

Fall 2017

# Out of the darkness and into the limelight: How *Nurse Jackie* better the nursing image

Shayla M. Holloway  
*James Madison University*

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Out of the Darkness and Into the Limelight: How *Nurse Jackie* Better the Nursing Image

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An Honors College Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Health and Behavioral Sciences  
James Madison University

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by Shayla M. Holloway

Fall 2017

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Accepted by the faculty of the School of Nursing, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

HONORS COLLEGE APPROVAL:

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Project Advisor: Erika M. Sawin, Ph.D., R.N.  
Associate Professor, School of Nursing

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Bradley R. Newcomer, Ph.D.,  
Dean, Honors College

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Reader: Betsy Herron, Ph.D., R.N., C.N.E.,  
Assistant Professor, School of Nursing

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Reader: Julie Strunk, Ph.D., R.N.  
Associate Professor, School of Nursing

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at James Madison University School of nursing on  
December 14, 2017.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Erika Sawin for encouraging me to continue to pursue the honors track while in the nursing program. She has been a tremendous help throughout this entire project and gave me the inspiration behind the topic of this paper. I would also like to thank my two readers Dr. Julie Strunk and Dr. Betsy Herron for working with me so diligently and providing excellent feedback and revisions on my drafts. All three of these women made it possible for me to have the finished piece here before you. I would also like to extend my gratitude to James Madison University's (JMU) Honors College for giving me the opportunity to be apart of such a prestigious program. This program has continuously pushed me and challenged me, and because of it I am a better student. I am a grateful for the memories the Honors College has given me throughout my time at JMU. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents for continuously supporting me throughout this process and for being there in times of need.

## **Abstract**

Due to the media's portrayal of nurses, the nursing image has been misconstrued over the past few years. Although nurses tend to be overlooked in the media, there are television series out there that help promote the profession. This essay considers how the television series *Nurse Jackie* is positively changing society's view of the modern day nurse. By analyzing some of the main protagonists in season one of this controversial late night drama, one can see how *Nurse Jackie* dispels popular nursing stereotypes and enhances the nursing image. Although viewers may not grasp this show's impact on nursing, this show is important because it empowers nurses to change how they are portrayed by society.

## **Media's Role on the Nursing Image: An Introduction**

Consider these four attributes: kind, compassionate, helpful, and empathetic. When pondering these four characteristics, what is the first profession that comes to mind? Is it a nurse? When describing the many qualities of a nurse, these are typical traits that come about when one is asked to describe the quintessential caregiver. Nursing is considered one of the most ethical and trusting professions there is. One may believe that society holds nurses to an extremely high standard; however, this is not true. The media has a large influence on how individuals shape their thoughts and opinions (Truth about Nursing, 2009). Television, specifically, is a predominant outlet for how society receives information, especially information in regard to healthcare (Turow, 2012). Healthcare organizations understand the strong role that media has in society and use fictional shows as an outlet to illustrate

the triumphs and tribulations that modern day healthcare faces (Truth about Nursing, 2009). There has been much success with fictional hospital dramas however, despite the popularity and success of these productions, they often misrepresent the roles of health care professionals. Nurses, for example, are frequently undervalued in the media and television series. Shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *House* emphasize the role of the physician, while downplaying or undermining the value of the nurse. The media's portrayal of nursing is predominately based on misconceptions and stereotypes that denounce the nursing profession (Hoeve 2013). According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a stereotype can be defined as something held in common by members of a group that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Although individuals generally apply this concept to people of different ethnicities and backgrounds, it is easy to stereotype other aspects of life as well, such as one's profession or livelihood. Fictional hospital dramas commonly portray nurses as female nurturers, angels, battle-axes, sexy, and handmaidens. These unrealistic portrayals of nursing do not reflect the true role of a nurse and falsify patient expectations.

Unlike what is shown in the media, nurses save lives every day. Nurses face some of the most exciting challenges in healthcare, but these moments are constantly overlooked (Summers & Summers, 2010, pg. 5). Nurses use their advanced skills and extensive knowledge to work autonomously and make numerous decisions regarding patient care plans and treatment interventions. Not only do nurses provide quality care, they serve as advocates, educators, and case

managers for their patients, which are roles that are not typically shown in the media. As advocates the nurse speaks up and protects their patient when they feel the patient's safety may be at risk (Shannon, 2016). As educators nurses teach patients how to manage their illness, explain necessary procedures, and provide medication reconciliation. As case managers nurses facilitate optimal health, functioning, and wellness when caring for individuals, families, and communities (The University of Texas at Austin, n.d). It is clear that nurses do more than what society perceives, and the nursing profession can be both exciting and rewarding. Sadly, this is not what is portrayed in the media. Media portrayals of the nursing profession can range from harmless to offensive and destructive to the nursing image (Vaughan, 2009). The negative stigmas that are placed on nurses by society are evident in a study conducted by Terry Ferns and Irena Chojnacka (2005). This study evaluated how nursing is portrayed in the media in comparison to other occupations. This was done by researching common phrases used by the media to describe various professions (Ferns & Chojnacka, 2005). When the phrase "naughty" was typed into their search engine, 252 results related to the nursing profession came up. This was more than twelve times the amount of data that came up for other professions such as doctors or pharmacists. Other phrases that were found to be associated with nursing were kinky and sexy as opposed to positive traits such as hardworking and dedicated. It is clear that these stereotypes denounce the nursing profession and pose a threat to modern day nurses, but why should we care?

For over twenty years there has been a sharp decline in the number of practicing nurses. This nursing shortage has been the longest in modern day history

and has had devastating effects on patient outcomes (Summers & Summers, 2010, pg. 13). According to the American Nurses Association (ANA), it is estimated that over one million new nurses will be needed by 2022 in order to care for the aging population (American Nurses Association, n.d). Although it is hard to pinpoint one reason as to what caused this shortage, one can agree that negative nursing stigmas and a damaged nursing image may be contributing factors. Redefining the nursing image is crucial in order to try and combat this nursing shortage. Image and the perception of the profession impacts recruitment of students, public perception of nursing, funding for nursing education and research, relationships with healthcare administrators, and the identity of current nurses in the field (Finkelman, 2013). Being a profession that is undervalued in the healthcare field, there are simply not enough resources devoted to nursing research and education (Summers and Summers, 2010, pg. 14). As a result, this makes the profession unappealing to new graduates and young adults. Many do not consider this field because they simply do not understand the roles of the nurse and how their work matters, causing them to seek careers in other areas (Summers & Summers, 2010, pg. 14). Therefore, current nurses must begin to acknowledge the fact that the image of nursing must be changed in order to try to combat the nursing shortage and change societal perceptions of the profession. It needs to be known that nurses devise care plans, catch medical errors, and treat patients not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. As an industry, nurses must work collaboratively in order to change how society views the nursing image. One way to do this is to debunk common nursing stereotypes and teach children and adolescents at a young age the

importance of the nursing profession. Doing so will allow children to become more engaged and develop a true interest in nursing (Kelsey 1990). If society is aware what being a nurse actually entails, hopefully this can recruit more young nurses.

Another issue that is affecting the nursing image is diversity. The nursing profession is predominately female, and there is also no question that this needs to change in order to improve the nursing image (Finkleman 2013). Diversity in healthcare is important and modern day nursing has struggled with integrating male nurses into the profession (Summers & Summers, 2010). The belief that women are naturally more compassionate and nurturing than men has shut men out of the nursing profession (Minority Nurse, 2013). Although men served as nurses prior to the work of Florence Nightingale, men still often face many challenges entering the field. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, men were excluded from the American Nurses Association (ANA) and were declined from nursing schools because of their masculinity (Minority Nurse, 2013). Keeping the profession exclusive to females is unjust, but progress is slowly being made to include men in nursing. Even though men are entering the field, many men are ridiculed for choosing a “feminine” occupation. Choosing a profession that is considered emasculate to society, male nurses often have their sexual identity questioned by others and are labeled as homosexual (Harding, 2007). The stigmas placed on men in nursing make it hard to not only improve the nursing image, but to improve the current nursing shortage as well. In order to make a more positive image for all nurses, nursing must be an inclusive profession that is attractive to both men and

women. Until the nursing image is redefined, societal perceptions and the nursing shortage cannot be resolved.

### **The Importance of *Nurse Jackie***

Played by actress Edie Falco, *Nurse Jackie* is a medical drama that follows an emergency room nurse at All Saint's Hospital in New York City. Described as a drug-addicted nurse who struggles to find a balance between the demands of her job and her own personal drama (imdb.com, n.d.), this show has been able to give viewers an insight to the realities of the nursing profession. Nominated for multiple Golden Globe, Screen Actors Guild, and Emmy Awards, this television series clearly has had much success. The *New Yorker* reported that main character Jackie Peyton is a strong, complex, funny, and flawed character that feels more true to life than the one-dimensional nurses commonly shown on television (Franklin, 2009). Despite the fact that this show had an overall positive response, there are still critics who believe this show is a negative portrayal of the nursing image. Throughout the first season, it is clear that Jackie is a great nurse with excellent judgment skills. However, even in her most compassionate moments, Jackie is always secretly plotting how she is going to get her next drug fix (Nussbaum, 2009). Many critics may argue that *Nurse Jackie* is not a positive illustration of the nursing image due to her drug addiction and dishonesty. One nurse reported that she was shocked and found certain things Jackie did in season one such as forging a donor card, stealing money, and throwing people's body parts away, to be extremely insulting to nurses (Kinson, 2009). Edie Falco addressed the critics by stating that the show's purpose is

not to generalize all nurses, and it is simply following the life of one nurse in particular (Kinon, 2009). When the show premiered, many nurses were worried that it would continue to tarnish the already broken image of the nurse. Although some traditional nurses may not agree with Jackie's actions and decisions, in its six years on air, this dark comedy was considered one of the strongest fictional TV portrayals of the experiences of a modern nurse that one has ever seen (Truth about Nursing, 2009). The character, Jackie Peyton, strays away from the nurse being portrayed as a hyper-sexualized female to someone who is skilled and knowledgeable. One can argue that creators of the show, Linda Wallem, Evan Dunsky, and Liz Brixius, strived to incorporate educational messages into the shows plot in order to raise awareness, increase knowledge, create favorable attitudes, and motivate people to take action to changing the nursing image (Singhal & Rogers, 2011). Nurses have a much bigger impact on healthcare than what is traditionally seen in the media. Edie Falco's character goes against what is stereotypically shown in medical dramas and proves that nurses do much more than people think. *Nurse Jackie* is a paramount symbol to the challenges every day nurses face and pivotal to the advancement of a positive portrayal of the nursing image in modern day media. The following paragraphs will analyze existing nursing stereotypes and discuss how season one of *Nurse Jackie* breaks these traditional stigmas.

### **Nurse Jackie: Not the Stereotypical Unskilled Handmaiden**

Almost every TV drama that depicts the healthcare setting typecasts the nurse as a handmaiden and being subservient to the doctor. As a handmaiden,

nurses are viewed as assistants and subordinate amongst physicians. This stereotype can be traced back to the early beginnings of nursing when nurses had little to no formal training. Due to the lack of training, nursing was an occupation that was virtue based as opposed to knowledge-based work (Gordon & Nelson, 2005). When the movement for nursing reform began in the 1860s, women began to transform nursing from an unskilled occupation into a secular profession; a movement that many physicians found to be threatening to their line of work (Gordon & Nelson, 2005). Although nursing requires extensive training, the value of their work is still looked down upon. Media portrayals often show nurses following doctor's commands, furthering the societal belief that nurses are no more than servants that depend on a physician (Gordon & Nelson, 2005). In reality, nursing is an autonomous profession that has its own set of skills, responsibilities, and liabilities (Summers & Summers, 2010). This handmaiden myth is detrimental to the future of nursing and media outlets and television series only reinforce this image in their medical dramas.

*Nurse Jackie* breaks this barrier by depicting Jackie standing up to physicians and administrators and advocating for her patients always. This is evident throughout the entire season as Jackie continuously bumps heads with the floor's nurse manager, Gloria Akalitus. Ms. Akalitus' outward semblance makes it apparent to viewers that she is an individual who holds authority on the unit. Her type-A personality is evident through her tone of voice, which is often cold and scornful, especially towards Jackie and other nurses on the unit. Ms. Akalitus often speaks down to Jackie and often gets angry when Jackie does not comply with her orders.

For example, in episode three, Jackie receives a deteriorating elderly patient with heart disease. The patient has been refusing treatment, and states that the only medication he uses to treat his condition is chicken soup. Seeing this patient in the ER, Ms. Akalitus demands that Jackie send him over to hospice because he is taking up space on the unit. Instead of submissively agreeing to those in authority, Jackie refuses and tells Ms. Akalitus to open the curtain and really analyze the patient. Upon a second look, this man is dying and all he wants to do is die in comfort while eating chicken soup, a remedy that makes him comfortable and content. Without question, Jackie continuously advocates for her patients to make sure they receive competent and compassionate care. To her, they are not just a patient with a set of symptoms, but a human being.

It is not uncommon to see nurses on television series appear as healthcare servants. Although this is what the media may illustrate, a large part of the demands of patient care is centered on the work of nurses. When care falls short ... nurses shoulder much of the responsibility (Hughs, 2008). Jackie Peyton is not the typical handmaiden and does not always adhere to what those above her say just because they hold a higher title. This is evident when exploring the dynamic between Jackie and physician Dr. Fitch Cooper. In the first few episodes, Cooper undermines Jackie's intelligence and frequently dismisses her recommendations because she is "just a nurse". For example, in the first episode, a bike messenger is rushed into the ER after an accident. Upon the patient's arrival, Jackie is shown completing a full head-to-toe assessment and verifying if the patient needs immediate intervention. While Jackie is completing the assessment, Dr. Cooper is seen texting on his phone

and blatantly ignoring the patient. After the assessment is finished, Jackie informs Dr. Cooper that the patient has blood in his urine and suggests that they obtain another urine sample to check for glucose and cerebral spinal fluid to assess for a possible cerebral hemorrhage. Instead of listening to Jackie, Dr. Cooper overlooks her suggestion and tells her that he knows what he is doing. Later, it is discovered that Jackie was right, and the patient suffers from a massive brain bleed. As a result, disregarding Jackie's opinion is what ultimately leads to the patient's demise. Even though Jackie is an intelligent and highly skilled nurse, her efforts were ignored because Dr. Cooper did not value her professional opinion. Instead of questioning a nurse's judgment and viewing them as assistants, physicians and nurses must collaborate in order to cohesively develop patient care plans and enhance patient outcomes. Like physicians, nurses have independent legal and ethical duties to patients, with a unique focus and scope of practice (Truth about Nursing, 2009). Jackie's character allows viewers to realize that the nurse's role is more than just obeying doctor's orders and fluffing pillows. Breaking the stereotypical nursemaid archetype is only one of the many arguments that prove that *Nurse Jackie* is a show that is positively changing perceptions of the modern-day nurse.

### **Nurse Jackie as the Nurturer**

Having a nurturing and compassionate disposition are two qualities for which nurses are well known. Florence Nightingale put emphasis on developing virtuous nurses, as she believed that nurturing qualities were the impetus to providing adequate care and gave the nursing profession its ethos (Bradshaw, 2011). Even

though history shows that nurses were trained to be compassionate and caring, one can agree that most nurses choose the profession based off their natural love for helping and caring for others. Providing care is a nurse's livelihood and it has been set in the foundations of nursing to always put the patient first and care for them holistically. This image, although shown in media, is often pushed aside as sexual and negative images of the nurse are in the forefront of entertainment shows.

Although she may be flawed, one can argue that Jackie Peyton still embodies the fact that nurses are nurturing beings. Outside the hospital walls, viewers get an occasional glimpse of Jackie's home life. One learns that Jackie is a mother of two young girls, and through her interactions with her children, her loving nature is clear. At home, Jackie speaks to her girls in a sweet song-like tone, and is always seen outwardly expressing her love for her daughters through hugs and kisses. Indeed, she loves, protects, and teaches her children just like any average mother would. In a similar way, Jackie does this on the job as well. The character, Zoey Barkow, is a student nurse who Jackie mentors. Taking her under her wing, Jackie teaches Zoey how to be a strong, competent nurse. Throughout the first season there are multiple occasions where Jackie teaches her mentee life lessons on how to make it in the nursing world. For instance, towards the end of the second episode, Zoey expresses to Jackie that she does not think she is cut out to be a nurse. Zoey explains how she looks around and is in awe at how the doctors can heal so many lives on a daily basis and how she could never measure up to that expectation. Listening to Zoey's concerns, Jackie makes a profound statement that illustrates the true role of the nurse. She tells Zoey that doctors only diagnose, they do not heal.

Nurses heal (*Nurse Jackie*, episode 2). These statements make a lasting impact on Zoey as she decides to continue to pursue her nursing career. In addition, Jackie tries to instill common values in Zoey such as advocating for oneself in the workplace and practicing safe and holistic care. This is evident in episode three when Zoey comes into the hospital with a new stethoscope her parents had gotten her. Wearing her new stethoscope around her neck, Zoey proudly shows it off and is eager to assess patients. In this moment, Dr. Eleanor O'Hara comes into the patient's room and snatches the stethoscope from Zoey's neck to assess the patient they are currently with. Shocked and slightly intimidated, Zoey is at a loss for words as O'Hara walks out of the room with her stethoscope. When Jackie notices Zoey without her stethoscope, Zoey informs her that Dr. O'Hara took it and that she is afraid to get it back because she is a doctor. Jackie tells Zoey that doctors take [things]. Sandwiches, stethoscopes, credit; it's what they do, they can't help themselves (*Nurse Jackie*, episode 3). Throughout the entire shift, Zoey tries to muster up the courage to ask for her stethoscope back, and eventually finds the courage to claim it at the end of the episode.

Although she may show Zoey tough love, preceptors like Jackie truly make a difference in a new nurse's life. According to recent research, there is evidence that demonstrates that mentoring can make a difference in the retention of new nurses (Grindel & Hagerstrom, 2009). As Zoey's mentor, Jackie has taught her not to give up and has increased Zoey's confidence as a caregiver. Using her own personal experiences and vast knowledge, like a mother, Jackie teaches Zoey how to learn from her own mistakes and shapes her into a strong nurse.

## ***Nurse Jackie: Debunking the Nurse as a Sex Symbol***

How can someone believe that working twelve straight hours around bodily fluids and foul smells is something that is sexy? Most can agree that this is not something that should be deemed attractive at all. Society has a deep-rooted belief, perhaps even a fantasy, that nurses are the sex symbol of the medical field. The stereotype of the nurse as a sex symbol dates back to the 1500s during the Protestant Reformation (Gentile, 2015). During this time, nursing was a profession that was not well sought after and was a job given to formally convicted prostitutes (Gentile, 2015). An image that was once acceptable for prostitutes has had a detrimental effect on how nurses are perceived by the modern day public. This “sexy” reputation has stuck around for centuries as nurses have been commonly shown wearing tight white dresses, red lipstick, and high heels and serve to fulfill the needs of men. For years, this hyper-sexualized image of the nurse has been shown repeatedly in popular culture through advertisements, movies, Halloween costumes, and television shows.

Although many hospital dramas still illustrate the sexy nurse archetype, *Nurse Jackie* transcends this negative nursing image and proves that there is nothing remotely sexy about being a nurse. Contrary to what society may believe, the nurses shown in this series eschew glamour and wear baggy scrubs, sneakers, and have makeup free faces. Even lead character Jackie Peyton goes against society’s standard that having long hair equates to femininity, and is seen with a short pixie cut. Even though nurses are the ones who are generally sexualized, in this show, it is the physicians that are typically seen engaging in promiscuous activities as well as being

very stylish. For example, Dr. O'Hara always comes into the hospital with her hair and make up done, designer shoes, and form fitting ensembles. Similarly, Dr. Cooper always looks polished in his button up shirt and suit pants. One can argue that their professional attire is considered more appealing than a pair of scrubs. Though the media plays a central role in perpetuating the global vision of nurses as half-dressed nymphomaniacs, (Summers & Summers, 2010, pg. 146), the naughty nurse is not limited to just clothing. Many believe that nurses are promiscuous females that make themselves readily available to physicians and patients for sexual favors. As stated above, the physicians in this television series are commonly the ones seen caught in sexual acts. In episode nine, Dr. Cooper is nowhere to be found as Jackie has a high influx of patients that come into the emergency department. Needing assistance, Jackie and other workers on the floor continuously page Dr. Cooper, but fail at getting a response. At the end of the episode, Jackie finally finds Dr. Cooper in an exam room; however, his pants are down, and his shirt and tie are completely undone as Jackie barges in on him and his new girlfriend. Infuriated, Jackie calls Dr. Cooper useless and picks up the slack for the work that he failed to do all day. Clearly, the roles have reversed, and the nurse is the one who is compensating for the tasks that were left undone earlier in the day by the healthcare provider.

Although there is nothing wrong with being sexy and embracing one's femininity, fetishizing nurses and viewing them as sex symbols increases the likelihood of sexual assault in the workplace. In a study conducted by the University of Missouri, it was recorded that more than 70% of the nurses surveyed had been sexually harassed while providing care (Summers & Summers, 2010, p. 143). A

similar incident can be seen in *Nurse Jackie*. On multiple occasions, Dr. Cooper grabs Jackie's breast when she is confronting him about something that makes him stressed or nervous. Truly, no nurse wishes to be sexualized, harassed, or assaulted (Summers & Summers, 2010, p. 143). The notion that the nurse is a naughty feminine character is something that this Showtime series tries to dispel. Discarding the naughty nurse character shows society that they should change their image of the profession.

### **Nurse Jackie: The Fallen Angel**

One can agree that the image of the nurse as an angel is one of the most popular and long-lasting stereotypes. Since the Middle Ages, Christian deacons and deaconesses healed the sick and provided care to the poor in order to serve God (Summer and Summers, 2010). Basing their work off of Christian values and ideals, these women were often viewed as virtuous and holy for immersing themselves in purposeful work (Gordon & Nelson, 2005). Their work created a virtue script for nurses and made nursing based off of key attributes such as compassion, trustworthiness, kindness, and honesty (Gordon & Nelson, 2005). It is clear that the image of the nurse as an angel dates back very long ago and that this stereotype's historical roots have influenced the nurse to be an angelic figure to society for centuries. Although this image had a positive connotation in the past, to some modern day nurses, this image has created false expectations of what modern nursing actually entails.

The image of nursing often faces two extremes: the harlot or the angel (Summers & Summers, 2010). While the hyper-sexualized image of the nurse was previously discussed, society also tends to view nurses as angels on earth. Going back to the early days of nursing, nurses were commonly seen in uniforms that were all white (Tobin, 2006). White, a color that is angelic in nature, generally symbolizes purity and innocence (Color Psychology, n.d). In the opening title sequence for this show, there are many clues that hint at Jackie's so-called angel-like character. For example, the backdrop for the opening credits is a bright white color, and Jackie is the only one represented in this sequence. As the credits continue, one sees that a variety of objects come into the picture. Two of them being a wedding ring and a necklace with Christ on it. In American society, matrimony symbolizes a unity under Christ and is a value that is held to a high standard (Wikipedia, 2017). Contrary to societal beliefs, Jackie is seen removing her ring as her stethoscope is placed around her neck. This moment signifies how Jackie undermines her marriage to fuel her need for narcotics. Aside from the opening credits, the show makes numerous references to this virtuous archetype. The most obvious symbol being the name this series takes place in, called All Saints Hospital. This is quite ironic being that all the caregivers seen on the show are flawed in their own way. Jackie's imperfections are apparent when Zoey tells her that she thinks Jackie is a saint. At a loss for words, Jackie continues to care for a patient, and as Zoey leaves Jackie breaks down into tears as the IV pump she was handling goes awry; ultimately, proving that she is not who Zoey makes her out to be.

As mentioned above, the image of the nurse as an angel is commonly depicted as a religious being that heals the lives of others (Gordon & Nelson, 2005). Although this may sound like a positive portrayal of nurses, quite often the angel stereotype diminishes the work of the nurse (Truth about Nursing, 2009). This image consistently praises nurses for basic care such as changing linens, filling water cups, and removing food trays; but demoralizes the actual training and skill that comes with the profession (Summers & Summers, 2010). Although nurses perform basic skills to maintain patient comfort and satisfaction, good nursing care involves more than simply good intentions. Nursing requires a deep and thoughtful knowledge of the patient's situation, needs and competencies (Tronto, 1993, p. 136). Having multiple patients that need different interventions and prioritized care is truly difficult to juggle for twelve hours a day. These high intense days and stressful situations often put a nurses' coping skills to the test. Caring for individuals during times of need is a rewarding task; however, popular culture and the media tend to ignore the "harder" aspects of nursing, such as nurses' advanced skills and stress they endure (Summers & Summers, 2010, p. 197). Though her patients may consider her a saint who is able to cure them of illness, Jackie Peyton struggles immensely balancing the burdens she faces both at work and at home. Managing grueling hours, demanding patients, and her chronic back pain, Jackie finds herself abusing prescription drugs just to make it through a single shift. Her drug abuse gets her sexually involved with the hospital's pharmacist, Eddie, who makes access to quality narcotics readily available whenever she needs her fix. To keep her home life a secret from Eddie and those at work, Jackie removes her wedding ring and puts it

in her pocket at the beginning of each shift. Living this double life, Jackie ultimately commits adultery in order to fuel her addiction Jackie's struggle between balancing her work persona and secret personal life comes to light in Episode 10 when she struggles to get her ring off at the beginning of her shift. Throughout the day, Jackie hides her hands by wearing latex gloves and spends the entire shift devising a plan to remove the ring. This moment symbolizes how Jackie can no longer separate her work life from her home life, and how she can no longer handle the burden of keeping her two identities a secret. Throughout the entirety of the first season, the severity of Jackie's addiction is evident as it drives her over the edge. In multiple episodes, Jackie is seen going to the extreme to get her fix of pills. She fishes them out of the sink if they fall in, and even masterminds ways to sneak them into sugar packets that she takes into work to pour inside her coffee. Jackie is far from being a saint. Her flawed, but ambiguous character deviates her from the typical angel stereotype and perhaps transcends her to embody a fallen angel instead.

### **The Aggressive Tyrant: How *Nurse Jackie* Shines Light on the Battle Axe**

#### **Female**

Not a common stereotype shown in the media, is the nurse portrayed as a battle-axe female. This archetype depicts the nurse as an incredibly sadistic, often older, nurse that has a degree of power over both her patients and other nurses (TVtropes.com, n.d.). The most famous depiction of this stereotype can be seen in Nurse Mildred Ratched in the classic film and novel, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Ratched is described as a cunning nurse who psychologically tortures those she is

ostensibly helping, and resorts to harsh measures in order to maintain control on the unit (Summers & Summers, 2010). This image of the nurse is overdramatized, and it is safe to say that most nurses do not behave in this manner. Nurses can be responsible and promote fairness while assuming an authoritative position. If given an authoritative position on a television series, many Hollywood dramas portray highly skilled nurses as cutthroat, hostile beings. Why is it that a woman cannot be given a role of power without her having to be an aggressive tyrant? Without considering the fact that modern day nurses are clinical leaders, nurse managers, and nurse practitioners, prime time U.S. television has rarely shown a positive nurse character with genuine authority (Summers & Summers, 2010, p. 220). Although *Nurse Jackie* illustrates this stereotype through nurse manager Gloria Akalitus, there are moments where viewers get a glimpse of her compassionate side that downplays the battle-axe persona. In episode 7, Akalitus discovers an abandoned baby who was left at the nurse's station. Unable to locate its parents, Akalitus takes the baby under her care. Through her interactions with the baby, the viewers see a side of the case manager that they are not used to. Developing a bond with the child, Akalitus is seen smiling and playing with the baby, breaking her normally cold character and showing a more warm and relatable persona. When the parents of the infant come into the hospital, Akalitus is reluctant to hand the baby over. Normally a woman who has power and control over situations, Akalitus surrenders the child. Generally, nurse managers, like other nurses who refuse to fit the accepted stereotype of the pretty, kind, compliant nurse, are banished to the moral margins of societal acceptance where they become objects of fear or ridicule (Darbyshire &

Gordon, 2005). Although Akalitus is generally seen as a bureaucratic authoritative female, moments where she is vulnerable truly debunk the typical battle-axe image. Her vulnerability proves to society that nurses in power can still have the benevolent qualities that acute care nurses possess.

## **Conclusion**

Transcending typical nursing stereotypes, the late-night television series, *Nurse Jackie*, shines light on the many barriers that hinder a positive nursing image in modern day society. Producers and writers of this series allow those who watch the show to see the nurse in a way that society has never seen before. By including roles such as the student nurse, male nurse, and nurse manager, viewers are educated on how fluid the profession is. In the past, Hollywood has considered physicians to be the major players on the health care stage and [view them] as totally responsible for all the good things that happen to the patient; when in fact, it may be the nurse, nurses' aide, or another clinician who was also responsible for an excellent outcome (Darbyshire & Gordon, 2005). *Nurse Jackie* ultimately creates a dialogue between healthcare professionals and the media by showing the true value of the nurse. This series illustrates that the nurse is more than just the typical handmaiden, sex symbol, angel, nurturer, and authoritarian. Although this series helps promote a positive image of nursing, nurses themselves must be the ones to initiate change. Nurses today must be proactive and continue to educate the media and entertainment industry. Improving public knowledge and diminishing the negative stereotypes that are associated with the nursing profession will ultimately improve

how nurses are viewed in society. The public is unaware of how much schooling and decision-making the profession actually requires, and this needs to be made clear by present day nurses. Nurses are strong, intelligent, and patient individuals and it is time for them to gain credit for their valiant efforts. A profession that has been undervalued and invisible in the past now comes into the foreground because of groundbreaking shows such as *Nurse Jackie*. As nurses and other healthcare professionals make the strides necessary to make an impact, in due time, the image of nursing will be one that is highly respected.

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