sexuality. In the following sections, I will further outline the significance of each of these categories, and conclude with my definition of the working class that motivated this project.

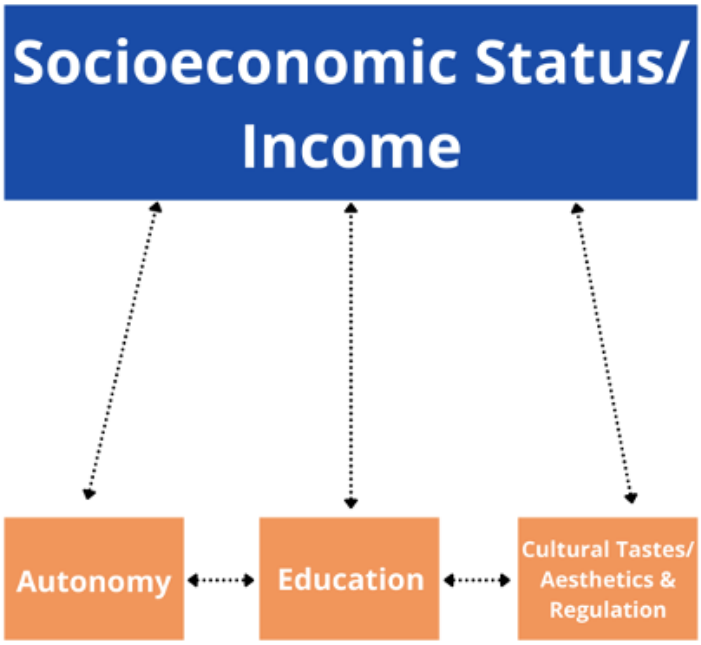

Figure 1

Socioeconomic Status & Income. While socioeconomic status and income can be influenced by your degree of autonomy, education, and cultural tastes and aesthetics, one's

wealth and familial wealth are the most important factors when considering class. One's income and wealth (or lack thereof) can lead to disparate access to higher education, inequal access to resources, and reduced quality of life (Woolf et al., 2015; Bapuji and Chrispal, 2017). There are several ways to designate class from an economic standpoint. Stiernstedt and Jakobsson (2017) invoke a Marxist framework and classify working-class people as those who sell their labor power, upper-class people as those who own capital, and middle-class people as those who are between selling their labor power and owning capital, such as admins, clerks, middle managers, doctors, lawyers, and academics (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2017). Socioeconomic class can also be determined in part by one's annual income. The Pew Research Center states that a family of three making $40,100 or below as low income, families who make over $120,400 as upper income, and families falling between these two metrics as middle income (Horowitz, et al., 2020; US News, 2020). These metrics are largely dependent on what state you live in and whether you live in a rural or urban area. To be sure, income is not synonymous with class— however, the income and monetary resources one has access to can impact their work and education opportunities, and subsequently their cultural and social status, which collectively determines class position (Press and Deery, 2018).

While household income can reflect one's socioeconomic standing, it does not always show the full picture. As Press and Deery note, one's class position is not only influenced by their income but by their family's background, income, and wealth (Press and Deery, 2018). Take the example of a college student that comes from an upper-middle to upper-class family. This student may work in a service, retail, or otherwise lower-class position for extra spending money, but their family is covering the cost of their tuition, books, and/or housing. This student

certainly works in a working-class environment, but because of their access to familial wealth, their socioeconomic status prevents them from being "working class" as defined here.

Autonomy. Fredrik Stiernstedt and Peter Jakobsson (2017) introduce the idea of "autonomy" as an identifier of class. Autonomy refers to "a person's status, power and influence over his/her own as well as others' living conditions" (Stiernstedt and Peter Jakobsson, 2017). In other words, the degree to which someone is able to contest, alter, or change their working and living conditions without suffering a severe economic deficit signals their class position.

Recent "corporate" and "lean in" feminism (aptly named for Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) popular book, *Lean In)* encourages women to keep track of their accomplishments, negotiate for what they want, and if all else fails, leave the company in search of a different position (Sandberg, 2013). This type of feminism and this advice only benefits those with the material resources to do so— or in other words, women with more autonomy. Due to their financial constraints, working-class people may not have the autonomy to speak up or negotiate with their superiors as to not jeopardize their position. Furthermore, as many working-class people do not have the autonomy to contest their working conditions, they could be hindered from future promotional opportunities. Thus, a reciprocal relationship exists between autonomy and socioeconomic status, with the latter being the main identifier.

Education. Prior to our current socioeconomic environment, class was often signaled by one's profession (like traditional, blue-collar positions) and education level (Press and Deery, 2018). For example, when conducting research for *Speaking of Abortion,* Andrea Press and Elizabeth Cole sought out people who worked in blue-collar professions and had completed "some college" or less as their "working-class" participants (Press and Cole, 1999). While education can still provide a gateway to higher-paying jobs, the increased cost of college tuition

in the United States coupled with the rise in "unskilled administrative jobs" with little-to-no benefits that require four-year degrees, recent college graduates may find themselves in debt and in low-paying positions (Stiernstedt and Peter Jakobsson, 2017). In this manner, one's access to affordable higher education can influence and is influenced by their socioeconomic status.

Let us return to our example of an undergraduate student who comes from an upper-middle to upper-class family. If this student's family paid for her tuition and other university costs, then she as a result will graduate debt-free. While there is certainly still a possibility that she will be offered an unskilled job, her access to affordable higher education (and subsequently, lack of debt) is influenced by and influences her socioeconomic status.

Cultural Tastes/Aesthetics and Regulation. Cultural tastes and aesthetics— such as dress, behavior, and physique— often signal one's class position (Polson et al, 2020). Many middle-class people (and middle-class women in particular) follow a certain post-feminist notion of womanhood (McRobbie 2008; McRobbie 2020). These women are fit, polished, have a flourishing career, have a planned family, and are traditionally feminine (McRobbie, 2020). Therefore, women who do not fit this standard of beauty and behavior signal a lower-class position— overweight, reliance on government assistance, or more a-gendered dress all coincide with certain working-class aesthetics (McRobbie, 2020). Pierre Bourdieu (1979/2010) further outlines class-specific tastes, aesthetics, and consumption-styles in his book, *Distinction.* Bourdieu argues that the structure of the dominant class is "defined by the distribution of economic and cultural capital among its members"— furthermore, "each class fraction" is "characterized by a certain configuration of this distribution to which there corresponds a certain life-style" (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 257). Characteristics of these lifestyle choices include interior design, preferred qualities of peers, meals, furniture, and music taste (Bourdieu, 2010). The

different ways in which people expressed these lifestyle choices points to their cultural capital and subsequently their class position (Bourdieu, 2010).

In addition to one's cultural tastes and aesthetics being a marker of class, the degree to which these tastes are regulated or disciplined can also signal one's class. One of the best examples of regulation of the body comes from John Fiske's (2011) work, "Offensive Bodies and Carnival Pleasures." Fiske offers that the ruling class creates a problem for lower-class people— in turn, working-class people will then utilize their bodies or their leisure time in order to cope with said issue, signaling certain working-class tastes and aesthetics. In response, these same ruling classes will socially— or in some cases, legally— regulate these leisure activities (Fiske, 2011). Similarly, Beverly Skeggs (2004) uses the term "social abjection" to describe the phenomenon in which over time, media and popular discourse create a "disgust consensus" about a group of people that further divides social classes and reinforces hierarchies (Skeggs, 2004). Working-class aesthetics are coded with "dirt and waste, sexuality and contagion, and danger and disorder," and continue to be reproduced (Skeggs, 2004). Thus, the cultural attitude surround certain tastes and aesthetics can also be a marker of one's class position.

Working-Class Definition and Examples

Given each of these categories, a member of the working class would then be a person of low socioeconomic status whose economic position can influence and is influenced by their lack of autonomy over their working and living conditions; their limited access to affordable, higher education; their "unruly" cultural tastes and aesthetics; and/or the degree in which these aesthetics are regulated and disciplined.

I use this definition because it encompasses a wide range of working-class people in an ever-evolving class landscape and the existing literature. For example, a more "traditional"

working-class person could make a low-income wage; have little to no autonomy over their working and living conditions; have no access to affordable, higher education; and have traditional, working-class tastes and aesthetics that are heavily scrutinized.

In a more contemporary example, a working-class person could come from a more middle-class family, have a four-year degree, and have more middle-class tastes and aesthetics. However, because they make a low-income wage, have student loan debt, and subsequently have little to no autonomy over their living and working conditions, they are working class.

Media and the Working Class

In the following sections, I will outline common media tropes and stereotypes surrounding the working-class woman and how they are tools for social abjection (Skeggs, 2004). Historically, working-class people (and working-class women in particular) are grossly underrepresented in popular media (Bettie, 1995). A survey conducted by Richard Butsch found that only 11% of sitcoms that aired between 1945 and 1990 featured "blue-collar, clerical, and service workers as heads of households" (Butsch, 1992; Bettie, 1995, p. 127). While some popular television shows have broken this mold, such as *Roseanne*, *Mike and Molly*, *Family Matters*, and others, these shows are far and few between. Furthermore, representations of working-class women are inaccurate and not a reflection of reality, often conforming to certain stereotypes (Skeggs, 2004; Butsch, 2018; McAllister and Galaza, 2019).

The idea that media is not a reflection of reality is not a new concept— many media and communication scholars have noted that media is packaged for consumption (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944; Hall, 1980; Becker, 2018). Namely, Stuart Halls' encoding/decoding model succinctly represents this phenomenon: media is encoded in a certain manner by producers, which is then decoded by viewers (Hall, 1980). In other words, producers and other executives

encode certain messages and tropes into a media text, and viewers/consumers decode these texts based on societal attitudes and their personal experiences (Hall, 1980). There are two main factors that lead to inaccurate encoding at the political economic level: purposeful ignorance and purposeful social abjection. Producers, executives, and other actors at the production level utilize "purposeful ignorance" in that they purposefully remain ignorant of the lived experience of working-class people and do not seek out working-class voices to provide insight (Skeggs, 2004). Returning to Beverly Skeggs' (2004) idea of "social abjection," many producers of television shows and films code working-class bodies in such a way as to invoke feelings of disgust, grotesque, or excess (Skeggs, 2004). The following sections will outline these different mechanisms in greater detail through a discussion of working-class bodies in advertisements; three fictional working-class women tropes; and working-class bodies in the reality makeover show.

Advertisements

One arena in which working-class stereotypes are utilized for social abjection is in advertisements. Matthew P. McAllister and Litzy Galarza (2019) explore the ways in which bodies are coded to belong to certain socioeconomic classes. They found that "the 'normal' class position is coded as middle-class— and while this is not always overtly "marked," it is "simply assumed, and therefore nearly invisible" (McAllister and Galarza, 2019, p. 18-19). While working-class-coded characters are somewhat rare in advertisements— with "only 10 percent of all characters in magazine ads in this category"— their presence often adheres to a set of working-class stereotypes (McAllister and Galarza, 2019, p. 19.) The working-class-coded character in advertising is usually a white male, with deep ties to "loyal servitude, masculinity" and "disgust" (McAllister and Galarza, 2019). In contrast to the middle-class character, who can

be found in the home, with family, or engaging in other forms of leisure, the working-class character is usually at his place of employment or wearing the uniform of a typical blue-collar worker. In some instances, he represents traditional, rugged masculinity, like the Brawny paper towel mascot or Mr. Clean. In other instances, he represents everything that the middle-class man should not be: overweight, unruly, and coded with disgust (McAllister and Galarza, 2019).

The ties to loyal servitude are not just reserved to working-class male characters. White, working-class women in advertisements are often "willing to share secret knowledge" and has "the consumers' interests at heart in helping them live better lives" (McAllister and Galarza, 2019, p. 20). In other words, they are eager to serve and eager to assist the consumer achieve class mobility, all while wearing "uniforms with their names embroidered or with a name tag" (McAllister and Galarza, 2019, p. 20) The most prominent present-day example of this stereotype is Flo from Progressive, a perky, white, working-class woman who enthusiastically helps Progressive customers find an insurance plan, all while displaying her "Flo" nametag on her crisp, white uniform. (McAllister and Galarza, 2019).

The Three Types of Fictional, Working-Class Women

I will pivot to discuss three patterns of working-class tropes that emerge out of fictional programming, drawing on Kathleen Rowe (1995) and Richard Butsch (2018). As Press and Deery (2018) write, "media has a vital role to play in forming and understanding class identities"— therefore, the fictional tropes surrounding working-class women can impact how these women are understood in everyday life (Press and Deery, 2018, p. 1). These categorizations are not concrete, as a character can often display overlapping attributes, but they point to the different ways in which producers at the political economic level can misrepresent the lived experience of working-class women.

The first trope is the sensible, working-class wife. Unlike the unruly and grotesque nature of many working-class men in advertisements, the sensible, working-class wife displays more middle-class standards of dress, behavior, and physique. As Richard Butsch (2018) notes in "Class and Gender in Sitcoms," the "working-class and middle-class wives generally adhere to a middle-class norm, slim and trim figures with a narrow waist, shoulders straight and erect posture, as with the middle-class men" (Butsch, 2018, p. 44). This is in contrast to the sensible, working-class wife's husband, who is "a buffoon or bungler, often well-meaning and warm-hearted, but incompetent, immature, ignorant, irresponsible" (Butsch, 2018, p. 41). The dopey, working-class husband is the butt of the joke and the source of comedic relief, while simultaneously representing "the opposite of models for their children to emulate" (Butsch, 2018, p. 41). The sensible, working-class wife is therefore a symbol of what this working-class family *could* be— a beacon of class mobility, and the anchor that keeps her goofy working-class husband in check. Characters such as Hariette Winslow in *Family Matters* (1989-1998), Marge Simpson in *The Simpsons* (1989-present), and Lois Griffin in *Family Guy* (1999-present) all fit this trope. This is in contrast to the middle-class wife, who "affirms the success and pride/respect of the middle-class men" and in many instances, is the source of comedic relief (Butsch, 2018). It is when the husband and wife both display characteristics of the middle class that sexism is revealed.

The second stereotype emerging out of fictional media is the overweight and unruly working-class woman. In contrast to the sensible, working-class wife, the overweight and unruly working-class woman is a symbol of excess and rebellion of middle-class standards of behavior and beauty (Rowe, 1995). This woman is "willing to offend and be offensive"— and "the looseness or lack of personal restraint" in her weight and her attitude "can thus communicate

resistance to social discipline" (Rowe, 1995, p. 60-62). The most notable example of this stereotype is Roseanne, who is overweight, loud, crude, and dresses in a more a-gendered fashion. In contrast to the working-class wife, who represents a sensible counterpart to her goofy husband, Roseanne is the opposite. She is often the source of comedic relief and conflict, while her husband is the more mild-tempered, sensible one (Butsch, 2018). While the "unruly" woman as presented by Katheleen Rowe can also be viewed as sexually deviant and belonging to other socioeconomic classes, Roseanne and other characters that fall into this category are far from feminine, marking them as "others" to the middle-class standard of beauty (Rowe, 1995; McRobbie, 2020).

The third type of fictional, working-class woman is the promiscuous and hyper-sexual working-class woman. Similar to the overweight and unruly working-class woman, she represents a certain "looseness" and "excess"— however, her excess is seen to be sexually promiscuous and vulgar (Rowe, 1995). She "occupies more precarious positions of sexual respectability" than her middle-class counterparts (Williams, 2021). As Beverly Skeggs notes, the distinction between sensible, middle-class coding and more "trashy," working-class coding can be slight, but make a large overall impact. Take Skeggs' (2004) example of dyed hair— a more natural shade of blond is middle-class coded; however, bleach-blond or "unnatural" blond is coded as "working-class" and trashy. An "excessive" sense of style— such as Vivian in *Pretty Woman* or Fran from *The Nanny*— can also point to excess sexuality and a threat to moral order (Skeggs, 2004).

The Post-Feminist Shift

While I have highlighted some common working-class traits that are coded onto fictional characters, it is important to note what working-class women are not coded to be— the

neoliberal[4], middle-class standard of femininity that arose with the post-feminist shift. In order to understand how working-class women are excluded from this ideal, I will first provide a brief background into the post-feminist shift, and subsequently the new standard for women.

Andrea Press (1991) defines post-feminism as "a retreat from feminist ideas challenging women's traditional role in the family, an increasing openness toward traditional notions of femininity and feminine roles" (Press, 1991, p. 4). Post-feminism blends traditional feminist elements (such as having a steady career outside of the home) with more anti-feminist elements, such as embracing sociobiological notions of femininity and traditional roles within the family unit. This shift occurred in two major ways: through neoliberalism and privatization during the Reagan and Thatcher administrations in the 1980s; and the rise and subsequent appropriation of Girl Power feminism by the political right (Press, 1991; Hasinoff, 2009; McRobbie, 2020).

"Girl Power"— as most prominently promoted by girl groups such as The Spice Girls and Destiny's Child— refers to feminist rhetoric that places emphasis on female independence and freedom (Gauntlett, 2002). While this language is seemingly a harmless attempt at female empowerment, it has since been adopted into neoliberal rhetoric on the political right in order to constitute a new way of measuring female success: a woman who is fit, well-put-together, has a flourishing career, a planned family, and most importantly, does not rely on state resources (McRobbie, 2020). This creates the issue of "having it all," or the need to choose between having a career or a family. Yet, this issue of "having it all" is a strictly middle to upper-middle-class

[4] Neoliberalism is a philosophy that places emphasis on free-market capitalism (Smith, 2019). As a result, it promotes personal responsibility and a focus on individual adjustment, rather than structural change. This neoliberal attitude is often negotiated through womanhood—the woman's condition is an "illness that can be cured with the aid of learned experts," and issues are "exclusively personal, rather than political and cultural" (Grodin, 1991, p. 406).

issue, as women from working-class backgrounds do not have the luxury of a choice. They instead must work and care for their families in whatever means necessary. Because neoliberalism also places responsibility on the individual rather than systemic disadvantages, the inability to take care of family and work without government assistance is seen as a failure (McRobbie, 2020).

In media, the post-feminist shift is manifested in several different ways. In television and films, post-feminism shifts the focus from "female bonding" and "alternative family forms" to one that privileges a blend of career and familial responsibilities (Press, 1991). Women in these shows are usually white, urban, middle-to-upper class, sexually liberated, feminine, and closely tied to consumer culture (McRobbie, 2008). Modern-day sitcoms such as *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) and *30 Rock* (2006-2013) are good examples of this trend. Both programs feature a female lead who is white, middle-class, and college-educated, and feature both feminist and post-feminist elements (Swink, 2017). For example, Liz Lemon of *30 Rock* demonstrates a more feminist portrayal of working women through her personal hardships and the satirization of the post-feminist. This takes a post-feminist turn as "the show ultimately ends with Liz Lemon getting married, adopting children, and returning to work: reflecting a characteristically post-feminist focus on finding an individual balance between romance, work, and family life." (Swink, 2017, p. 24). The major takeaway is that the post-feminist ideal— and subsequently, post-feminist programming and characters— often leaves working-class women, queer women, and women of color behind.

As discussed in earlier sections, working-class women are grossly underrepresented in the media at large (Press, 1991; Bettie, 1995). Amidst the post-feminist era, one arena in which working-class women are featured prominently is reality television, specifically the makeover

show. In the following section, I will outline how the makeover show is used as a tool to emphasize working-class women's' "otherness" and emphasize post-feminist ideals of beauty (Deery, 2004; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

The Makeover Show. The makeover reality show is a tool used to usher working-class women into post-feminist ideals of consumer culture (Deery, 2004; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Femininities that fall outside of the post-feminist ideal are seen as unruly and a threat to status quo. These "unruly femininities" of the working-class are "marked as 'other' or 'abject'," and thus must be made over into a more post-feminist version of femininity (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008, p. 233). Thus, through the format of the makeover show, they are adapted to fit this dominant mold (Rowe, 1995; Deery, 2004; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). In addition to being closely tied with the post-feminist ideals of femininity, beauty, and consumption, these programs highlight the neoliberal notion of personal responsibility (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Contestants of these shows are taught that the conditions of their lives are entirely in their control— often eliminating economic constraints and other systemic disadvantages. Through this self-transformation, makeover programs "normalize the neo-liberal ethos of continuously maximizing, bettering, and reinventing the self, but in class-specific ways" (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008, p. 236). Furthermore, the emphasis on consumption and the products that assisted in these women's transformations reinforces the link between femininity and consumer culture (Deery, 2004). The new, consumption-driven subject is sold to viewers; simultaneously, the viewer is being sold to advertisers (Deery, 2004). Programs "point to the role of experts in sculpting new subjects" which open up the "potential for a perpetually shifting neo-liberal subject, who must continuously work to mold themselves into something better, different, acceptable" (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008, p. 236).

Race, Gender, and Class in the Media

The post-feminist era not only excludes working-class women from the dominant narrative but also leaves women of color behind. The intersection of class and gender historically has fostered certain stereotypes; however, the intersection of class, gender, and race creates different and intersecting tropes that must be considered when doing feminist research. While I found a gap in scholarship that addressed the intersection of race, gender, *and class* in the media, there are notable, racist stereotypes of women of color in media.

Returning to working-class bodies in advertising, the working-class Black woman is also eager to serve and eager to assist the consumer to achieve class mobility. However, the working-class Black woman in advertising carries with her racist stereotypes originating from slavery (McAllister and Galarza, 2019). Symbols such as Aunt Jemima call back to the antebellum South—a figure who is depicted to be overweight, asexual, maternal, non-threatening, and eager to serve white families (Bogle, 1973; Brown Givens and Monahan, 2005; McAllister and Galarza, 2019). In modern-day advertisements, she is used to conjure feelings of domesticity, servitude, and care in order to promote cooking and cleaning products (McAllister and Galarza, 2019). Another common stereotype stemming from the antebellum South is the Jezebel. In contrast to the Mammy, the Jezebel is promiscuous, sexually aggressive, and a threat to moral order (Bogle, 1973; Brown Givens and Monahan, 2005).

One of the most notorious working-class, Latina stereotypes is the Latina maid (Baez, 2015). While early depictions of the Latina maid were "asexual or sexually undesirable" like the Mammy trope, more recent adaptations of this stereotype, as most popularly proliferated through *Devious Maids* (2013-2016), are "sexualized and sassy servants" (Baez, 2015). Latina women are also often portrayed as hot-blooded, hyper-sexual, gang members, or teen mothers (Lopez

and Chesney-Lind, 2014). Even when Latina women are central characters, they are "flat, stereotypical images that emphasize sameness and minimize agency and variety (Lopez and Chesney-Lind, 2014, p. 529). In other words, Latina characters are often coded with certain stereotypes, and not given the same depth and character development as their white counterparts.

Throughout this section, I have highlighted the ways in which working-class women are portrayed in media, from fictional stereotypes to their appearances in reality television. In presenting characters who displayed these stereotypes to my participants, my ultimate goal was to understand if real working-class women identify with these characters. In the following sections, I will discuss the importance of feminist audience studies and literature that has aimed to better understand how working-class audiences interact with television and films.

Audience and the Working Class

Many scholars have demonstrated that focus groups, interviews, and other ethnographic research methods can be particularly useful in feminist audience research (Morley, 1986; Gray, 1992; Cavalcante et al., 2017). The activities of everyday life— and what women consume in the private sphere— can reveal "how people make media content meaningful to them both as content and in their domestic, familial, and other social relationships" (Cavalcante et al., 2017). One notable study that highlighted the power of media consumption and everyday life is Janice Radway's work on romance novels (Radway, 1984). Romance novels had previously been regarded as "trash" or a low-brow form of entertainment— in contrast, Radway demonstrated how women found deep meaning in these novels, using them as a form of escape (Radway, 1984). Research like Radway's laid the foundation for feminist audience research; however, it was not until later that the "discipline evolved" and it became more intersectional, bringing in the

"experience[s] of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities under its purview" (Calvacante et al., 2017).

Working-Class "Realism" and "Middle-Class Hegemony"

Andrea Press published *Women Watching Television* in 1991, bringing working-class voices into the canon. Press conducted a series of interviews with both middle-class and working-class women about different television programs, such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), and *Alice* (1976-1985). Her results provided two key insights into how media perceptions from working-class women differed from that of their middle-class counterparts. First, working-class women preferred programs that they deemed to be "realistic"— even if this "realism" did not match up with their lived experiences. For example, a working-class participant found Claire Huxtable from *The Cosby Show* to be a more "realistic" attorney than attorneys she has met in her personal life (Press, 1991). Second, Press found that television programs— and subsequently working-class audiences— follow a certain "middle-class hegemony" (Press, 1991). The dominance of middle and upper-class settings, characters, and attitudes are believed to be a "reflection of reality" by audiences, but "'wish-fulfillment,' rather than 'closeness of fit' between experience and image, may be the actual basis" of working-class women's definition of "realism" (Press, 1991, p. 108). As a result, Press found that working-class women were more critical of working-class television, as it resembles their reality, rather than what they wish and expect their reality to be (Press, 1991).

Working-class women also display different attitudes toward sexuality and feminism than their middle-class counterparts. As Kathleen Rowe notes, "poor women, especially women of color, may assume a bearing that is 'stiff' and 'ladylike'" in order "to protect themselves against the threat of rape, violence, come-ons, and offensive male vulgarity" (Rowe, 1995, p. 62). While

this is in direct contrast to the "loose" and "excess" stereotypes assigned to working-class-coded characters, it is reflected in audience response to sexuality in television (Press, 1991; Rowe, 1995). When discussing the ways in which Lucy from *I Love Lucy* utilizes her femininity and sexuality to achieve what she wants, Press found that working-class women were uncomfortable with her expressions of femininity. Furthermore, they did not find these tactics to be non-feminist. In contrast, middle-class women admired Lucy for her clever nature and found her subtle rebellion to domesticity to be feminist (Press, 1991).

Unconscious Bias, Sexual Harassment, and the Working Class

In recent years, many sociologists have explored the ways in which women face both "hostile" and "benevolent" sexism in the workplace (Glick et al., 2000). Hostile sexism is characterized by male dominance over women and sexual conquest (Glick et al., 2000). On the other hand, benevolent sexism "presumes women's inferiority," that women are "needing men to provide for them," and the expectation for women to "fulfill domestic roles" and "fulfill sexual intimacy needs" (Glick et al., 2000, p. 764). Within the realm of benevolent sexism, an emerging area of study is unconscious or implicit bias and how it can hinder women's professional development in the workplace (Williams and Dempsey, 2014; Bohnet, 2016). In *What Works for Women at Work: Four Strategies Working Women Need to Know,* Joan Williams and Rachel Dempsey outline four patterns of biases that women face in the workplace, two of which relate to this study. First, the "Prove it Again" bias outlined how women must demonstrate and prove their competency and abilities more than their male counterparts (Williams and Dempsey, 2014). Additionally, women are judged more harshly for their mistakes, while their accomplishments are quickly forgotten (Williams and Dempsey, 2014). Similarly, the "Tightrope" bias asserts that women must maintain a "precarious balance" between "masculinity and femininity," in all of

their workplace interactions (Williams and Dempsey, 2014, p. 61). Display more feminine qualities and you are taken advantage of, performing "important-but-undervalued-tasks that have to be done but no one gets much credit for doing" (Williams and Dempsey, 2014, p. 67). Display more masculine qualities and you are seen as a leader but are faced with hostile opposition from your male colleagues (Williams and Dempsey, 2014). Overall, these biases can hinder women's advancement and well-being within the workplace (Williams and Dempsey, 2014; Bohnet, 2016).

In addition to highlighting subtle sexism present in workplace environments, other scholars have attempted to understand how women react to this sexism and what strategies they employ as a result (Liinamaa and Rogers, 2020). Saara Liinamaa and Malia Rogers (2020) interviewed women working in Canada's screen industry how they reacted to sexism and established themselves within the industry. What resulted were five main categories of sexist reactions: toughness, or to "be more resilient"; silence, or "staying quiet during humiliating moments"; humor, or "making a joke to break tension"; refusal, or "refusing a role"; and creative resistance, or moving to a role in the industry outside of acting (Liinamaa and Rogers, 2020, pp. 9-11).

While these contributions are certainly important to the women's labor movement, they tend to focus on middle to upper-middle-class women working in an office environment. Self-help books stemming from this discourse further reinforce this target market, offering advice that only benefits certain types of "working women" (Gauntlett, 2002; McRobbie, 2020). In this literature, women are encouraged to keep track of their accomplishments, negotiate for what they want, and if all else fails, seek out a different position (Evans, 2001; Sandberg, 2013; Frankel, 2014; Williams and Dempsey, 2014; Bohnet, 2016). Similar to the pressure to "have it all,"

much of this advice only benefits women with the financial means and autonomy to jeopardize their professional position by negotiating or pushing back. This brand of feminism has been referred to as corporate feminism or "lean in" feminism— aptly named for Sheryl Sandberg's popular self-help book, *Lean In* (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015; Fraser et al, 2019). Given that these issues largely focus on middle-class office environments, I will now turn to discuss the sexism that working-class women report in the workplace.

Workplace Sexism & The Working Class

Because working-class women often work in customer-facing roles such as a waitress or cashier, the assumption would be that they would report more sexism than their middle-class counterparts. In "Higher exposure, lower vulnerability?" Matthew Andersson and Catherine Harnois (2020) found the opposite to be true. Andersson and Harnois used data from the General Social Survey (GSS) in which working women in the United States reported their experiences of sexism and gender-based discrimination, and their mental and overall well-being (Andersson and Harnois, 2020). Andersson and Harnois found that women with less education who worked in low-paying jobs reported experiencing less overall sexual harassment and sexism compared to women working in more middle-class positions (Andersson and Harnois, 2020). While this seems puzzling on the surface, there are three possible explanations.

First, because service and retail positions typically have more female employees and are coded as feminine, women working in these jobs may receive less pushback from their male colleagues (McLaughlin et al., 2008; Andersson and Harnois, 2020). This differs from middle and upper-class office jobs, which historically have been coded as masculine. Women often "experience verbal gender harassment when applying for sex atypical jobs, such as sexist comments as well as skeptical or discouraging responses from hiring staff" (Neumark, 1996;

Stamarski and Hing, 2015, p. 5). Second, working-class women may have a different understanding of what constitutes "sexual harassment" due to their upbringing, age, race, and the overall company culture that has been fostered by HR and management (McLaughlin et al., 2008; Stamarski and Hing, 2015;). For example, younger, working-class women may be more susceptible to sexual harassment because of their inexperience, whereas older working-class women experience it less (McLaughlin et al., 2008). Additionally, the manner in with HR handles cases of sexual harassment can not only affect company culture and well-being but set the tone for what is and what is not acceptable (Stamarski and Hing, 2015). Finally, working-class women may not recognize sexual harassment because they regularly experience general, "taken-for-granted" harassment and stressors, and therefore may not distinguish when it is gender-based (Andersson and Harnois, 2020). Although working-class women reported less overall sexism, when they did experience harassment, their health and well-being suffered (Andersson and Harnois, 2020). Working-class women do not have the same level of access to mental health and women's resources as their middle-class counterparts— thus when harassment occurs, it is more difficult for them to heal (Andersson and Harnois, 2020).[5]

Race, Class, and Gender at Work

Women of color experience both benevolent and hostile sexism differently than their white counterparts. While there exists little research on the intersection of sexism, gender, race, and class in the workplace, Joan Williams and Rachel Dempsey (2014) found common patterns that women of color face while working in an office environment. According to their findings,

[5] For more information on the effects of company culture and HR on the recognition of sexual harassment, see Stamarski and Son Hing (2015): 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01400
For more information on the detrimental impacts of sexual harassment, see Andersson and Harnois (2020): https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112780

Black women need to "Prove it Again!" more so than their white counterparts— they are perceived to be less competent as a result of their gender and their race (Williams and Dempsey, 2014). Williams and Dempsey call this phenomenon "double jeopardy," or when race, gender, and other social factors compound to make bias more severe. Furthermore, Black women are expected to be "extremely aggressive" (like the "angry Black woman" stereotype) and display more masculine qualities than their white counterparts (Williams and Dempsey, 2014). As a result, many Black women felt as though their "only choice was to be respected-but-not-liked" (Williams and Dempsey, 2014, p. 231). While low-income women on the whole, are less likely to report sexual harassment than middle-class women, Black, low-income women are more likely to report sexual harassment in the workplace than their white or Latina counterparts (McLaughlin et al., 2008).

Similarly, Latina women also must prove themselves time and time again. Regardless of their ethnicity, Latina women often have the "Mexicans are lazy" stereotype placed upon them. As a result, they experience the "double jeopardy" effect like their Black counterparts— they are stereotyped for both their gender and their race. However, unlike Black women, Latina women are perceived to be "more feminine" and "motherly"— and as a result, they get tasked with "office housework" such as picking up company lunch, taking notes, and other undervalued tasks (Williams and Dempsey, 2014).

The degree of harassment that working-class women face also depends on their immigration status. For example, many undocumented women have experienced sexual assault while working nighttime janitorial shifts (Beltran, 2020). Sarah Beltran found that 70% of janitorial staff are undocumented, and half of these workers are women (Beltran, 2020). Due to their race, gender, and precarious immigration status, these women are targets for sexual assault.

Being isolated with men during the night shift increases this risk, as there are fewer bystanders to intervene or attest to the assault (Beltran, 2020). In summary, while working-class women reported less overall sexism, when they are sexual harassed, it tends to be more severe, or they suffer more long-term health consequences than their middle-class counterparts (Beltran, 2020; Andersson and Harnois, 2020). I overall found very little scholarship that addresses how working-class women experience sexism in the workplace. Through this study, I aimed to hear directly from working-class women about how they experience sexism, and when reporting this sexism, how effectively their management or HR handled the situation.

In this literature review, I have outlined scholarship that addresses class and subsequently the working-class; the intersection of gender, class, and media; feminist audience studies and the post-feminist shift; and sexism and gender-based discrimination in the workplace. This literature laid the foundation for the research questions that motivated this study; and in the following chapter, I will outline how I answered these questions through my sampling methods, data collection methods, and theoretical framework.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study utilized a mixed-method approach in order to gain insight into working-class women's experiences of workplace sexism; their reactions to workplace sexism; and their attitudes toward media depictions of working-class women. I used three methods of data collection: an introductory survey, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. The following sections will outline this study's theoretical framework, participant makeup, survey structure, focus group structure, in-depth interview structure, and limitations and considerations.

Sampling & Participants

I utilized two sampling methods to recruit participants: snowball sampling and convenience sampling by posting to public, local Facebook groups. The ultimate goal of these sampling methods was to find working-class women in the Charlottesville area between the ages of 21 and 50. Because I was looking for a specific demographic and was limited to the Charlottesville area, snowball sampling, or using "personal networks," and convenience sampling, or "drawing from a source that is conveniently accessible," were the most appropriate options for obtaining my desired participant pool (Hesse-Biber, 2017, pp. 56-58; Andrade, 2021, p. 86). One limitation of convenience sampling is that the resulting participant pool "may not be representative of the population at large" (Andrade, 2021, p. 86).

The total number of participants enrolled in the study was twelve, ranging from 21 to 48 years of age, with the majority of participants in their 20s. Nine were white, one was Hispanic/Latina, one was Asian/Mixed, and one identified as Mixed. Eleven participants identified as straight, one participant identified as bisexual, and all participants identified as cisgender. All participant names used in this study are pseudonyms, and employer names and other identifiable information have been redacted.

Survey

Once I received participants' voluntary consent, I distributed an online survey via UVA Qualtrics. The purpose of this survey was to gauge key details about their identity (race, gender identification, sexual orientation, age); their work experience; and their media consumption habits. Most participants had completed at least some college, and many hold an associate's or bachelor's degree. Participants reported working in a wide variety of working-class professions, such as service and retail, healthcare, the non-profit sector, and broadcasting. Media interests also varied widely— while some preferred sitcoms such as *Shameless* (2011-2021) and *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), others preferred dramatic programs like *Criminal Minds* (2005-2020), and some reported watching reality television or news programming. Regardless of interest, all women reported watching television at least once a day, often for at least one hour before going to sleep. While participants did discuss some films, they reported watching television more frequently than films.

Focus Group

Three focus groups were conducted in September and October 2021, consisting of 3-5 participants each. Focus groups allow the researcher to gain insight from "multiple participants at once," which can foster a unique group dynamic and provide the researcher with "depth and breadth to a subject about which very little is known" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 150). Focus groups lasted 63 to 120 minutes, and each group was recorded with a handheld voice recorder for ease of transcription and analysis. Each focus group was conducted in Wilson Hall at the University of Virginia. While some participants knew each other on a personal level, no participants who had an existing professional relationship were placed in the same focus group. Each participant was given an alias and a nameplate with this alias to use when introducing themselves to the

group to reduce the risk of a confidentiality breach. The focus group was semi-structured in order to allow the participants to speak of their experiences freely, while still maintaining a general structure and ensuring that I as the researcher asked key questions. Participants were shown a series of television and film clips that depicted a working-class woman being discriminated against in her workplace environment, and asked questions about how this character reacted; what traits this character embodied; and how they felt this character may influence their own reactions to workplace sexism. These clips were chosen because they each portray working-class women in different professions: Roseanne from *Roseanne* (1988-1997) as a factory worker, Doralee from *9 to 5* (1980) as a secretary, and Max from *2 Broke Girls* (2011-2017) as a waitress. Additionally, these clips were selected because each character employs a different "strategy" to combat sexism. The term "strategy" comes from the work of Liinamaa and Rogers (2020), published in the *Feminist Media Studies* journal. Liinamaa and Rogers found five main strategies that women employ in response to workplace sexism in Canada's screen industry: toughness, or to "be more resilient"; silence, or "staying quiet during humiliating moments"; humor, or "making a joke to break tension"; refusal, or "refusing a role"; and creative resistance, or moving to a role in the industry outside of acting (Liinamaa and Rogers, 2020, pp. 9-11). In the clips, Roseanne employs humor and later assertiveness; Doralee utilizes dismissal and "laughing it off"; and Max utilizes a blend of humor and assertiveness. It is important to note that the majority of these clips are not contemporary— however, the age of these clips did not diminish or hinder participants' engagement with them. Furthermore, while reality television is currently one of the richest sites of working-class representations, it was not the best genre to use in this study due to my focus on workplace interactions and specifically, how characters respond to gender-based discrimination. For this, fictional sitcoms were the better choice, as they offered

portrayals of these particular scenes. The following sections provide brief descriptions of the clips used.

Roseanne, "Let's Call it Quits," Part 1. Participants were first shown two clips from the same episode of *Roseanne* (Barr et al., 1989), "Let's Call it Quits" (Season 1, Episode 23). This episode was accessed via Amazon Prime Video from timestamp 0:50-5:00. In this episode, Roseanne is shown working at a plastic factory with her coworkers. Their newest supervisor, Mr. Faber, is known for being strict, rude, and particularly amongst the female employees, misogynistic. In this scene, Roseanne and her fellow coworkers are sitting in the factory's break room eating lunch. As they eat, the women chat and joke about their distaste for Mr. Faber. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Faber enters the scene and begins heckling one of Roseanne's coworkers about her messy workstation, calling her "blondie" and "sweetheart." Roseanne sarcastically replies that "this is a job for a brunette" amongst other humorous remarks to break the tension (Barr et al., 1989).

***Roseanne*, "Let's Call it Quits," Part 2**. The second clip from this episode occurs at timestamps 18:26- 23:33. Between the first clip and the second clip, it is revealed that Roseanne and her coworkers are having trouble meeting Mr. Faber's production quota. Roseanne and Mr. Faber ultimately make a deal with each other: Roseanne will "toe the line" and stop antagonizing Mr. Faber, and in return, Mr. Faber will lower the production quota for all employees. While this initially works, Mr. Faber ultimately goes back on his word, raising the production quota once again. In the scene that was showed to participants, Roseanne learns that Mr. Faber has raised the quota and confronts him in his office. After this assertive confrontation, Roseanne storms out of his office and begins telling her coworkers what happened. Mr. Faber follows, furious at her

behavior and "subordinance." In response, Roseanne clocks out for the last time and quits her job— her friends reluctantly follow suit (Barr et al., 1989).

9-5. Participants were shown a clip from *9 to 5* (Higgins, 1980) from Amazon Prime Video from timestamp 11:59- 15:06. In this clip, Doralee, an office secretary played by Dolly Parton, is asked by her boss, Mr. Hart, to help him with a letter in his office. Unbeknownst to Doralee at the time, Mr. Hart has been telling other employees in the office that the two of them are having an affair, though both of them are married. During the scene, it is also hinted that Mr. Hart has a history of inappropriate behavior and romantic advances toward Doralee. During Doralee and Mr. Hart's meeting, he purposefully knocks over pens on his desk so that he can stare at her breasts as she picks them up. Additionally, he tries to hold her hand, give her a gift, and make other inappropriate comments about her appearance. Throughout all of his advances, Doralee is dismissive, trying to change the subject and making funny but polite remarks to get Mr. Hart back on task (Higgins, 1980).

***2 Broke Girls,* "And the 90's Horse Party."** A clip from Season 1, Episode 5 of *2 Broke Girls* (King and Cummings, 2011) titled "And the 90s Horse Party" was obtained from a YouTube compilation titled "Two broke girls funny moments" at timestamp 5:04[6]. In the clip, Max, a diner waitress played by Kat Dennings, approaches a table of men who are banging their fists on the table, laughing and chanting "service." Max approaches and immediately quips "you heard your bro, service him." Max and one of the customers have a humorous and at times vulgar back-and-forth, where Max asserts that the restaurant is closed, and the customer needs to leave. The customer is insistent that the restaurant's sign says open until 2 am, and it is only 12

[6] The link to this video compilation can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aw0M5L2Q1ME

am. Finally, one of Max's coworkers uses a baseball bat to move the hand on the clock from 12 am to 2 am, forcing the group of men to leave (King and Cummings, 2011).

In-Depth Interviews

Similar to focus groups, interviews were semi-structured to ensure that I as the researcher asked key questions while allowing participants to speak freely. In-depth interviews allow for researchers to gather "thick descriptions of social life recounted from their participants," and places the knowledge and experiences of the participants in the forefront (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 106). Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 78 minutes, with most interviews lasting between 20 and 45 minutes. Each interview took place in various public locations around Charlottesville such as Riverview Park, outdoor tables around the university grounds, and Wilson Hall. One interview took place via Zoom[7]. Interviews were recorded using a handheld recorder for ease of transcription and analysis. Participants were asked about their experiences of sexism in the workplace; how they reacted to this sexism; and how HR or management handled this sexism. Because interviews followed the focus groups, participants were again asked some of the questions discussed in their groups. Especially if a participant was quiet during their focus group, I was sure to ask them again about their perceptions of working-class women characters, and in what ways they identify with characters on TV.

Limitations & Considerations

It is important to note that I as the researcher am a white, cisgender, heterosexual, and middle-class woman, and therefore do not understand firsthand the experiences of working-class

[7] This particular participant had scheduling conflicts. A single, working mom, she had difficulty finding childcare for the duration of our interview. The interview was recorded using a handheld recorder, and the participants face was not included in the recording. As a result of some connection difficulties and the online format, I may not have been able to grasp her body language and facial expressions as clearly as in my other in-person interviews.

women. Additionally, I myself have experienced workplace sexism and discrimination. Both my experiences and my upbringing may have impacted the manner in which I designed this study and the questions that I asked my participants.

It is also crucial to note that I had an existing relationship with some of the participants, both personal and professional. This close relationship that I have with the participants is consistent with a peer-to-peer power structure, and interview dynamics remained mostly equilateral (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Participants felt comfortable sharing difficult or sensitive topics with me, without coaxing or persuasion. In some focus groups, participants knew each other on a personal level— yet, no participants who shared a professional relationship were placed in the same focus group. In each focus group and interview, I dressed casually in an attempt to foster an open environment and reduce the risk of a power imbalance.

While all participants from Facebook recruiting considered themselves to be "working class," some participants obtained through snowball sampling may have had working-class *experiences*, rather than a working-class *lifestyle*. In other words, some participants— particularly ones who were currently obtaining their bachelor's degree from UVA— have experiences working in a working-class job, such as a restaurant or another service position, but have used or are currently using these positions as steppingstones to obtain a more middle-class profession. While their experiences in working-class environments are certainly vital to this study, they may have a higher degree of autonomy than other participants who live working-class lifestyles. This limitation occurred for a number of reasons. First, as a white, cisgender, college-educated woman, the contacts in my network that I used for snowball sampling— and subsequently, their contacts— are somewhat homogenous. Second, due to the accelerated timeline in which I conducted this research, I made compromises for who I selected for this

study in order to hear from more participants. Finally, due to the constraints that COVID-19, such as limited access to childcare and risk of infection, I found it somewhat difficult to recruit participants.

Theoretical Framework

This study was structured and analyzed through a critical feminist lens. Critical feminist theory assumes that women have different standpoints due to their cultural, political, and social position. Ultimately, work under this theoretical framework aims to "eradicate gender inequality and unearth women's subjugated knowledges" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 29-32). Feminist research emerged out of second-wave feminism as a result of women being "excluded from knowledge construction both as researchers and research subjects" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 29). In addition to bringing women's subjugated voices into the canon, feminist research also aims to break down gender binaries. One of the best examples of this is Donna Haraway's (2006) "A Cyborg Manifesto," in which she rejects essentialism and calls for a frame of thinking that rejects gender binaries and embraces fluidity between human, animal, and machine (Haraway, 2006).

Media studies scholarship emerging out of this tradition, particularly feminist audience studies, aimed to uncover how women interacted with media in the private sphere to reveal how they "make media content meaningful to them both as content and in their domestic, familial, and other social relationships" (Cavalcante et al., 2017). Early audience studies work focused on white women's consumption of media in the private sphere, but the rise of third-wave feminism and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality aimed to bring women from different racial backgrounds, sexual identifications, and socioeconomic classes into the cannon (Crenshaw, 1991; Cavalcante et al., 2017; Oren and Press, 2019). As outlined by Andrea Press and Tasha Olsen (2019), feminist theory has permeated "most fundamental scholarly disciplines

in virtually every field," such as sociology, political science, philosophy, anthropology, sexuality, media studies, and socialist feminism/labor inequality (Oren and Press, 2019).

Given the applicability of critical feminist theory to these various disciplines and the interdisciplinary approach of this project, critical feminist theory was the best theoretical framework to use. Sensitizing concepts for this study include keywords from both feminist media studies and research on gender inequality in the workplace and include implicit bias, self-image, female labor, and media representation.

One of the unique aspects of qualitative research methods and critical feminist theory is the ability for the researcher to locate themselves within the study. I was inspired to pursue this research because of my own experiences in the workforce. After graduating from the University of Virginia, I was eager to prove myself and demonstrate that I was an ambitious employee. But, the more that I worked, the more that I noticed that I was evaluated, managed, and spoken to differently than my male colleagues. My accomplishments were overlooked while my perceived mistakes were emphasized; I was required to do tasks outside of the purview of my job description without compensation; and with everything that I did, someone was always checking up on me. At any given industry event— particularly when alcohol was involved— men who were old enough to be my father would put their hands on my lower back or around my waist; stand so close to me when talking that I could feel their lips on my ear; or squeeze my arm as they walked past. Over time, I found myself crying every day to and from work, and sometimes, in a bathroom stall during the day. It was not until I returned to the University of Virginia to pursue my M.A. that I realized that all of the negative experiences I had were directly correlated with sociological research on workplace discrimination and unconscious bias. The constant need for me to prove myself aligned with the "Prove it Again!" bias; the tasks I completed outside of

my job description were known as “office housework”; and the balance I had to maintain between being assertive and being personable correlated with the “Tightrope” bias (Williams and Dempsey, 2014). As I continued to research these patterns and connect them to my own experiences, I found that most of this research focuses on white, middle-class women. While this research is certainly important for the women’s labor movement, it was is not necessarily applicable to marginalized groups of women: women of color, queen women, or working-class women. Thus, I wanted to hear from some of these marginalized voices and join together my own experiences of sexism with my love for media studies.

In the following three chapters, I will outline my findings and analysis, organized by research questions. Chapter 4 will address RQ 1, or how working-class women experience sexism in their workplace environment; Chapter 5 will address RQ 2, or how working-class women understand media representations of working-class women; and Chapter 6 will address RQ 3, or how media representations of working-class women impact working-class women’s responses to sexism in the workplace and their sense of self.

Chapter 4: "It's the Man's Word Against Mine": How Working-Class Women Experience and React to Workplace Sexism

Each of the 12 working-class women that I interviewed have experienced sexism in their workplace in some capacity. However, I argue that the degree of this sexism— and how these women reacted to sexism— is dynamic and largely dependent on their workplace and the amount of work experience they have. In the following sections, I highlight some of these differences. First, I discuss the ways in which participants experienced "benevolent sexism" versus "hostile sexism" based on their workplace environment (Glick et al., 2000). Next, I outline how women's strategies to combat sexism differ based on their age and level of experience. Finally, I demonstrate how participants' attitudes about when to report an incident to HR and when to stay at a job differ based on level of work experience.

Benevolent vs. Hostile Sexism

As discussed in Chapter 2, hostile sexism is characterized by male dominance over women and sexual conquest whereas benevolent sexism "presumes women's inferiority" (Glick et al., 2000, p. 764). Based on my interviews with my respondents, I found that working-class women in office settings experienced more benevolent sexism, whereas women working in more customer or client-facing roles experienced more hostile sexism, though there are exceptions to this trend. Benevolent sexism, for my participants, came in the form of sexist comments, being barred from opportunities, or unconscious biases. For example, Carly, who is 48 years old and has been working for 35 years, was rejected for a job assignment in favor of a male coworker with less experience in the field:

> I walked around pretty much with my job description in my back pocket because I was questioned in every instant…So we get to a meeting and here we are. Me and these men are in this meeting and we're talking about this [sales] project… I say 'oh, yeah, no

> problem, I'll take care of that. My background is in outside sales, right? Easy. I already know people. No problem.' My boss says, 'Oh no, no. [male colleague] will take care of that.' I say 'OK. Why is that? I mean, I am the… that's my job…well, you know why, [male colleague]? And he says, 'well, that's kind of more in his wheelhouse.' I say, 'how is that?' You know? And he says, 'well, you're more of a ginger.' (Carly, personal communication, Sept. 13, 2021)

Similarly, Bailey, age 31 and with 16 years of work experience, found herself to be a second choice for work opportunities— she would often have projects revoked from her once management found a male colleague to replace her:

> He offered me a job and had me do it for like a year and a half for free. And then when it came time to give me the job, he told [male colleague] that I don't smile at him enough, so that's why he wasn't going to give it to me. Meanwhile, he gave [male colleague] a promotion. (Bailey, personal communication, Sept. 15, 2021)

Carly and Bailey's experiences align with Joan Williams and Rachel Dempsey's (2014) findings in *What Works for Women at Work*. According to Williams and Dempsey, because of unconscious bias, women "seem less natural fits for high-stakes jobs as compared to men" and are offered fewer opportunities for growth or promotion as a result (2014, p. 27). Carly's example in particular highlights the "Prove it Again!" bias as outlined in Chapter 2. The "Prove it Again!" bias asserts that women must demonstrate and prove their competency and abilities more than their male counterparts (Williams and Dempsey, 2014). Here, Carly's need to constantly prove herself and carry her job description "in her back pocket" is exemplary of this bias.

For many of my participants working in client-facing sectors such as restaurants, nursing homes, and retail stores, hostile sexism came in the form of inappropriate touching, sexual

harassment, and sexual assault. For example, Olivia, age 23 and with 5 years of work experience, had customers who would pinch her waist when she worked as a waitress:

> They would like, pinch you and stuff like try to like, you know, like, try to like, ask you out or something and you'd be like, 'no thanks.' But they would just like, keep going. And yeah, just like…oh my gosh, I can't imagine someone from work, like poking [me] in the stomach right now. Like, that's terrible. I can't believe they did that. (Olivia, personal communication, Oct. 13, 2021)

Danielle, age 24 with 7 years of work experience, described an encounter with a visitor at a museum who refused to leave her alone until she gave him a hug:

> I had this guy…he was like in a wheelchair, and he probably spent 20 minutes trying to convince me to give him a hug. I think I ended up doing it just to get him to go away… but I was like 'I think I might throw up from how gross I feel physically.' I went to the bathroom to like, splash water on my face… But he would not leave… he was like, 'you know, women these days don't know. They all draw the line in a different place of like what you can and can't do, like what you can say. Back in the day, you just, you know, there's nothing wrong with like a good old-fashioned business hug.' (Danielle, personal communication, Sept. 15, 2021)

Emily, who was introduced in Chapter 1, has been sexually assaulted in the workplace three times. Each of these times, her perpetrator specifically isolated her in a minimally trafficked area of her work building without security cameras. In one particular instance, a coworker cornered her in a stairwell:

> So, when I was almost raped, it was at [employer name] and it was by a coworker and he had gotten me in the stairwell as I was going up to go and answer a page from a resident. And he got all up on me and he was making love, I guess, and I was trying to push him off and he was a stronger man and he was like, 'Oh, OK, it's OK, no one's coming, no one's coming. It's OK.'

> And I was like, 'I have a page to answer with the resident,' I had my pager on me. I was literally trying to go up the stairs, and he just forced his way on me. And then he tried to…and he tried to get my pants down. And I kind of, you know, I was fighting tooth and nail for that. And once I was able to get away…I threatened to report that one. But I felt like I couldn't report that one because, you know, I…was a new person in that facility. (Emily, personal communication, Sept. 23, 2021)

The prevalence of both hostile sexism in client-facing roles and benevolent sexism in more office-oriented roles is in opposition to Andersson and Harnois' (2020) study on women's experiences of sexism in the workplace, as outlined in Chapter 2. Andersson and Harnois found that women working in low-income positions reported less overall sexism than their middle-class counterparts— and while my study does not have a middle-class component, it is still noteworthy that each participant experienced and was able to recognize sexism in their workplace in a variety of industries (Andersson and Harnois, 2020). However, Andersson and Harnois are also careful to note that although working-class women reported less sexism overall, when these women did experience sexism, it was often hostile and severe (Andersson and Harnois, 2020). My findings support this claim, in that participants working in more customer-facing roles experienced more hostile sexism in the form of sexual harassment and assault. Overall, these dynamic experiences of sexism and gender-based discrimination demonstrate that working-class women's experiences are rich for exploration; and the only way for feminist scholars and "lean in" feminists to "eradicate gender inequality" in the workplace is to study working-class women's "subjugated knowledges" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 29-32). Returning again to critical feminism's recent emphasis on intersectionality, exploring working-class women in addition to women from other socioeconomic backgrounds would paint a fuller picture of

inequality, moving toward a more egalitarian eradication of gender inequality (Crenshaw, 1991: Oren and Press, 2019).

Differences in Strategies

My respondents with more work experience felt more comfortable on the whole setting boundaries when experiencing sexual harassment or gender-based discrimination; in contrast, my respondents with less work experience felt more timid and were more likely to utilize deflection and humor. Returning to Liinamaa and Rogers (2020), women working in Canada's screen industry employed five major strategies in response to workplace sexism: toughness, or to "be more resilient"; silence, or "staying quiet during humiliating moments"; humor, or "making a joke to break tension"; refusal, or "refusing a role"; and creative resistance, or moving to a role in the industry outside of acting (Liinamaa and Rogers, 2020, pp. 9-11). In this study, women with less work experience overall felt less confident and less sure of themselves in the workplace; so, when an inappropriate encounter took place, they were more likely to deflect or use humor in response. For example, Jessica, age 21 with 4 years of work experience, found that she tried to brush comments off when she worked as a waitress:

> I'm definitely like, pretty passive. I don't... I'm not really good at confrontation, I guess, especially when it's people that I don't know… So, I would just like move on with my life or try to just like indicate that I wasn't really interested, but without like being too harsh, I guess. (Jessica, personal communication, Sept. 17, 2021)

Hannah, age 21 with 2 years of work experience, similarly avoids confrontation when someone is being inappropriate with her. She details two instances in which she was the only woman in a room full of men who were making inappropriate comments about other women:

> I'm more reserved, especially in a professional setting…like, it was just me there, so I didn't really feel super comfortable voicing my opinion, I just kind of didn't say anything because it

> was almost like I wasn't there anyways when they were having the conversation. And then kind of similarly with my last internship when they were talking about like, why they don't have women [working] there. I just kind of sat there like…I didn't really do anything about the situation. (Hannah, personal communication, Sept. 16, 2021)

In contrast to women with less experience, women with more experience felt more comfortable drawing boundaries during inappropriate confrontations. These women have learned to "choose their battles"— they reported using a combination of humor, assertiveness, and deflection, based on the situation. These women also acknowledged that they were not always assertive; their confidence grew over their years of work experience. For example, Bailey noted: "I mean, when I was like younger, I would shut down. But now? I mean, now…now I shut *it* down." Similarly, Anne, age 26 with 11 years of work experience, said that as a teenager, she did not want to "stir the pot" or cause any trouble. Now, she is more likely to be assertive:

> I definitely have changed for sure. And I do think that, like some of the way I'm treated, is directly relevant to the fact that I have changed so much and I do feel a bit more comfortable in my own skin and able to, like, assert myself and have boundaries. (Anne, personal communication, Sept. 10, 2021)

The strategies that women with more experience use in the workplace also depend on whether the perpetrator is a customer or coworker and their degree of safety or power in the situation. For example, Anne felt as though she could not be as assertive with customers when she worked as a waitress, as tips were the basis of her pay:

> When it's a customer like, I feel way less like I have the ability to do or say something, especially when I'm serving them and like, being like in America, where servers are dependent upon tips to make a wage. (Anne, personal communication, Sept. 10, 2021)

In contrast to interactions with a customer, many of these women felt like they could be a bit more assertive with a coworker, with limits. Carly, for example, was careful not to "cause a scene" or come off too aggressive, but was comfortable enough to speak up:

> Researcher: So, you don't want to burn your bridge, you know?
>
> Carly: Yeah, even if it's a bridge, you never cross again. Yeah, it's my reputation. And I don't want anybody to be able to tarnish it, right? Especially because I just acted up one day because they didn't want to hear the whole story around why you acted up that day. All they know is that you acted up yesterday. (Carly, personal communication, Sept. 13, 2021)

In addition to the difference between coworkers and customers, participants reported using different strategies when their safety was in question. If they felt as though they had power in the situation, women would be a bit more assertive. For example, Anne detailed a time when a coworker would not stop touching her, and she felt comfortable pushing back:

> And there was one day that I just I wasn't having it. I was having a really bad day and I was like, 'do not fucking touch me.' And he was like, 'oh, oh darling.' I was like, 'no.' I was like, 'do not touch me.' And he, like, laughed and did it again, and I grabbed his arm very firmly, and I was like, 'if you touch me again, I will break your arm.' I'm like, 'we're not doing this. You don't need to touch me.' (Anne, personal communication, Sept. 10, 2021)

Despite these respondents' more assertive nature, when they felt as though they had less power, they were more likely to be dismissive or "laugh it off" like women with less experience. Bailey outlined how she becomes more "docile" when she is scared:

> There's this quote, like 'men are scared that women will laugh at them and women are scared that men will kill them.' Yeah, that is the most poignant. That is the most accurate. So, like, when I'm in a position where I don't feel safe like that, my way of handling it is

> going to be a little different because I'm just trying not to…like, because I'm scared. I mean, it is interesting because I'm a very strong person and I have a lot of boundaries, but like when I reflect on it, I definitely still become very docile when a man is like making me uncomfortable like that. (Bailey, personal communication, Sept. 15, 2021)

In addition to adjusting their strategies when faced with a threatening or unsafe situation, participants also cited safety as a factor when deciding whether or not to report an incident to HR or management. Again, the decision to report or not report, and general attitudes about HR, differed based on participants' level of work experience.

To Report or Not to Report?

While women with less work experience tended to have a bit more trust in HR, women with more work experience felt jaded; their previous, negative experiences with HR reduced their trust in the process. For example, Olivia and Madison, age 21 with 2 years of experience, felt somewhat optimistic about the future of the workplace and HR but noted that subtle bias was more difficult to detect and report. After watching the *Roseanne* clip in which Roseanne's boss referred to her and her colleagues as "sweetheart" and "honey," Olivia and Madison said the following:

> Olivia: There are [HR] policies that protect against…you at least have some kind of grounds in a professional sense to stand up to that without having to yell at your boss and collectively quit…I'm just like 'Oh, my gosh, I'm glad it's not like that anymore.'
>
> Madison: Yeah, I mean, like, I think we as a world definitely progressed and are way more progressive than what is depicted here. But because of that, these things happen in like, a lot more subtle ways and so it makes it harder when it's not as overt. (Olivia & Madison, personal communication, Oct. 6, 2021)

Natalie, a 30-year-old, local journalist[8] with 10+ years of experience, held a different opinion. As someone who has unionized in the workplace and witnessed HR failures firsthand, she did not have the same level of optimism: “HR doesn't work for you, they work for the company.”

In addition to split attitudes about HR, women with less experience and women with more experience differed in their opinions on when to report an incident. Hannah believed that she would report an incident to HR if it made her feel unsafe or if it was persistent:

> I think the line for me is probably where it's like more than just like, slightly uncomfortable because none of these I've been super like affected by. But if I really… feel actually super offended by a statement or something or like threatened, or maybe if someone was like making a pass and like, wouldn't stop, I feel like that's the point that I would go to [HR]. When I felt like I again, like, couldn't control the situation. (Hannah, personal communication, Sept. 16, 2021)

While many of the women with more experience agreed that the degree of safety was important when deciding whether or not to report, they also argued that this could not be the only reason to report. Women with more experience emphasized the need to have concrete evidence in your case. Carly stressed the need for evidence and having the upper hand before reporting:

> You have to have evidence; it can't be just you and him. You cannot. That's not going to…it's just not going to work. You have to be in a situation where in that meeting you know you're going to win. (Carly, personal communication, Sept. 13, 2021)

These two groups of women have different opinions surrounding HR due to their personal experiences. Women with less experience on the whole have not yet needed to report an incident to HR, whereas many of the women with more experience have— with varying results. For

[8] Natalie has had experience working in local journalism and in digital marketing. At the onset on the pandemic, she was laid off, while still needing to pay off her student loans. Therefore, she still fits the working-class definition, as outlined in Chapter 2.

example, Anne and Emily had the following exchange during their focus group about HR's inadequate responses:

> Emily: You know, whatever happens behind closed doors with the window shut. I mean, what? It's the man's word against mine.
>
> Anne: I went to HR when I worked at [employer name], and I always reported it because like, you know, I was young, I was a kid at the time. We were told to do that— like, I did that, and they would just transfer them to another store…
>
> Emily: It's just a slap on the hand.
>
> Anne: Right, and so like after a while like, you know, things that happen at work. And I just like, stop saying things because I'm like, 'Okay, and now nothing happens.' (Emily & Anne, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

Due to this history of lackluster HR responses, participants felt jaded about the process and were less likely to report incidents in the future. The absence of HR protections points to Stamarski and Son Hing's (2015) argument that the organizational structure of a company can largely impact the degree in which women experience gender-based discrimination. As Stamarski and Son Hing (2015) state, "organizational culture can contribute to gender inequalities because culture constrains people's ideas of what is possible" (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015, p. 7). In other words, if management and HR allow for discrimination to continue, then the possibility for progressive change is limited. Participants' negative experiences with HR also tie into Andersson and Harnois' (2020) research about the detrimental effects that discrimination can have on working-class women's overall well-being. Participants who have experienced sexism with little support reported feeling "gross" and "frustrated," and in many cases, their mental health declined. Bailey highlighted how the continual discrimination at her job in broadcasting contributed to her Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and triggered her past traumas:

> [Name of coworker] was making rape jokes… And like, I was just so triggered and so worked up. And that was like kind of— that was like PTSD driven, for sure. And, and then. And then in my exit interview for [employer name], I reported some of the stuff that had gone on there, but that was…for like, the last like eight months of when I worked at [employer name], I would just like cry every day on the way to work. (Bailey, personal communication, Sept. 15, 2021)

Because of the toll this particular job took on Bailey's mental health, she eventually quit—however, the reasons other participants had for quitting versus staying at a job varied overall.

To Quit or Not to Quit?

Women with less work experience and women with more work experience had similar opinions about when it is time to quit a job. Yet, the two groups differed when it came to reasons why they would stay at a position. When asked why they would quit a job, almost all participants stated they would quit if they felt undervalued, if they felt underpaid, or if their mental health began to decline. However, participants' reasoning for staying at a job, even if they were unhappy or were facing gender-based discrimination, once again varied based on the level of work experience. Women with less work experience stated that the main reasons why they would stay at a job is for professional development, because they had a strong comradery with their coworkers, or because the job was comfortable. This again points to a limitation in the study, as outlined in Chapter 3. Some of the participants with less work experience, while working in working-class professions, have a financial safety from their families. Thus, their decision to continue or quit a job is largely tied to their access to material resources.

Returning to the notions of comradery and comfort, Grace, age 22 with 3 years of work experience, and Hannah discussed how fear of the unknown has kept them at certain jobs in the past:

> Grace: It like, definitely boils down to like the people because you got to have a comfort level in your job and that's…it's hard to leave that comfort level. Like before I moved to my most recent job, it took me so long to quit my last job, even though I was getting paid shit. The management was awful, but it was comfortable, and it was walking distance from my house and my coworkers were wonderful and I worked there for two and a half years. Like, you know, there's like a certain level of like, you just don't want to leave a stable situation in terms of like, for something unknown.
>
> Hannah: I totally agree with that, for sure. Also, my last job before the one I had this summer, I really hated, and I didn't…I didn't really have the support network there. I didn't like the management. There wasn't a lot that I loved about it, but I was like afraid to quit more for like what you said about professional development, like what it would look like to end an internship early on a resume. (Grace & Hannah, personal communication, Sept. 14, 2021)

This sense of comradery that Grace felt in her workplace— and the lack of support that Hannah felt— points to another difference amongst my participants. Some felt as though they had a strong sense of comradery with their coworkers, whereas others felt that they were on their own. As I conducted my research, I first believed this to be another generational or experience divide— however, the attitude that women seem to have about comradery largely depends on their personal experiences and their specific workplaces. Returning to Natalie, who has unionized in the past, we find another example of a participant who felt very strongly about coworker unity:

> If you work with good people, they'll back you up. They will lift you and support you when you're struggling. Which happened— we did band together. (Natalie, personal communication, Oct. 15, 2021)

Because Emily had been failed many times by management, HR, and her coworkers, she held a different attitude about comradery in the workplace:

> It's a joke. It's a joke. There's…there's no sense of comradery and unification, and there's no sense of that. And even if there was, it just falls apart within minutes. (Emily, personal communication, Sept. 23, 2021)

As this quote from Emily demonstrates, not all women would stay at a job for the comradery. For most participants with more work experience, it comes down to finances or the passion they have for the job or the industry itself. Natalie outlined how, especially in light of the pandemic, it's better to have job security at a job that you don't particularly love than no job at all:

> And it's…staying also, because like the money. Even if it's not great, it's better than nothing. It's better than like waitressing sometimes, right? Like having a stable job with stable benefits beats waitressing at minimum wage, I don't even know, like what tips you're going to get, right? (Natalie, personal communication, Oct. 15, 2021)

The differences between women with more experience and women with less experience could be caused by two factors. First, women with less work experience have yet to establish themselves within their preferred industries, and therefore may feel more pressure to stay at a job in order to network and pad their resumes. Second, many of the participants with less experience are full-time students— and while they have experienced working-class job environments, many of them still have a financial safety net and the support of their family. This is in contrast to most participants with more work experience like Natalie, who either do not have this safety net or have children and must provide for themselves in whatever means necessary.

Working-class women's experiences are dynamic and varied based on their workplace and the amount of work experience they have. Given the baseline level of sexism these respondents have faced, the following chapter will examine how participants grappled with

media representations of working-class women given these personal experiences. I outline how participants' opinions of working-class media representations are also dynamic and complex, reflecting the dynamic and complex nature of the American working class.

Chapter 5: "She's Working-Class Hot": How Working-Class Women Understand Media Representations of Working-Class Women

Working-class women have a complicated relationship with working-class media representations. On the one hand, they find them to be somewhat realistic, particularly scenes in which the character is facing gender-based discrimination or difficult work conditions. On the other hand, they find them to be unrealistic— characters were described as being "messy," "masculine" and "utilitarian," but also, in some instances, hyper-sexual. Furthermore, the ways in which some participants understood and viewed media portrayals of working-class women evolved over the course study. I argue that the messy, complicated, and dynamic relationship that working-class women have with media representations of working-class women reflects the complicated and dynamic nature of today's working class, as outlined in Chapter 2. I will first discuss the different ways that participants described the characters we examined during the focus groups and in popular culture at large, and how these perceptions may have changed over the course of the study. Next, I examine the relationship between feeling powerful and having power, and how this distinction relates to Andrea Press' (1991) notion of the "working-class matriarch" in fictional media. Finally, I discuss the tension that participants had between wanting a show to be more realistic, but not too realistic— a tension that again highlights the complicated nature of the working class.

Messy, Masculine, and Hyper-Sexual

Toward the beginning of each focus group, I asked the participants the following question: when you think of the working woman, who, what character, or what characteristics, do you think of? Participants' answers varied, but many of them described a woman in a

powerful office position who was career oriented. Hannah described the working woman as the following:

> When you say the working woman, I picture someone in power, probably in a pantsuit…it's just like, the first thing that comes to mind. (Hannah, personal communication, Sept. 14, 2021)

Natalie elaborated on some of the personality traits of the working woman that she felt are often portrayed in media:

> I think of someone strong and someone who is determined to make a name for herself. She's not necessarily a woman who wants to just sit around and do nothing. She actually is going out there and being proactive and working in a community that she really, really likes. (Natalie, personal communication, Oct. 6, 2021)

Here, participants' perceptions of the working woman align with more middle-class or upper-middle class tropes that fall in line with the post-feminist ideal discussed in Chapter 2: hardworking and financially and emotionally independent (Gauntlett, 2002; McRobbie, 2020). On the other hand, some women began describing the working woman as a character that they would later identify as a working-class woman. For example, Leah, age 23 with 3-4 years of experience, began describing the working woman as follows:

> Leah: Yeah, I would say for me, when you say the working woman, it kind of brings to mind someone who might be financially challenged in a way and is like literally working just to survive. So, and you know, that can be found in a lot of different situations.
>
> Grace: Yeah, I guess I like, I think there's some instances where a working woman is very… kind of in the context of the pandemic and everything, the working woman is definitely seen as like more of a front line worker character that is like, you know, maybe a nurse working lots of shifts or like a grocery store worker or a restaurant worker. But

> perhaps for that, l before that kind of connotation of the working woman…like, I probably used to think of what my mom would wear, like a suit to work. (Leah & Grace, personal communication, Sept. 14, 2021)

It was not until I asked the participants who, or what characteristics, they think of when they hear "working-class woman," did Grace's answer slightly shift:

> Hannah: I feel like for me, that kind of also pivots to more of what Leah said. When you say working-class woman, I kind of see like the blue-collar workers, like the front-line jobs, doing some of the nitty-gritty stuff and working like paycheck-to-paycheck type person.
>
> Grace: Yeah, I think yours is like the most accurate of like somebody who's definitely like more paycheck to paycheck type work. (Hannah & Grace, personal communication, Sept. 14, 2021)

While Grace did not entirely change her original description of the working woman, she pivoted to make the distinction that working-class women are always in "paycheck-to-paycheck" work, whereas working women can *sometimes* be "paycheck-to-paycheck" work. The other ways in which participants described the working-class woman varied: to some, she was messy and unable to have a romantic relationship; for others, she was hyper-sexual, and constantly using a man to get ahead. For example, Anne said the following about working-class portrayals:

> They're completely a mess when it's like, 'No, I have my stuff together. It's hard, but I have my stuff together.' Or like, I guess it's also frustrating that being a mess is viewed as being so negative because sometimes you just are messy. Like, That's OK. I never met a person that always has it together, like all the time and…you know, you can be somebody who likes overachieving. Emily has her shit together and is like, you know, paying her

> bills and doing the mom thing and taking care of it all. But something's got to give. (Anne, personal communication, Sept. 10, 2021)

In her introduction survey, Emily said that working-class women are often portrayed to be "overworked, underappreciated, paid less than men, and made to look like little whores." She also noted the different ways in which women of different racial backgrounds are stereotyped:

> Older women are made to look like they're on the edge of retirement. They're made to look stupid. Just the same as a blond woman. A blond woman is made to look stupid because of the stereotype. You know, Black women or any different origin are made to look like, you know, their basic job is what their ethnicity is. Hispanic women are meant to…because I am Hispanic, but I'm white [passing]. On the outside, Hispanic women are made to look like restaurant workers, house cleaners. Black women are made to look like house cleaners all the time, serving white families in any kind of movie in any kind TV show. (Emily, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

Emily's comments about racialized stereotypes relate to the tropes discussed in Chapter 2, such as the Black woman portrayed as the Aunt Jemima trope, a domestic worker who is eager to serve white families (Bogle, 1973; Brown Givens and Monahan, 2005; McAllister and Galarza, 2019). Similarly, Hispanic/Latina women have historically been portrayed as maids or domestic workers (Baez, 2015). As a Latina woman herself, Emily identified and critiqued these stereotypes.

As we as a group examined the three different examples of a working-class women character— Roseanne as a factory worker, Doralee as a secretary, and Max as a waitress— the participants noticed more characteristics about the ways that the characters were portrayed that they may not have necessarily mentioned at the beginning of the group. For example, the group noticed that Roseanne was not traditionally feminine: she was overweight and "dumpy," and

wore more “utilitarian” clothing, as opposed to Doralee and Max. Bailey and Anne described Roseanne in the following way:

> Bailey: Well, she's meant to be dumpy. And I mean, I know I have a mullet, but it's a different mullet…
>
> Anne: Like in a very masculine way though.
>
> Emily: Like she’s a leader, and those are her followers. (Bailey, Anne, & Emily, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

Similarly, Grace described the way Roseanne was dressed as follows:

> I think she's…like, she dresses like my grandma dresses just…very like utilitarian, functional…which I think kind of adds to her personality and that she's like, not going to take, you know, bullshit from anybody. (Grace, personal communication, Sept. 14, 2021)

Taking this idea of the “masculine” working-class woman one step further, participants also noticed that there was a difference in the way that more masculine, assertive supporting characters in the scene dressed versus the more timid, feminine characters. As outlined in Chapter 3, the second *Roseanne* clip that participants watched showed Roseanne quitting her job at the factory and her other coworkers followed suit. Two of Roseanne’s coworkers were more eager to quit alongside her; two others were timid. The participants noticed how these two distinct groups of characters differed in appearance, dress, and overall coding:

> Bailey: But also, if you look at it, the other [timid] women, they…one of them has an apron and one of them has a V-neck button-up, but the other one has a tighter sweater. And she's [Roseanne] wearing that [flannel and jeans]. The feminine vs. masculinity is, that's a good point…

> Carly: Costume-design wise that's a very good point because the black lady and the sister[9] are both wearing shades of blue. You know, and the two more [feminine] types, they both have pink. But I also wonder if they [producers] even realize what they were doing.
>
> Anne: I also feel that those two [women in pink] did not get up quite as confidently as the others. It was very, very timidly like, 'OK, I guess we're doing this.' (Bailey, Carly, & Anne, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

Furthermore, Natalie noticed that this particular Roseanne clip plays into blond and brunette stereotypes that also tend to follow this feminine versus masculine distinction:

> It could also be seen as playing up to the 'blond women are like more submissive' kind of trope and that the brunettes are, like, definitely the loud, strong ones. (Natalie, personal communication, Oct. 6, 2021)

Turning to Doralee and Max, participants noted how their dresses were particularly low cut, promiscuous, and feminine, which differed from Roseanne. Anne and Bailey discussed the way in which Doralee's work attire was sexualized:

> Anne: I feel like they definitely picked Dolly Parton for this part. I mean, she's known for her giant, you know [breasts]. I'm sorry [laughs], but also like, she's wearing something that's professional, but it's deeply sexualized.
>
> Bailey: Well, I mean, the issue is…that's like what you just were saying. That could be worn professionally, but a lot of people wouldn't dress that way because it is so sexual. (Anne & Bailey, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

This led to a discussion about wanting to look put together, but not wanting to attract unwanted attention:

[9] Here, the "black lady and the sister" refer to Roseanne's coworkers who first quit alongside Roseanne in the clip.

> Emily: But like as far as like how she dressed, she kind of um, or the way she presented herself, she was kind of clean and put together and had her, you know, cleavage out…the personality was a bit like Roseanne…
>
> Bailey: But the fit was like Dolly Parton…
>
> Emily: Yeah, so like she was beautiful…
>
> Bailey: But working-class hot.
>
> Anne: Yeah, not necessarily answering your question, but just like from my own personal experience, I've worked a lot of service jobs and none of my uniforms have ever looked like that. Like, it's always been like T-shirts and jeans and I'm allowed to wear denim shorts at my job, but obviously within reason and like, actually, we're really allowed to wear whatever we want. And my current job, which is great in terms of as long as you've got a work shirt and something on. But like I know I cater my wardrobe to not being harassed… And so, I'll find something that's a little bit more moderate in between that. Like, I look nice, but I'm not being sexy.
>
> Emily: Yes, you're not setting yourself up like a sexual object, I guess. (Emily, Bailey, & Anne, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

The phrase "working-class hot" signifies that respondents were able to distinguish the aesthetic differences between Doralee/Max and Roseanne; yet, despite their more feminine looks, these women have not escaped the "working-class" label. This calls back to the discussion of class tastes in Chapter 2, and how subtle differences in aesthetics can mark different classes and illicit different responses. For example, Beverly Skeggs (2004) noted the difference between more tasteful, middle-class blond, and more "trashy," working-class bleach-blond: a distinction that is very subtle, yet because of a long-standing history of social abjection, the two carry very different connotations. Here, Doralee and Max represent this distinction— they are feminine and

"beautiful," yet ultimately "working-class hot." Furthermore, Anne related this notion of promiscuity, femininity, and sexuality back to her own workplace experiences. As a bartender, she did not necessarily find Max and Doralee's low-cut clothing to be unrealistic, as she has coworkers who dress in that manner, but she herself tries to avoid revealing clothing, as she does not want to be objectified by customers.

In addition to noticing these more feminine or sexual elements, participants also noted the ways in which working women and working-class women are portrayed in their romantic and sexual relationships. One participant noted the ways in which working women who are career-oriented are often alone and must sacrifice their career in order to have a relationship. Danielle cited Hallmark movies as a good example of this trope:

> So, it's like every single Hallmark Christmas movie. It's like, high powered businesswoman from the city has to return home, and it's soft countryman [who] teaches her that it's okay to like, not go to work sometimes. (Danielle, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

Danielle's discussion of this trope aligns with Sean Brayton's (2020) analysis of Hallmark's *Countdown to Christmas* films. Brayton argues many of these films follow an urban, career-obsessed woman who has no social life outside of her job. This protagonist usually is seen "travelling to a small town to oversee potential business deals and rediscover the Christmas spirit," finding heteronormative love within this idyllic, rural setting (Brayton, 2020, p. 59). Brayton notes an interesting juxtaposition interwoven throughout the plots of these films. Themes of women being overworked and overpaid as a result of late-stage capitalism call to the women's labor movement, while themes of choosing heteronormative romance and a "do what you love" mentality have the opposite effect (Brayton, 2020, p. 51). While some protagonists' "romantic love is reflected by and rewarded with professional success," rather than total

abandonment of her corporate responsibility, it still pushes the narrative that women cannot be happy and fulfilled without "having it all" (Brayton, 2020, p. 59). This juxtaposition also points to "urban professional discontent against rural domestic bliss" and continues the longstanding tradition of media aimed at working women catering to white, middle-class women (Brayton, 2020, p. 52).

In contrast to the working woman, the working-class woman was understood by my participants to "sleep with the boss," use her sexuality to get ahead, or rely on a man. Anne said the following about *Ginny and Georgia* (2021), a recent Netflix show that follows a single, working-class mom:

> I feel like in some representations where the women are sleeping with the boss, it's like a power move and it's very powerful and like, whatever. But I also then have, I guess, issue with it being like a power play— it sucks, then in the workplace it's inevitably almost considered to be like a power play like *Ginny and Georgia.* (Anne, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

This quote in particular raises the question about working-class women and power. Anne does not necessarily think this portrayal is helpful for working-class woman, but she does acknowledge that the character is using her sexuality as a power play. This ties into another distinction amongst my participants: feeling powerful versus having power.

Feeling Powerful vs. Having Power

Despite their critiques of media representations of working-class women, overall, participants believed that these characters were somewhat realistic in that they show how working-class women can be strong in their own right. Jessica and Hannah had the following exchange about power:

> Jessica: I definitely think they're portraying working-class women as like, strong characters, like people who can do it themselves. That's sort of what I get from them, I guess.
>
> Hannah: Yeah, I feel like they maybe are in positions of less power than each situation but showing them being confident and like taking back at least some power for themselves. They all handle the conflict in their own way. (Jessica & Hannah, personal communication, Sept. 14, 2021)

Similarly, in her interview, Emily said that despite the critiques she has of working-class women in television and films, these characters are "strong, independent, and reliable," which she feels is reflective of who she is. Participants with more work experience felt powerful in their workplaces, in that they felt more comfortable asserting boundaries. Additionally, outside of the workplace, many of these participants are single women or single moms, and therefore feel powerful in that they are completely independent. However, as Hannah and Jessica said, there exists a difference between feeling powerful and the power and autonomy that these women actually have. Returning to Emily, as a single mom and a sexual assault survivor, she feels that her experiences have made her stronger. Yet, Emily's experiences with lackluster HR solutions demonstrate that she does not have total autonomy, as she could not control the manner in which HR responded to her assaults. Furthermore, her need to provide for her child in whatever means necessary and her "every woman for herself" attitude as a result of negative experiences in the workplace points to this distinction between feeling powerful and having power. To be sure, this is not to say that Emily is not powerful in her own right; it simply demonstrates that the degree of autonomy that one has can mark their class position, as outlined in Chapter 2. Moreover, this relationship between feeling powerful and having power and autonomy relates to Andrea Press' (1991) findings in *Women Watching Television* regarding the myth of the working-class

matriarch. To Press, post-feminist television gave rise to the blue-collar sitcom in which the wife was the voice of reason, and the husband was the source of comedic relief (Press, 1991). This depiction is similar to Butsch's (2018) findings in Chapter 2, in which the wife represented post-feminist and middle-class ideals of beauty and behavior and the possibility of class mobility, while the husband was the "buffoon" (Butsch, 2018). In the case of *Roseanne*, Press argues that although she has "escaped" post-feminist standards of beauty by being "overweight, sloppy, unkempt, uncouth, not at all traditionally 'feminine'" she still follows certain markers of post-feminist television (Press, 1991, p. 42). For example, when Roseanne returns home from work, her husband and children help her with housework and care work, eliminating the "second shift" that many women must perform. The "second shift" refers to the phenomenon in which women "are more likely to return home at the end of their workday to do domestic and/or care work, (Sarrasanti, 2020). Press notes that television shows with the working-class matriarch often do not portray the "second shift," low wages, overtime, and other hardships that working-class women face (Press, 1991). In other words, these programs may show working-class women being powerful, but do not showcase the lack of power and autonomy working-class women may have in other aspects of their lives. Press demonstrated that these television programs are not entirely realistic; still, the question as to whether working-class women want a more realistic representation was a common theme throughout this study.

Realistic or Unrealistic?

Similar to the messy relationship that my participants had with working-class characters, there also existed a complicated relationship with how realistic they found television programs to be, and whether or not participants wanted to see more realism. As discussed, participants critiqued depictions of working-class characters for being "messy" and for framing working-

class positions as something that characters *have* to do, rather than something that they *want* to do. For example, Natalie described how some people use "working-class" jobs to survive; but for others, they enjoy this line of work:

> I don't look down on the people who are waitressing to survive. Or even the people who waitress because they enjoy it. (Natalie, personal communication, Oct. 15, 2021)

Similarly, Bailey argued that the ways in which television frames working-class jobs differs from her personal experiences and working-class people that she knows:

> And that's the thing is that like in real life, it [service work] can just be an option because that's what you want, right? But often times on TV shows, it's what you were forced into, where it's like, 'yeah, you don't have the education or you're poor or you're, you know, whatever.' It's like, the best you can get or it's…you're just getting by and you're a single mom. (Bailey, personal communication, Sept. 15, 2021)

Despite the critiques participants had of working-class characters, they also found certain aspects of it to be realistic. For example, Natalie felt that the range of personalities that we saw from Doralee, Max, and Roseanne was reflective of herself and women she had worked with:

> Researcher: And so, would you all say that these characters are accurate or representative of you or other women that you've worked with?
>
> Natalie: It's a mix, yeah, because there are women I've worked with that have been more on the meek and kind of just like toeing the line stance. But then there's been other women who've just been so loud, and you could hear them from a mile away and they didn't care who heard them and they were like, so confident about what they were doing. (Natalie, personal communication, Oct. 6, 2021)

Bailey too found some elements of these programs to be realistic, in that they align with their personal experiences of sexism. After watching the *Roseanne* clips, she said she once had a boss who was similar to Mr. Faber:

> That was like so triggering like…it was real. And independently of that, not even just being triggered…I got a guy fired from my last career who did that kind of shit, and it was actually impressive that it happened. But that was like, that was very triggering. And I was just like… I'm sure we've all experienced that [sexism] to some degree. Even if it's in your childhood or at work or whatever. But that was horrible. That's my view… I'm just saying that even though they stood up to him at the end, that was still horrible. And like, that is my takeaway from that. It's just like hard, having been there. (Bailey, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

Given this complicated relationship participants had with media depictions of working-class women, I aimed to understand whether participants had an ideal television show or movie about a working-class woman in mind, or if they wanted media to be more realistic. In some ways, participants wished media would more accurately portray working-class women. Anne said that the way in which Doralee and other characters are portrayed as "pushovers" is not accurate, which is "frustrating":

> I don't feel like that's an accurate representation of my day to day in any way, shape or form at all, like, which is frustrating. (Anne, personal communication, Sept. 10, 2021)

As discussed, other participants wished that Doralee and Max would be dressed more realistically, or working-class women characters would not have to rely on a romantic or sexual relationship with their boss to get ahead. Despite this desire for a more realistic representation, overall, my participants did not want shows to be too realistic. As Danielle noted:

> I think a lot of like, what makes the reason that we like watching TV shows and movies is because they're not real life. They are different than real life. Like, I would never in real life say what Max said in that clip, but I like watching her do it. And I like seeing it work out for her. So, I mean, I think there's obviously lots of improvements that can be made in their presentation, but I don't know that…I don't think I want it a truly accurate representation, right? (Danielle, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

Similarly, Olivia wanted to see shows that were more aspirational, rather than a reflection of her reality:

> I don't enjoy watching shows like we saw clips of. I don't like…I don't want to watch a working-class woman like, throwing out her waitress job because I'm like, 'oh, that's like too much real…real life'. I'm like, 'why would I watch that to relax at the end of the day?' Like, I would rather watch something with like, maybe like our higher up job with more power, which maybe that is just because that's more aspirational. (Olivia, personal communication, Oct. 6, 2021)

This desire for a more "aspirational" program lines up with Andrea Press' (1991) findings in *Women Watching Television*. Press (1991) found that working-class women found more middle-class programs to be more "realistic," and were hyper-critical of working-class programs. While this can in part be attributed to middle-class hegemony, it is also reflective of working-class women's desires to achieve class mobility. Here, Olivia has a similar attitude; she wants to watch programs that depict what she could be, rather than who she currently is.

Given her past experiences of sexual assault and harassment in the workplace, Emily did not want a show to be too realistic, as it could be potentially triggering:

> Researcher: And so, would you ideally want to see a program in which they do depict like that struggle in a more realistic light?

> Emily: Yes and no. And I say that because it's an iffy subject because I, you know, there are certain aspects where you know, someone says, 'yes, I do want to see more of that.' But at the same time, no, I don't, because you know what? What if they show something that does trigger? What if it shows someone's struggle so bad that it triggers you? (Emily, personal communication, Sept. 23, 2021)

Messy, but strong; independent, but sleeping with the boss; the desire for realism, but not too much realism; participants' relationship with working-class characters and programming was messy, dynamic, and complex. I argue that this messiness is reflective of the complexity of today's American working class. As outlined in Chapter 2, the neoliberal shift has changed the way that class is defined. It can no longer be a sum of one's profession or education level— rather, it is a combination of socioeconomic status and income; cultural tastes and aesthetics; and access to affordable education, with these components being interdependent.

Overall, participants looked to media to be entertained and to relax— yet, there were certain aspects of these programs that participants could see as potentially influential in their own lives. In the following section, I outline how participants made sense of media representations of working-class women, and how they related to their own workplace experiences and their sense of self.

Chapter 6: "I Want to Veer as Far Away from That as Possible": How Media Representations Impact Working-Class Women's Strategies and Sense of Self

As outlined in Chapters 4 and 5, the ways in which working-class women experience sexism in their workplace is dynamic and dependent on their level of work experience; furthermore, the messy relationship they have with media representations of working-class women is reflective of the complexity of today's American class. My third research question addresses how media representations of working-class women impacted working-class women's sense of self and the strategies that they use to combat sexism in the workplace. While all participants held a critical view of media, there existed a lack of class consciousness and an alienation from labor and from the self among participants with less work experience. First, I demonstrate how participants with more work experience and participants with less work experience differed in which strategies portrayed on television that they found empowering or would use in their own workplace environments. Second, I discuss the lack of class consciousness among working-class women with less experience, and how the characters that they identify with reveal this alienation from their labor and from the self.

"I Would Never Do That": Applying Media Representations to Real Life

Regardless of their level of work experience, all participants looked to media with a critical lens. As outlined in the previous section, participants understood movies and television sitcoms to be exaggerated and fictitious and would therefore would never "copy and paste" what they see on television and apply it to their own workplace environments. Still, there existed another divide between respondents with more work experience and respondents with less work experience. Women with more work experience were more critical of media scenes in which the

character was being defiant with their supervisors, whereas women with less experience did not find these scenes reflective of who they are, but who they wish to be.

Participants with More Work Experience

As outlined in Chapter 3, the first two clips shown to participants were from Season 1, Episode 23 of *Roseanne.* In the first clip, Roseanne responds to her supervisor's sexism with humor and sarcasm; in the second, she caustically confronts him before quitting along with some of her coworkers. Following these two clips, participants with more work experience described feeling "uncomfortable" with the way that Roseanne behaved. Bailey said the following:

> They are also wildly disrespectful like, that just made me uncomfortable… I don't really think that they're being powerful or funny either, because like, I would never do that in a professional workplace. That was crazy to me. (Bailey, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

Emily expressed similar feelings, saying:

> To think that it's OK to talk to your supervisor like that mortally disrespectful. Kind of just like what you said, I would never, ever, ever talk to my supervisor like that. (Emily, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

When asked if they would ever use Roseanne's strategies in their own workplace environments, participants were careful to draw the distinction between setting boundaries and being disrespectful. Danielle and Emily had the following exchange:

> Danielle: I mean, there's definitely…like I think I've seen using humor to address things can be helpful because it takes a lot of tension out of the situation, especially if you think the person that's so receptive to like pure criticism. But you have to do it in a way that still gets the point across and doesn't end up like just undermining what you're trying to say in the first place.

> Emily: I think I think there's a line between what's appropriate to say in the workplace versus crossing the line and harassing, you know, like there's a fine line. (Danielle & Emily, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

This calls back to Carly's concerns about "burning bridges"— while participants with more experience on the whole feel more comfortable setting boundaries in the workplace, they would never escalate to Roseanne's level. This balance between being assertive yet not aggressive was evident in their attitudes about Doralee from *9 to 5*. After watching the clip, participants felt that Doralee still had control over the situation, but that she could have been more assertive. For example, Danielle said the following:

> I would deflect more strongly, like when he knocked the pens over. If he insists on coming over and picking them up, then I'll step back... she seemed like she had a decent handling the situation, but it was more like, I just kind of wanted her to do more. With Roseanne, I was like, 'Stop. Do less than what you're doing right now. But with her [Doralee], I was like, 'Do a little bit more than what you're doing.' (Danielle, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

The final clip that participants watched was from Season 1, Episode 5 of *2 Broke Girls,* in which Max uses a blend of humor and assertiveness to handle a group of customers who was heckling her. One customer in particular was making sexual jokes and advances to Max; and in response, she also made sexual jokes before asking the customer to leave. While Max was not as assertive as Roseanne, respondents with more work experience still did not find her strategies to be relatable. Emily described how Max was "abrasive," as a single mom with her career on the line, she would not act as abrasive as Max:

> I have no room for error, you know, because I am a single mom and have been raising my kid on my own since day one with little to no support from her biological father. So, you

know, I am in a sense abrasive, but I'm abrasive to the point that it's professional. (Emily, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

Bailey and Emily in particular felt uncomfortable with how sexual Max was with the customer, and how she escalated the conversation:

> Bailey: She deeply sexualized that situation and they [the customers] were like already doing that. But she did that too. And that is something that like, when I have that happening, I want to veer as far away from that as possible. And it's like, OK, they're doing this. I'm not saying she's in the wrong or whatever. You [Max] talked about his genitals, which then puts him…
>
> Emily: ….in that awkward position.
>
> Bailey: Well, not even about that. No, I don't give a shit if he's in an awkward position, but you [Max] are giving him [customer] the power, now you're talking about his penis. Yeah, it's like, even if you're making a joke about yourself…
>
> Emily: She went up like this, and he went up like this [motions with hands], and it only makes him want to go up higher.
>
> Bailey: Yeah, you want to not be sexualized, but you're [Max] talking about sex like that. And I'm not…it's not a blaming thing, I mean, it's the TV show. But…. if a man is harassing me, I don't want to talk or think about his penis. (Bailey & Emily, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

While participants recognized that this scene was intended to be entertaining— with some participants visibly enjoying the clip— they once again felt uncomfortable with how Max handled the situation and would not apply her strategies to their own workplaces.

Overall, women with more work experience did not fully embrace any of the strategies portrayed in the focus group and reported that they would not necessarily look to media to

influence the strategies they use to combat sexism. However, some were not entirely opposed to looking to media for inspiration. For example, Anne said the following:

> But like I will say, like if I see someone in like film or TV shows that like do a good job of deflecting or have a great way of dealing with those situations like I do pay attention and try to like adapt that to my own situations, I do find that to be very helpful. Like, you know, I am from Southwest Virginia. When I go home, like sometimes a little bit more…I lean into my accent. My Southern accent lets in, even though I worked really hard not to have on for most of my life. Like, they're just like things that like pop out and, you know…when we saw like Doralee's, like, Southern charm…I definitely have done that before, where I've played that up quite a bit and like being charming and sweet, it was easier to be dismissive of them. (Anne, personal communication, Sept. 10, 2021)

Anne may take certain elements of a television program or film and apply it to her own workplace environment. Yet, she is not entirely "copying and pasting"— the Southern accent and dismissive nature that she admired about Doralee also ties into her own personal experiences growing up in Southwest Virginia. In other words, though she looked to media for inspiration, she decoded the media text based on her personal experiences (Hall, 1980).

Participants with More Less Work Experience

In contrast, women with less work experience felt that their workplace strategies were more in line with Doralee. For example, Leah said she would use the same strategy that Doralee uses in *9 to 5*:

> I am definitely more like Doralee and the fact that, like, I tend to keep my cool and be quieter in a situation. (Leah, personal communication, Sept. 20, 2021)

Participants with less work experience found Doralee to be more dismissive and passive, while still maintaining her power. Jessica said the following:

> I didn't personally see it as, like, demeaning. I still thought of it…I was still rooting for her and like, I was still…You know, she seems to know how to handle the situation. And I didn't necessarily feel like she felt trapped or she felt helpless, like she still knew what to do and could still get through the situation. (Jessica, personal communication, Sept. 14, 2021)

Because respondents with less work experience felt that they were more dismissive like Doralee, they found Roseanne's scenes to be empowering and inspirational, rather than uncomfortable. For example, Grace and Hannah saw Roseanne as a "role model":

> Grace: I could see her like, as a role model and in that kind of way. Like, I would want to be maybe a more outspoken like she is.
>
> Hannah: Yeah, I agree. Kind of like what we've been saying, I probably wouldn't be…I don't see myself a lot in her, but like I would aspire to be more like that and be more confident in the stuff that I was saying. (Grace & Hannah, personal communication, Sept. 14, 2021)

Leah echoed this statement, saying that while she would never use the same strategies as Roseanne, she could see someone else using them:

> This is not the type of person that I am, but I do believe that if it's been going like conditions have been bad for long enough that someone actually taking charge and leading that sort of movement is very possible. (Leah, personal communication, Sept. 14, 2021)

The notion that "someone out there" uses the same assertiveness and humor as Roseanne points to David Foster Wallace's (1993) discussion of television and hegemony. While there were exceptions to this trend, many of the younger women did not necessarily know someone who was like Roseanne but assumed *someone* used strategies like her. Therefore, television has created a sense of what is "normal." As Wallace writes: "if we want to know what American

normality is— what Americans want to regard as normal— we can trust television" (Wallace, 1993, p. 152). Despite these women knowing that television and films are dramatized versions of reality, they still see Roseanne's actions as something that could be normal for someone, somewhere.

After watching the clip from *2 Broke Girls,* women with less experience did not find Max's strategies to be as strange as participants with more work experience. Again, participants themselves generally agreed that they would not necessarily use the strategies Max used in this clip; still, they argued that it is more acceptable for a waitress to act in this manner as opposed to Roseanne as a factory worker and Doralee as a secretary. For example, Grace argued that waitresses often engage with and joke around with their customers:

> Working at a restaurant on [location] and you serve a table of frat boys, you have to match the energy if you're if you're going to take control of the situation. And that's definitely more excused in a casual restaurant like that. At a fine dining restaurant, I am there to make the customer happy and like, that is my end goal, and so I'm going to be more passive. But in my previous job, they're going to eat [food] regardless of whether I'm nice or not. And so, I'm going to take charge and they're going to tip me shitty regardless because they're a bunch of 18-year-old boys. And so, it's like…I definitely have acted like that to take charge of the situation before in my previous job. (Grace, personal communication, Sept. 14, 2021)

As a waitress herself, Grace did agree that sometimes you need to "match the energy" of your table; but, similar to the respondents with more work experience, she did notice that Max "weaponized her sexuality" in a way that she would not necessarily do herself:

> She's also kind of weaponizing her sexuality, and this seems like she's more like flirty aggressive than Roseanne. Like Roseanne is straight up like taking on more of a

> masculine aggression, whereas the woman [Max] in the scene is like, 'show me your hands.' It's still aggressive, but it's much more like a feminine way, like weaponizing the fact that you have something he wants. (Grace, personal communication, Sept. 14, 2021)

When asked whether or not these women would ever draw inspiration from something they saw in the media, answers varied. Olivia said that because she knows media is a "exaggerated," she would not apply anything she saw to her personal life:

> Researcher: Do you think that anything you ever saw, like in TV would impact the decisions that you make in the workplace as a result?
>
> Olivia: Um, I don't think so, just because I, for the most part, take examples in television to be exaggerated examples. And so, I think I watch them with a little bit of like suspension of disbelief, like, 'Oh, I don't know if that would really work in real life.' Like in Roseanne with her quitting and saying, 'who's with me?' and everyone else punching out. I don't know if I would like, be the starter of a rebellion trying to get everyone else to quit. So, I don't think they would. I've never…I've never really seen anything on TV in terms of like work life and think, 'Oh, I should do that for my job.' (Olivia, personal communication, Oct. 13, 2021)

In contrast, Madison said that the strategies that she uses in the workplace are "a little bit" from both media and her personal experiences:

> Researcher: Would you ever take something like that [strategy] and apply it to your own life? Or would base your like your experience based off of your own experiences rather than like what you see on TV? Or is it a bit of both?
>
> Madison: Um, yeah, I think a bit of both, because I think sometimes when I'm watching TV, I think some people like really buy into like TV situations that would like never happen… but you know, like if I see more of the opposite of that [unrealistic depiction],

than like, it might shift my like [strategies]. (Madison, personal communication, Oct. 15, 2021)

Women with more work experience and women with less work experience differed in their opinions of media representations of workplace strategies, and if or how they would apply these strategies to their own workplace environments. There also existed a distinction in which fictional characters my participants identified with and *how* they identified with these characters. This distinction points to an alienation from labor and from the self among my participants with less work experience.

Alienated

Participants with more work experience said that they identified with media characters based on their personality traits and their profession, whereas women with less work experience said that they identified with characters based on their personality. The ways in which working-class women with more experience identify with media characters is reflected in the characters that they cited, as this group identified with a mix of both working-class and middle-class characters. Although women with less work experience said that they identified with characters based on their personality and not their profession, each character that this group cited was aspirational or middle class, which points to their alienation from their labor and from the self. According to Marx, what separates humans from other species is our species being, or our ability to be self-reflexive, to create, and to produce (Storey, 2014). Alienation occurs "when we are prevented from realizing our full human capacities": when we work in order to live; when we do not reap the benefits of our labor; and when we become divorced from what makes us human (Storey, 2014, p. 16). As Marx (1932/1959) writes: "the alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him" (Marx, 1932/1959). In other words, we become alienated from ourselves, we become

estranged from our work, as it is no longer about realizing our full potential, but measuring our worth based on what we can produce (Marx 1932/1959; Storey, 2014). Here, the ways in which participants with less work experience identify with middle-class or aspirational characters points to their alienation and lack of class consciousness. Class consciousness is the "class-conditioned *unconsciousness* of one's own socio-historical and economic condition" (Lukács, 1920/1967). While participants with more work experience had a stronger sense of class consciousness, participants with less work experience did not, which is reflected in the characters that they identified with, and *how* they identified with them.

Within the context of our focus group, some participants with more work experience did not identify with Doralee, Max, and Roseanne, while others felt as though they were like "spectrum" between the three. For example, Anne said that she could see certain aspects of herself in these characters, but did not identify with one single character:

> Anne: Yeah, if I had to identify, I would say on the spectrum, that's probably where I would fall.
>
> Carly: I'm maybe a little smart ass, like Roseanne. But not disrespectful. Definitely not as charming as Doralee. And I'm definitely not Max. I'm not that quick. (Anne & Carly, personal communication, Sept. 9, 2021)

Outside of the focus group, participants with more work experience identified with both working-class and middle-class characters based on characters' personality traits and professions. Danielle did not provide a concrete example during her interview, but did say that she utilized this blend of personality and profession when looking to characters she identified with:

> Researcher: Do you identify with characters based more on their character traits and their personality or more so like, their situation, like their job or…

> Danielle: Yeah, I think a little bit of both. Obviously, if I see someone that has like some similar characteristics to me, I'm not going to be like, 'Oh, well, that's not me because I don't have this job or I don't do this thing, so that's not me,' like whatever. I feel like I can relate to those characters. But on the other hand, like if someone's in, I guess…I probably relate to those characters [personality] more than I do a character who's like in a similar position to me that I don't share characteristics with. Yeah, but I guess I relate to the characters that share personality traits. But when there's a character who is in a similar situation to me, I can still like empathize with their situation. (Danielle, personal communication, Sept. 15, 2021)

Anne cited both a working-class example with Georgia from *Ginny and Georgia* (2021), and a more middle-class example with J.J. from *Criminal Minds* (2005-2020). Similarly, Carly used a working-class character, Eddie from *Blue Bloods* (2010-present), and, like Anne, J.J. from *Criminal Minds* (2005-2020), to discuss characters that she feels balance their careers and personal lives well:

> *Blue Bloods*, whatever her name is, Jamie's wife [Eddie]. She's a cop that's blue collar… a blue collar professional, but she's definitely independent…. there's *Criminal Minds*. That's a great one with her, the blonde lady— J.J. Yeah, she she's got a couple of kids and her husband's a police officer, right? They definitely juggle everything. (Carly, personal communication, Sept. 13, 2021)

During the focus group, women with less work experience identified most with Doralee. This calls back to the strategies they reported using in the workplace, including being dismissive and "laughing it off." Outside of the focus group, participants with less work experience said that they identified with characters based on their personality traits; but, each of the characters that this group identified with were aspirational or middle-class. Olivia, for example, identified with Leslie Knope from *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015):

> I think I would go back to Leslie Knope, just because she's such a good go-getter and she's very much prepared, and I feel like that's a bit of a character that I would consider, my personality relates to her. But I understand that like drive she has, and I appreciate it. And I would say that's how I want to attack my work. (Olivia, personal communication, Oct. 13, 2021)

Jessica identified with Dr. Temperance "Bones" Brennan from *Bones* (2005-2017), who is a forensic scientist. In Jessica's focus group, the consensus among participants was that they identified with characters based on personality traits. But, in her interview, Jessica cited both personality traits and profession in her justification:

> Bones, because, like, my mom would watch that show, and she [Bones] was like a strong example of like a scientist woman. And I always kind of knew I wanted to be into science. Yeah, I like I think I like sort of looked up to her…she's very strong, like she likes and strong-willed, I guess. She has very like solid ideas of like what she wants to do and where she like, wants to go with her career. (Jessica, personal communication, Sept. 17, 2021)

Because participants with less work experience identified more strongly with middle-class characters—which contrasts their work experience—I argue that working-class women with less work experience are alienated from their labor and from the self. These participants are not only alienated from their labor, in that they do not see the benefits of their labor and are exploited in their working-class professions, but also from themselves— they experience a certain level of false consciousness, identifying with characters that are not within their class position, despite not consciously choosing characters based on profession. A lack of class consciousness, or the "*unconsciousness* of one's own socio-historical and economic condition," can then lead to false consciousness (Lukács, 1920/1967). As Denise Meyerson (1991) writes:

"the absence of class consciousness in the working class is another form of false consciousness" (Meyerson, 1991, p. 5). To Marxists, false consciousness occurs when "workers have a poor perception of their interests" and when "they have absorbed commercial values and chase after consumer goods" (Meyerson, 1991, p. 7). Here, working-class women's unconscious identification with middle-class characters and desire for class mobility is reflective of this alienation and false consciousness. Without always being consciously aware of it, they have separated themselves from their working-class status and experiences, instead gravitating toward more middle-class aesthetics and characters in media. It is crucial to note this distinction between conscious and unconscious identification. All respondents joined this study because they were consciously aware that they were working class or had worked in working-class professions—yet, women with less work experience unconsciously identified with middle-class characters, while claiming to identify with characters based on personality traits alone. This unconscious element highlights their lack of complete class consciousness and identification with their working-class experiences, and instead reflects false consciousness. These participants were able to perceive gender oppression in the workplace; yet, their false consciousness blinds them from economic oppression fostered by the capitalist class system (Lukács, 1920/1967).

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Future Research

> Emily: Most TV shows and/or movies, they don't really, fully depict the struggle— like the struggle is real.

Between the sexism and discrimination Emily has faced in the workplace, the lack of support from her management and colleagues, and raising a young child as a single mother, for Emily, the struggle is real. While Emily does not feel like there is a television show or movie that encapsulates this struggle, she does not necessarily want one. The ways in which working-class characters are structured could improve, but fully depicting "the struggle" and the lived realities of working-class women could be depressing and triggering. Despite this complicated relationship that Emily has with working-class media, she knows who she is— a strong, working-class woman who everyday overcomes hardships to build a better life for her and her child.

Discussion

In Chapter 4, 5, and 6, I outlined how working-class women's experiences of sexism are dynamic and dependent on their workplace and their level of experience; that the complicated relationship that they have with working-class media is reflective of the complicated nature of today's working-class; and through an analysis of how media representations impact women's everyday workplace experiences and the characters they identify with, that working-class women with less work experience are alienated from their labor and from the self. While no media representation of working-class women will ever fulfill the experiences and lived realities of working-class women, working-class women with less experience tend not to identify with working-class media due to their personal experiences; the prevalence of middle-class hegemony; the history of social abjection of working-class characters; and these participants' desires to achieve class mobility (Press 1991; Skeggs, 2004). To be sure, it is not the media's

duty to cultivate a sense of class consciousness— however, its history of working-class misrepresentation in conjunction with participants' lived experiences and attitudes influence this alienation. Returning to Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/decoding, media industries have long encoded negative connotations onto working-class characters, while middle-class characters are coded as the cultural "norm" (Hall 1980, Skeggs, 2004, McAllister and Galarza, 2019). As detailed in Chapter 2, this encoding has been prevalent in many arenas of media, from advertisements (McAllister and Galarza, 2019), to reality television (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008), to fictional sitcoms (Butsch, 2018). Working-class women in this study with less experience decode media texts based on these overarching ideologies and attitudes about class, in conjunction with their personal experiences. Because these respondents have less work experience and have a desire for class mobility, they decode media in a way that favors middle-class aesthetics and characters. This in turn influences their identity— one that is not strongly tied with their working-class status. Women with more experience in this study looked to younger women with optimism and hope, claiming that they would be the ones to enact change in the workplace. Yet, young women's lack of identification with the working class raises questions about how crucial class consciousness is to enacting change in the workplace. As outlined by Jeremy Sawyer and Anup Gampa (2020), class consciousness can help to influence activism, and these compounding factors may have the power to "counteract alienation" (Sawyer and Gampa, 2020, p. 198). In other words, while class consciousness alone is not enough to enact change in the workplace, it serves as a prerequisite for activism (Sawyer and Gampa, 2020).

Both Paul Gilroy (1996) and Angela McRobbie (1985) remind us that identity is not fixed and evolves over time through experience. Therefore, as these women continue in their working-

class professions and experience the hardships and sexism that go along with these experiences, their identities may shift toward a stronger class consciousness, in the way that working-class women with more experience in this study reported changing over time. As their identities shift, then too may their relationship with media representations of working-class women— scenes that they previously found "realistic" may become unrealistic as they are faced with the harsh realities of workplace discrimination as a working-class woman. Again, it is not the media's job to enact class consciousness— however, portraying characters that are more realistic and representative of real, working-class women without showcasing the harsh realities of their everyday lives may also inform these participants' identities.

Limitations & Future Research

As discussed in Chapter 3, this study had several limitations that could be improved upon in future research. First, participants were mostly straight, white, and cisgender women. While intersections of race, class, and gender did come up occasionally throughout the study, such as Emily's comments on racialized media stereotypes or Natalie's comments about anti-Asian racism at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, race was not a key category in my findings. Thus, future research that has a more racially diverse participant pool could shed light on how the intersection of race impacts working-class women's experiences of sexism and their attitudes about media portrayals. Second, the participant pool was fairly small and limited due to convenience sampling. A larger sample of respondents— possibly from geographical areas outside of Charlottesville—may yield new insights. Third, and most crucially, some of the participants in the "women with less work experience" group are currently full-time students at the University of Virginia. While these women do have experiences in working-class jobs, they could also rely on their families' financial support if necessary— thus, they have a higher degree

of autonomy than participants with more work experience, who are entirely financially independent. Finally, while the youngest participant was 21 and the oldest was 48, most participants were in their 20s. The inclusion of older participants in their late 30s and 40s in future studies could reveal generational patterns on how women experience sexism, react to sexism, and understand media representations of working-class women.

In this study, I selected the clips from *Roseanne*, *9 to 5*, and *2 Broke Girls* because they each portrayed a working-class woman in a different profession, and most importantly, portrayed a different strategy that the main character used in response to sexism. While it could have been beneficial to show clips from more contemporary programs, most of the programs and films that I watched throughout my research only portrayed the main character being assertive or quitting their job in response to sexism, whereas I wanted to showcase a variety of strategies. Furthermore, the age of these clips did not diminish respondents' engagement with the material, as many participants resonated with the sexism and gender-based discrimination portrayed in these scenes. Nevertheless, a future research study could focus less on particular strategies portrayed in television and films, and more on the contemporary shows and films that participants watch on a regular basis in order to gauge their relationship with these media texts and their everyday lives. Rather than ask open-ended questions such as who or what the working-class character looks like to them or who they identify with and why, asking participants about the specific shows that they reported watching in the survey portion of this study could yield more details on this relationship between media, everyday life, and identity.

Final Thoughts

My findings demonstrate that these women are each different in their own ways, yet united in that they each have experienced gender-based discrimination in the workplace, and they

each maintain a complicated relationship with media representations of working-class women. Despite the hardships that they have faced, participants developed strategies in response to this sexism in order to carry on— to obtain the college degree, to take care of their families, or just to make it through another day. These women's experiences are rich and worthy of study in feminist research.

This study also raises questions about the future of class consciousness, workplace sexism, and media representations of working-class women. If women with less work experience continue to work in working-class professions and face gender-based discrimination, their identities may shift over time, and they may favor more working-class characters on television and hold different attitudes about the strategies that are depicted. But if their experiences are not enough to shift their class consciousness, could we be facing another societal shift away from the working class as a political category, similar to the impact that neoliberalism had on class structure in the 1980s (Press and Deery, 2018)? It may be too soon to tell. For now, we can listen to and support women like Emily, and advocate for television and film characters to be more representative of her— a strong, working-class woman.

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