

**“Do You Know” of the Conflict
of Having a Family and a Career as a Female Surgeon?
The Representation of Cristina Yang in ABC’s *Grey’s Anatomy***

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ABSTRACT: According to a 2009 poll, only 27% of all surgeons in the United States are women, and looking at thoracic cardiac surgeons, this number declines to merely 3%. Seeking to shed light on cultural, political, and social preconditions of this fact, this essay investigates the conflict many female heart surgeons face, namely the decision between job and family, as it is represented and performed by Cristina Yang in the popular ABC drama series *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005-today).

KEYWORDS: Gender; Career; Family; *Grey’s Anatomy*; Cristina Yang; Female Heart Surgeon.

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Introduction

In 1998, 86 female thoracic surgeons were certified by the American Board of Thoracic Surgeons (cf. Augenstein). In recent years, this number has risen by about 120 and thus, there are still only about 200 thoracic cardiac female surgeons in the United States, which represents merely 3% of all thoracic cardiac surgeons.¹ The underrepresentation of women in thoracic surgery mirrors the underrepresentation of women in surgical jobs in general: only 27% of all surgeons in the United States are female (cf. Grover 490). This, and also the fact that female surgeons seem to fall behind their male counterparts in reputation, esteem, and prestige, led to the 2015 twitter hashtag “ILookLikeASurgeon,” which went viral after female surgeons posted pictures of themselves to raise awareness of the enormous gender disparity. Because gender is, in contrast to sex, socially constructed and not biologically set, gender roles have the potential to change over time (cf. Blackstone 335). And indeed, the social and professional roles women can take have changed considerably since the second-

¹ Status as of 2009. Percentage in 2015 might be around 5%.

wave of feminist activism. That said, it seems that the surgical field is almost unaffected by this cultural trend. This, and also the recent visibility campaign by female surgeons on the internet and across social networks, raises the question of why there are so few female surgeons, whereas the number of male surgeons is extraordinarily high. Heather Logghe, MD, the founder of #ILookLikeASurgeon, cites the high workload of up to 80 hours per week as a reason that may discourage women who also want to raise a family from this career choice (cf. Tiedge).

Despite the many tweets with the #ILookLikeASurgeon hashtag, women surgeons are quite visible on the TV screen. The popular TV drama series *Grey's Anatomy*, which is now airing in its twelfth season, shows a gender balanced list of M.D.-characters and one of the major characters was the female heart surgeon, the Asian American Cristina Yang.² Cristina Yang serves a perfect example to illustrate the assumption that female surgeons face a conflict of having to choose between job and family. Episode seventeen of the tenth season, "Do You Know?," centers on the dilemma of young female surgeons even when they have a straightforwardly work-oriented character, such as Cristina Yang. The episode showcases the ambitious work ethics and the outstanding professional performance that characterize Cristina throughout the whole show. At the same time, it makes visible the two lifestyle possibilities she has: either having a family or being an excelling thoracic cardiac surgeon. In the episode, Cristina thinks about starting over the relationship with her ex-husband Owen Hunt, and then imagines the possible outcomes for her own life after either reconciling with him or staying alone and focusing on her career. Can she "have it all" (Magliato 4), or does she have to make a decision between her ex-husband, who represents family to her, and her one and only dream of being an extraordinary cardiac surgeon? Or phrasing it differently: will she let herself be pushed into the stereotypical and traditional role of a woman who looks after the house and her children and, thus, suppresses her wish to have a career (cf. Blackstone 337), or will she be able to circumvent falling into a stereotypical gender role and devote her life entirely to her career instead?

² Sandra Oh, actress of Cristina Yang, left *Grey's Anatomy* after the 10th season.

“Do You Know?” Cristina Yang’s Two Visions

Assessing Cristina Yang’s individual situation in the episode “Do You Know?,” the particular context that instigates her dilemma is important. Cristina has just successfully performed a very difficult surgery, only to realize that the patient’s spine has been so seriously fractured that he will not survive without artificial respiration; the patient has to choose between life and death. Leaving the patient’s room after a consultation, Cristina contemplates on her own life and on what her future might look like depending on the choices she makes, and she imagines two radically different scenarios. In the first scenario that Cristina visualizes, she sees her ex-husband Owen Hunt waiting for the elevator—the two had separated because of their different positions on family planning. Seeing him standing there, she goes straight up to him and tells him: “You are the love of my life. [. . .] I love you, I want to be with you, for real, forever” (*Grey’s*, “Do You Know?” 00:08:30-00:08:38). Following this declaration, they reunite and after a leap in time, conveyed to the viewer by a black screen between two scenes, they move in together and start over. After a short period of time, signified by another black screen, Owen persuades Cristina to adopt a dog together, arguing that the apartment is too big for only the two of them. Cristina eventually surrenders; but in the animal shelter, she clearly states that “I agreed to a dog, not a horse” (“Do You Know?” 00:09:35-00:09:37) when Owen tries to convince her of a mid-sized dog breed. This detouring of the conflict shows that Cristina is not comfortable with the idea of enlarging their family but that she follows her husband’s wish in order to not have to argue about having a child. Granting him his wish to “fill” the apartment with a dog seems to be the only way to keep him happy and by her side; but by only allowing a certain small breed, she is trying to control the relationship. When Cristina starts complying with her husband’s wishes to adopt a medium sized dog, we can observe a first step towards accepting a more traditional female gender role: even though she is “conscious of the weak position in decision-making [...] [in her] family life” (Tomeh 78), she does not maintain her ground but compromises and lets her husband lead the relationship (cf. Blackstone 337). By doing so, she starts to lose track of herself and of her ideals and gives up on “having it all.”

Some time passes (indicated by another black screen), and Cristina once again gives in to her husband whose desire to have a family cannot be stilled by adopting a dog. In order to keep him by her side, Cristina agrees to answer to his greatest wish and becomes pregnant,

although she had aborted Owen's child two seasons earlier because her career had been more important to her then (cf. *Grey's*, "She's Gone" 00:32:35-00:34:22). During delivery, she expresses what she had known to be true all along: that "this [pregnancy and motherhood] is a mistake" ("Do You Know?"). And yet, she has decided to put her dreams last and to follow her husband's wishes first—thus, her submission turns Owen from partner to patriarch. Cristina's own role, too, changes when their child impacts her life in unforeseen ways and she becomes an overprotective mother. For instance, when her son trips on the playground, she cancels all of her important research work even though he only has a minor injury, because her emotions are taking over control of her actions. She hands her nearly completed project to her intern Ross, who finishes the last important steps of the research (cf. "Do You Know?" 00:17:50-00:18:05). In contrast to her earlier judgments, she now performs what she deemed to be a backwards model of womanhood and motherhood, redirecting her perfectionism from her professional work to her domestic role of mother. She is so completely absorbed with identifying as a mother that she puts her family above everything: above her dreams, her wishes, and her desires (cf. Blackstone 337; Hill 50-1; Shields 3). It has become impossible for her to leave her child with her husband because she feels that it is only her, the mother, who can take proper and perfect care of her son.

A few years later—the time lapse is again conveyed by a black screen—Cristina is pregnant with her second child and confesses to her friend Meredith Grey that she is tired but that this has nothing to do with her pregnancy but rather with the unfulfilling life she leads: although she has her job and her family, one could argue that she has "the problem that has no name" that feminist Betty Friedan described in the early 1960s (71). Friedan observed that many college-educated women who, instead of entering the professional or academic workforce in the 1950s, returned home to start a family. Instead of following career paths, they remained bound to the domestic sphere, dissatisfied with their situation, if not even depressed. In Cristina's case, the situation, albeit 50 years later, is similar: she cannot be what she wishes to be (i.e., an extraordinary surgeon [cf. *Grey's*, "I Bet It Stung" 00:09:41-00:12:44]), because she is trapped within her family and her family's needs; the fatigue is never leaving her (cf. "Do You Know?" 00:18:48-00:19:10).

Cristina's dissatisfaction and frustration culminates into despair when she realizes that she will not win the Harper Avery Award for her research—her life goal before she had

children—because she handed over the responsibilities of her research project to her intern Ross in order to be with her child. Ross’s research provides groundbreaking results, for which he eventually receives the Harper Avery Award. At the award ceremony, after Cristina has given the laudatory speech, she breaks down in the bathroom. She is absolutely devastated that she forfeited her one and only dream to win the prestigious award for a child she never herself desired to mother (cf. “Do You Know?” 00:21:08-00:21:20). Instead of following her own wishes and staying true to her ideals, she makes too many compromises, thinking that she can “have it all.” What started innocently with admitting a dog to her and Owen’s home turned into a foot-in-the-door technique for Owen, who eventually convinces her to have a child with him if she does not want to lose him. Because Cristina gave in to one of his wishes, he thinks that he can now make decisions for both of them without her: when Owen receives an outstanding job offer in Germany, he tells the board at Seattle Grace Hospital that he and Cristina are leaving the United States without mentioning the offer to Cristina. In the fight that follows, he tells her that he “cannot have another conversation where the idea that [his] career or, in fact, any of [his] wishes might come first is presented as some crime against humanity” (“Do You Know?” 00:13:28-00:13:37). This is when Cristina gives in again: instead of moving to Germany and leaving the job of her dreams, she agrees to having a baby with Owen even though she never wanted to be a mother. Ultimately, motherhood leads to the next compromise, when she hands over her research project to her colleague Ross in order to be able to look after her child (cf. “Do You Know?” 00:17:50-00:18:05). Cristina seems to have adopted the stereotypical, traditional female role in society: she obeys her husband, fulfills his wishes, puts his lifelong dream above her own, and tries to succeed in the domestic instead of the public and professional sphere even though she knows that this will not be enough for her (cf. Blackstone 337; Hill 50-1, 198). The vision shows clearly that Cristina’s greatest fear is not being able to prioritize her work over her child. It demonstrates that the idea of having to hand over her research and give up her dream to become a distinguished heart surgeon is untenable.

In contrast to this first vision, viewers experience a completely different Cristina in the second scenario. Once again, she confronts Owen after she has successfully performed the difficult surgery. This time, however, she tells him about that “good [. . .] no, [. . .] incredible” (*Grey’s*, “Do You Know?” 00:22:43-00:22:49) feeling she had while performing surgery. She

knows what she wants: to be an excellent thoracic cardiac surgeon and to be with Owen. This time, however, after moving in together and starting over, she sets down certain rules. One of these rules is that Owen and Cristina stay, as she phrases it, “just us” (“Do You Know?” 00:23:37-00:23:43). This means that Owen has to respect Cristina’s wish not to have children but to instead become an extraordinary heart surgeon if he wants to stay together with her. This time, it is Owen who gives up his dreams for Cristina, which raises the question whether “having it all” will remain an unattainable goal for the two of them. In this second vision, it is Cristina who starts with “having it all”: the man of her heart is by her side and she has the opportunity to realize her professional dreams and desires. This perfectly portrays the identity of the job-oriented Cristina: a woman who is driven by her professional ambitions and who has become known for her determination to put everything else, even her husband, second. This image confirms Cristina’s self-understanding as an emancipated, liberal woman who goes after the job she wants and who is “free from oppressive [and normative] gender roles” (Tong 28) that would push her into other fields.

Although Owen at first agrees to the premise of “just us” (*Grey’s*, “Do You Know?” 00:23:37-00:23:43), a conflict soon arises when he wants to reopen the discussion about having children. Cristina, however, is not willing to give in and tells Owen that if he wants more from life than they have together, then he has to go to “get it somewhere else” (“Do You Know?” 00:24:21-00:24:23). She deliberately pushes the love of her life and her prospective family away to be successful in her job and to be able to fulfill her dreams and her desires. Her attitude and demeanor corresponds to a new way of thinking of ambitious women in the 21st century who will “prioritize their work over all other aspects in life [o]r more simply, for whom work is so essential that they have little or nothing to give to a family” (Roustang-Stoller 184). At the same time, critic Roustang-Stoller proposes that there is “[n]o longer a work/family hierarchy between which we would have to decide, with men traditionally in the lead and women following but a reasonable coexistence”; she calls this “reconstructive feminism” (184). Cristina is not content with being the appendage of her husband, she does not want to coexist but to shine brightly on her own. She can thus be called a ‘reconstructive feminist’ as she has completely dissolved the work/family hierarchy for herself and on her own.

It becomes clear that, even if Cristina gave in to Owen's wishes, she would not have the emotional capacity to actually raise children in this scenario because her work stands above everything else. This can also be seen when, after another leap in time, the wife of the aforementioned patient asks Owen to bring Cristina to her, in order to talk to Cristina about the surgery her husband is undergoing after a rebound in his regeneration process. The wife asks specifically for Cristina's medical opinion because she trusts her and believes in her words, but when Owen tells Cristina to go and see the wife, Cristina remains emotionally unaffected even though years before, she felt compassion and was able to commiserate with the patient's wife after the surgery (cf. *Grey's*, "Do You Know?" 00:28:13-00:28:34). Cristina's low affect deliberately counterpoints the stereotypical emotional response so often ascribed to women (cf. Shields 3). But when Owen suggests that Ross could take over supervising the research project just for a second in order for Cristina to see the patient's wife, she is so fixated on her role as an extraordinary researcher that she shouts at Owen that "Ross can't do this" (*Grey's*, "Do You Know?" 00:28:22-00:28:23). Her reaction shows that she is not the clinical robot she appears to be but that she can very well be emotionally involved, however, only when it comes to her own dreams and desires; that is to say, she can be emotionally involved in her research, but not in the well-being of other people, be it a family or children (cf. "Do You Know?" 00:28:06-00:28:50).

And although she might not "have it all" in this imagined version of her life, she still is very satisfied with the way her life has gone: even though she has lost Owen, she has achieved her goals and dreams and is rewarded with the Harper Avery Award for at least four times in a row. At the award presentation where she is about to receive her fourth award, she asks, "Do you want to live this way?", and with a smiling and pleased face, she leaves the stage, knowing that she has made the right choice (cf. "Do You Know?"). Cristina's conviction points toward a simple truism and alludes to the individualism that is inherent in the American Dream: following one's own dream is always more important than letting one's life be controlled by other people or prescribed gender roles, even if that means destroying the happiness or building upon the misfortune of someone else. From a broader sociopolitical position, however, it remains questionable whether one woman, who lives the life she wants by stepping over the happiness of others, can help the project of emancipation and cause other women to follow their dreams as well.

Concluding Remarks

In the TV-serial world of *Grey's Anatomy*, Cristina Yang follows what Roustang-Stoller's has called "reconstructive feminism," in which "men are [no longer] traditionally in the lead and women [do not] follow [. . .] [in] a reasonable coexistence" (184). But the other female characters of the show do not manage to free themselves from their environment's gendered expectations. The hierarchies that govern work and family life are still very much intact in the fictional and possibly also the real surgical world. Focusing on Cristina Yang as a female thoracic cardiac surgeon, viewers learn that women in this medical field have to decide whether they want to have a family or excel in their job. Obviously, "[t]o simply see television as a funhouse mirror [. . .] is to greatly oversimplify and underestimate television's role in the representation of the social world" (Allen 368) because the serial narratives both represent cultural givens and feed back into them (cf. Allen 368). In the case of Cristina Yang and *Grey's Anatomy*, the show helps to raise awareness in regard to the inequality between men and women in surgical jobs and tries to promote female surgeons who prefer to have a career instead of children.

However, *Grey's Anatomy* seems to suggest that, if a woman's goal is to have a medical career and a family with children, other paths will have to be taken by female doctors: either, the female surgeon needs a partner who supports and takes care of the children as well, or the female surgeon may have to specialize in another, less time-consuming medical or surgical field than thoracic cardiac surgery (cf. Fried 898). The concept of "reconstructive feminism" could thus help women to concentrate on their career, as it is the case with the surgeon who started the twitter hashtag, Heather Logghe (cf. Tiedge). In an ideal world, everybody should have the chance to work in his or her preferred field without having to choose between career and family. Thus, (and this is also what Heather Logghe argues in the interview with Tiedge) the structure of surgical labor and the culture of the profession needs to change, in order to make the job more attractive for men and women, who seek to realize both a family and a career life. But how the structure might change in a time of neoliberalism with a neoliberal feminism where women "disavow the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality [because they] accept full responsibility for [their] own well-being and self-care" (Rottenberg 420) remains a question without an answer. Neoliberal women like Cristina Yang are too focused on the idea that

each individual is responsible for one's own happiness without considering the fact that "neoliberal governmentality undoes notions of social justice" (Rottenberg 421) such as the formerly relentless and at least partly successful fight for equality. Thus, the women themselves support this injustice by taking the responsibility individualistically: in their opinion, inequality is no longer the fault of a larger structure but of every individual. Only if women return to see that there still is injustice and inequality in society that can only be changed on a higher level, it would make for the practice of "reconstructive feminism" to become a reality and not just a vision.

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