

**"Mass Media and Moral Discourse: Social  
Class and the Rhetoric of Abortion"**

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**Working-Class Women Respond to the Primacy of Class in Television:  
Representations of Abortion**

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In this study, I attempt to articulate discourses of gender and class used by groups of working-class women in the contemporary U.S. My goal is twofold. First, in studying discourses of gender and class characterizing dominant media representations of these phenomena, I attempt to establish the cultural background against which women's own ideas about these issues are conceived and expressed. Second, by examining variations and nuances within the discourse of particular groups of women, and differences between groups, I attempt to illustrate the complexity and fluidity of these discourses, and to emphasize both their resonance with, and resistance to, mass media discourse. The ultimate goal of the work is to use the example of abortion to promote a rethinking of the notion of media hegemony, and, more specifically, of women's relation to social class and gender identities and political discourse in the contemporary U.S.

### Theoretical Context

The question of how "the subject" is both created and "subjected" to mechanisms of domination and power has been central to the studies of popular cultural practices which have flourished over the last decade (Willis 1978; McRobbie 1978, 1981, 1984; Morley 1980; Hobson 1982; Radway 1984; Long 1986, 1987; Lull 1987; Seiter et al. 1989; Seiter 1990; Liebes and Katz 1990; Press 1991). Recent students of the mass media audience, influenced by postmodernist theory's critique of the concept of the subject, have exposed the communication field's traditional attempts to construct "scientific" studies of the popular cultural audience. Such studies have been identified as yet another academic and political effort to subject the populations studied to the hegemonic structuring already taking place in their very constitution as media audiences. In contrast, newer studies have led to an emphasis on "resistances" to power occurring at individual and small-group levels. This interest in resistance was absent in mainstream work.

Widespread criticism of traditional audience studies has altered the research techniques and theoretical orientations which predominate in the field. For example, many recent studies tend to feature qualitative rather than quantitative methodological approaches. Some have embraced critical historical methods (May 1980; Rosenzweig 1983; Peiss 1986; Gabler 1988), using the techniques of social history to ask new questions about the ways historically specific audiences have created and used popular cultural forms to structure, and restructure, their own identities as critical subjects. Others, interested in more current practices, have turned to ethnographic methodologies (Ortner, forthcoming; Bacon-Smith 1992; Brown 1991a, 1991b; Press 1991; Radway 1988, 1984).

Ethnographic researchers have faced the paradox of studying the subject in an age of postmodernist insights which challenge the existence of unified, reflective "subjects" in any traditional post-enlightenment sense, substituting instead a more diffuse (but less easily researchable) notion of "subjectivity" (Baudrillard 1988; Radway 1988; Scott 1988; Lyotard 1984).<sup>1</sup> Of course, in many respects ethnographers have long shared the criticisms of traditional social-scientific epistemologies, including often ethnocentric assumptions about the nature of the subject, made so effectively in postmodernist theory. Yet on another level, ethnography requires a level of faith in the possibility of creative activity at the level of the subject, and in the potential of the ethnographer to come to "understand" her "subjects," which is often difficult to maintain in the face of postmodernist theoretical challenges to our customary notions of the subject. This paradox has led to a

growing split in the field between those most deeply affected by the postmodernist critique, and those more interested in practicing the new research techniques and emphases spawned in its wake.

This seeming contradiction between theory and method has particularly affected scholars using ethnographic techniques to study the popular cultural audience. Most centrally, the question of the way mass media audiences constitute and reconstitute themselves as subjects who at times resist cultural hegemonies, and at others accommodate them, has preoccupied researchers in this field, continually foregrounding challenges to traditional notions of the subject (Radway 1988; Grossberg 1988, 1989; Fiske 1989a, 1989b, 1990). The theoretical emphasis characterizing this research--the search for resistance to domination, often sought at the individual or small-group level--makes researchers sound particularly contradictory when they invoke postmodernist critiques. Increasingly, in these studies and research proposals, scholars attempt to eschew notions of the unified subject, thereby accommodating the postmodernist critique. As a result, newer studies contrast sharply in form and theoretical orientation with slightly older studies in the field (e.g., Morley 1980; Hobson 1982; Radway 1984). In fact, however, scholars have not been all that successful in altering the actual working notion of subjectivity which informs most current work in the field. Those most in the theoretical vanguard of the field have produced theoretical critiques of earlier works, theoretical tracts, and research proposals for ethnographic work based on these new ideas. To date, however, little actual research has been produced which might make a convincing case for the power of the postmodernist critique to deepen our understanding of the construction of subjectivity in our time.

Ethnography has been particularly attractive to feminist researchers looking specifically at the female audience (McRobbie 1978, 1981, 1984; Hobson 1982; Radway 1984; Press 1991).<sup>2</sup> Trends in cultural studies leading toward historical and ethnographic methodologies have intersected with similar trends in feminist research, leading to the identification of specifically "feminist" research methods with what are considered the "softer" qualitative, rather than quantitative, methodologies (Roberts 1981; Maguire 1987; Fonow and Cook 1991).<sup>3</sup> Feminist cultural researchers have responded, therefore, to two related theoretical developments: postmodernist critiques of the subject, as well as critiques in feminist theory of the last several decades discussing the masculinist bias of traditional notions of the subject (Nicholson 1986; Flax 1987; Scott 1988; Harding 1991).

In feminist theory, there is an established tradition of what is now called "essentialism," described by some as the abstract and ahistorical construction of "the female subject."<sup>4</sup> Feminist cultural studies, e.g., concrete, historical or current studies of a specific and situated female popular cultural audience, have generally led away from essentialism on one level, stressing as they do the study of concrete, historically situated cultural subjects. Yet on another level, the temptation of constructing, according to the dictates of feminist theory, an essentialized, resisting "female subject" which can be effectively contrasted to the "male subject" more customary in cultural theory, has been a continuing problem. For example, Radway's (1984) seminal work constructs a rather undifferentiated, perpetually resisting female subject, owing her continued existence and recreation to female popular cultural genres like the romance novel. The work, based entirely on interviews with white, middle-class women and directed toward a similar audience, quite classically, and unfortunately, universalizes

the qualities of these women as essentially female qualities. While Radway herself has since retreated from the extreme position this work represents (Radway 1988), others have taken up the essentialist torch, and this work continues to flourish (Brown 1991a, 1991b).

What is missing in these works is a sense of the socially and historically-situated nature of the subjects studied: somehow the terms of feminist theory have made these details seem, at times, superfluous luxuries, not really essential to the political thrust of these works. So, for example, while in a later article Radway (1986) attempts to discuss the explicitly political thrust of her book, in doing so she evokes an abstract, undifferentiated feminist movement which, if it ever existed in this form, has certainly since fragmented beyond recognition, and would seem a strange source of identification indeed were it described explicitly to the women who were the subjects of her study. Feminist politics, in this sense, is little more than an abstract invocation of what might have been, and of what might be.

The new direction in feminist cultural studies is toward more historically and geographically specific studies of particular groups of women. This complicates, of course, the subject identity to which researchers must refer, as ever more specific categories of race, class, age, location, occupation, political affiliation, and generation, are invoked in the effort to avoid meaningless generalities; yet the pitfalls of essentialism are effectively avoided as studies become increasingly specific in scope. The theoretical disadvantage of such studies from the perspective of more traditional feminist aims is the perhaps unavoidable fact that it is impossible to generalize about "the female audience" or popular cultural subject at all. Even traditional notions of the subject are sometimes jettisoned in the quest for specificity; for example, in a recent and interesting attempt to put into practice recent theoretical insights into the fragmented nature of the postmodern subject (1988), Radway lays out a research proposal essentially recommending that researchers observe and describe sets of conflicting practices in abstraction from the subjects producing them. Many of course (Scott 1988) see these transformations of more traditional feminist theoretical goals as an emerging strength of a field reconstituting itself at a new level of theoretical and historical specificity. It is in this tradition that I locate the study I discuss in the remainder of this paper.

#### **Introduction to the Study: Abortion, Television, and Social Class**

In this study, I try to incorporate some of the insights of the postmodernist critique of the subject in specifying the way the political perspective and identity of two groups of working-class women resonates with, confronts, and resists the dominant political discourses, and the construction of a particular political subject, which they confront in the mass media. I focus on the moral, intellectual, personal, and political issue of abortion. Abortion is an issue often discussed in current mass media organs. In addition, most women have at least thought about the issue of abortion in relation to their own experience, or to that of family and friends. One of the few political issues almost universally experienced at both the private (or personal) and the public (or intellectual) level, abortion is especially useful for examining the ways in which specific groups of women constitute themselves as political and intellectual subjects in the contemporary U.S.

The relationship between our cultural thinking about abortion and social class issues has long been a theme in feminist defenses of the pro-choice

position (Ginsburg 1989, Luker 1984).<sup>6</sup> but has never explicitly entered more popularly accessible discussions of abortion either from the pro-choice or pro-life sides of the abortion debate. Others have analyzed in great depth the conventions marking abortion rhetoric in our culture's literature and mass media (Condit 1990). Nevertheless, the social class issues which implicitly riddle the representations of abortion dominant in our mass media have been virtually ignored, as has the potential impact this feature may have on both pro-life and pro-choice constituencies. On prime-time television, for example, the medium I examine here, images of economically needy women seeking abortions predominate over images of middle-class women in similar circumstances, despite the fact that large numbers of middle-class women seek abortions as well (Condit 1990; Petchesky 1990; Luker 1984). The abortion-seeking subject, on television, is a working-class, female subject, articulated by a series of signifiers typical of television's portrayal of working-class women.

Television representations are produced at every level--writers, producers, actors, directors--by the middle-class. In fact, television representations of the experience and identity of working-class women in our culture represent a middle-class cosmology or perspective on working-class experience. These representations may or may not correspond to the representations and interpretations working-class women themselves might create, were they given the opportunities for expression which they currently lack in our culture. On a more obvious level, representations of the working-class on television falsely unify experiences differentiated in fact by ethnic, geographical, religious, and employment-related factors.

In this paper, I examine working-class women's responses to the working-class subjects characterizing two abortion scenarios aired on prime-time television. The first is an episode of the prime-time police drama Cagney and Lacey, the second a fictionalized account of the real-life Norma McCorvey (alias Jane Roe in real life, Ellen Russell in the fictionalized version) broadcast in the made-for-television movie Roe vs. Wade. In particular, I compare responses to these programs made by several groups of pro-choice<sup>6</sup> working-class women. These groups are composed of non-activist women, chose specifically to fill the gap in the feminist literature about abortion with information about "ordinary" women's views. The two groups I contrast here illustrate two characteristic modes of analysis which exemplify prototypical pro-choice working-class women's discourse. These two discourses mark deep divisions within working-class women's experience, and in their attitudes toward middle-class life and societal authority. The first group I term "middle-class identified": these women embrace middle-class values and sharply criticize working-class women they see on television. The other group I term "working-class identified"; these women identify themselves as outsiders vis-a-vis more mainstream society, and are more apt to sympathize with the problems attributed to working-class women and their lives on television.<sup>7</sup>

My findings here build on conclusions made in my recent book (1991). In research for that work, I found that overall, working-class women accept television's depiction of middle-class life as "normal," and as normative, in that many view achieving a middle-class lifestyle as a goal of their own lives. In contrast to middle-class women, working-class women overall value what they define to be "realism" in television. But often, in their view, realism is defined to mean images of middle-class life, rather than middle-class constructions of their own lives and experience. When television does portray the working-class, women become extremely critical of its images.

primarily for their lack of realism.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that working-class women reject television images of women making abortion decisions, permeated as they are with television's particular focus on the experiences and problems of working-class women seeking abortions. While responses from each of the groups I explore in the study excerpted here vary, all resist the terms prime-time television uses to define the abortion issue. Pro-life women, for example, are distanced from television in a very general way. Their vision of the world includes utopian hopes for the ability of families and communities to come together and support women, particularly women in need. Because the terms of this vision are essentially absent from television, these women by definition feel excluded by its images, as they are in so many ways excluded from mainstream society in the U.S.

Working-class pro-choice women are also alienated from television representations of abortion, but in a more complicated way given that the pro-choice perspective does predominate on the medium. Both the middle-class identified and the working-class identified pro-choice working-class groups object to the victimization of working-class women in television portrayals: neither accepts that these women are powerless, or even very disadvantaged. But middle-class identified women feel the relatively powerless ought to pay for their faults, that they should not be "free" to depend on others or on the state to solve problems they themselves have created. Their support for the pro-choice perspective is qualified by this fear of granting irresponsible women too much freedom and support. In contrast, working-class identified women focus their criticisms on the authorities and corrupt professionals whom they partially blame for their own difficulties. Their pro-choice position is based in part on objections to any policies which might further the authority of the state.

At one level, my goal in this paper, and in the larger study, is to afford working-class women the opportunity to respond to, and criticize, middle-class representations of their own experience. At another, broader level, I seek to explicate pro-choice working-class women's implicit articulation of a more general critique of the pro-choice subject as essentially a middle-class subject, the outgrowth of a discourse rooted in middle-class representations of working-class experience in our culture. Normally the pro-choice position is defined simply as one of a bi-polar set of opinions seen to characterize the abortion debate. In general, this view excludes mention of the different types of subject-positions possible under the more general rubric of "pro-choice." In particular, it excludes explicit reference to the ways members of different social classes articulate the position differently. My research indicates that indeed, "pro-choice" as we commonly define it derives from middle-class conceptions of the world, of individuals, of the experience of "haves" and "have-nots," and of pregnancy and childbearing and women's related dilemmas.<sup>9</sup> It is my hope that the information presented here may shed light on some of the difficulties the pro-choice movement has experienced in presenting a unified political front during recent, and ongoing, abortion struggles.

#### **Abortion on Prime Time**

Over the last two decades, television entertainment's representation of abortion decisions has coalesced around a norm of what one scholar terms "generally acceptable abortions" (Condit 1990). What this means, in effect, is that on television, middle-class or upper-class women can legitimately

abort only in cases of rape, incest, to save the life of the mother, or if genetic testing reveals a severely deformed fetus. Aborting to further a woman's career or to maintain a middle-class level of comfort for the family is not morally condoned in these representations. Single middle-class women may seek abortions, but in general these are portrayed as the "selfish" solution to a problem with other possible resolutions. While middle-class women may be seen to agonize over abortions contemplated for these reasons, in television treatments they are customarily spared the consequences of such decisions by acts of nature (sudden miscarriage or the realization of false pregnancy) relieving the necessity for choices the dominant media find unacceptable. Usually, it is poor or working-class women only who actually obtain abortions in the end.

These norms of representation did not always characterize television representations of abortion. They evolved in part in response to public protest over earlier, more liberal representations of abortion decisions. For example, in two episodes of Maude broadcast on CBS in 1972, the lead character opted for an abortion primarily because she felt too old to raise another child. The network was flooded with angry calls and letters from viewers objecting to this rationale for abortion (Montgomery 1989). Future network programming responded to this history by aiming toward explicitly "balanced" representations of the issue. Ultimately this meant that women's ability to freely choose abortion would no longer be morally sanctioned, or could be sanctioned only under very specific circumstances, such as in the case of women who face mitigating economic circumstances. Only women who are too poor to properly care for a child, or are for whatever reason economically unstable, are permitted on prime-time television to have morally "approvable" abortions. Even for these women, evidence of the responsibility of their decisions must be made abundantly clear. Either they must acknowledge the "irresponsibility" of their actions, or they must demonstrate that obtaining an abortion will contribute to their efforts to raise themselves out of their economically unstable situation into the boundaries of the middle class.

For this paper, I have chosen two separate abortion stories which fall under this prime-time umbrella of acceptable representations of the issue. One, an episode of Cagney and Lacey originally broadcast in 1985, offers an immigrant Hispanic heroine who seeks an abortion to allow her to finish school and better her family circumstances. The other, a made-for-television movie broadcast in 1990 entitled Roe vs. Wade, details the struggles of the real-life woman Norma McCorvey who unsuccessfully sought an abortion in Texas in 1970 and ultimately challenged the legality of prohibitive abortion laws in the landmark case decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1972.

The Cagney and Lacey episode used in this study embodies television's characteristic pro-choice slant (although pro-life elements are present for balance), and pictures a prototypically "acceptable" abortion scenario. The main plot involves police sergeant Christine Cagney and her partner police officer Mary Beth Lacey (who is five months pregnant in the episode) being called upon to protect a Latina (and by implication, Catholic) woman, Mrs. Herrera, who is intimidated by a line of angry anti-abortion while attempting to enter an abortion clinic. Soon after, someone bombs the clinic, inadvertently killing a transient old man. Cagney and Lacey are assigned to uncover the bomber, and ultimately discover that a somewhat crazed member of the picketing right-to-life group is responsible.

Mrs. Herrera is depicted as poor (her husband is on disability). While she is conflicted about the abortion, Mrs. Herrera is convinced that her



dreams of becoming a well-paid court stenographer will be unattainable should she give birth to a child now. She mentions in particular her fear of going on welfare, and her belief that she will be forced to drop out of school, if she has the child. Mrs. Herrera's plight makes one of television's strongest arguments in favor of abortion: that the lives of poor women will be ruined beyond repair by the burden of an unwanted child. Another strong argument in favor of abortion is made when Lacey, talking to her husband in bed, tells of her frightening experience as a teenager seeking an illegal abortion, which led her to fly to Puerto Rico to obtain one legally, an expense which, as a self-supporting student at the time, she could ill afford. Other extreme arguments are mentioned also in passing--Lacey mentions in an argument with Cagney the plight of rape and incest victims, and the abortion clinic doctor bemoans the clinic's bombing by referring to twelve-year-olds who have sought abortions there because they had nowhere else to turn.<sup>9</sup> But the logic that abortion is most legitimate and necessary in the case of poor women predominates on the show.

Producers of this Cagney and Lacey episode consciously sought to achieve a "balanced" presentation of the abortion issue in part due to their desire to avoid inflaming activists on either side as the Maude episodes had done years earlier (Montgomery 1989). This explains its of embedding within its narrative several characters who clearly articulate different sorts of pro-life as well as pro-choice arguments (Condit 1990). For example, Mrs. Herrera's actions are balanced by lead character Cagney's ambivalence toward abortion. Raised a Catholic (she once wanted to be a nun), Cagney is clearly troubled by her assignment to escort Mrs. Herrera past pro-life protestors and into the women's clinic. Balance is also attempted through the presence of an articulate pro-life spokesperson, Mrs. Crenshaw, a white middle-class woman who is head of the pro-life organization sponsoring the demonstration. We also hear Cagney's father, a retired Irish-Catholic police officer who believes abortion is murder.

Despite the overt attempts at balance, the show overall represents abortion as an acceptable choice, but only after careful consideration and only under very specific conditions, which are present in the case of Mrs. Herrera. The show presents more convincing arguments in favor of women's right to safe, legal abortions, than it does arguments in support of the pro-life perspective. This view is supported by Condit (1990), and most of the groups, both pro-choice and pro-life, who have viewed the tape in my study. Yet Mrs. Herrera's abortion is framed in a particular way. She is not an independent, well-employed, middle-class woman as is the Barnard-educated Cagney. Although arguments in favor of the latter's right to abortion are made on the show, the actual abortion subplot it contains concerns a working-class woman rather than the middle-class Cagney; and even her desire for an abortion is portrayed as morally ambiguous. While in the end it appears that Mrs. Herrera has chosen abortion, the act is left unseen; and her ambivalence and fears are highlighted, perhaps to maintain viewer sympathy with her. Choice is legitimated, but only just: in extreme or seemingly extreme circumstances, a woman may legitimately opt for abortion, provided it is a last resort for one who feels herself emotionally and--possibly most significant--financially backed against the wall.

The television movie Roe vs. Wade presents a working-class woman heroine who, unlike the respectable Mrs. Herrera, doesn't play by the rules. Ellen Russell lives a defiantly anti-middle-class lifestyle, and takes no recognizable steps toward achieving middle-class status. Unstable, with

little family support, no good prospects for employment, and no history nor anticipation of a stable relationship with a man, Ellen is a relentlessly nonconformist figure with few if any prospects for attaining middle-class status. Hard-drinking and rough-talking, Ellen defies conventional family values in telling us "I'm a loner; I don't mess with nobody and I don't want nobody messing' with me." Her lack of prospects for conventional family life are fully matched by the lack of promise in her employment history. Travelling with a carnival when we meet her, Ellen quits the job upon learning that she is pregnant for reasons which are not altogether clear to us. She unsuccessfully searches for another job all during her pregnancy; her failure to find anything at all mandates the necessity of giving away her child, although Ellen makes it clear throughout her pregnancy that she feels herself financially incapable of supporting a child in any case.

Ellen's earlier first pregnancy had led her to marry a man who beat her for alleged unfaithfulness when he learned she was pregnant. The marriage ended abruptly, following the abuse. Ellen's extremely critical mother had, Ellen tells us, forced her to sign away daughter Cheryl's care in the best interests of the child. Ellen's mother became guardian of Cheryl. Ellen moved away, and now, living a transient life, Ellen rarely sees her daughter. Ellen found the experience of giving up her child extremely painful. She thought constantly of Cheryl, and felt she could not live through the experience of giving away another child. Yet she could not see her way clear to keeping her second child either, in part because of her guilt at giving up Cheryl ("If I could afford it, wouldn't I be raising Cheryl?"). Ellen's mother makes it clear that she is unwilling to raise a second child for her, thus eliminating that option as an end to the pregnancy.

Ellen's only way out of her dilemma, as she sees it, is to have an abortion. Yet in 1970 abortion is illegal in the state of Texas. She could have obtained one legally in New York or California, but lacks the money to travel to either state. She tries to obtain an illegal, back-alley abortion but is frightened away by the conditions of the operating room. She asks a doctor to "help" her obtain an abortion but he refuses ("I'm not going to break the law"). He will only refer her to a lawyer to help arrange an adoption. This lawyer also refuses her request to refer her to a doctor willing to perform the abortion. Instead, he introduces her to two attorneys, Sarah Weddington and her partner, interested in challenging Texas' Attorney General Henry Wade's enforcement of Texas laws prohibiting the performing of abortion. Ellen cooperates with the attorneys, telling them "You ladies are my last hope." She believes, or at least hopes, that their suit will be settled in time for her to obtain an abortion. Although they are ultimately successful, and in 1972 anti-abortion statues are overturned nationwide, the final decision comes too late for Ellen. In the end, she goes through with her pregnancy, and gives the baby up for adoption. We see an extremely heartbreaking scene in the delivery room, where the nurses will not allow her even once to hold or look at her child. Following the experience, Ellen becomes so depressed that she attempts suicide. She is unsuccessful, however, and the movie ends with her reading in the newspapers that her case has succeeded when brought to the Supreme Court. Despite her momentary anger toward the lawyers for not making her abortion possible, in the end Ellen is grateful to have participated in so momentous a lawsuit.

Unlike Mrs. Herrera, Ellen does not play by the rules of middle-class society. Even if Texas laws could have changed in time for her to obtain it, her abortion would not have helped her enter into the middle-class or even

become a more stable member of the working-class. It would merely have spared her the pain of giving up yet another child, a pain already felt very keenly every time Ellen's thoughts turned to her daughter Cheryl. We are told nothing of her plans to further her education, obtain job skills, or even of her resolve to attain steady employment. Yet Ellen is portrayed in a heroic light. Pioneer of the feminist fight against restrictive abortion laws, her story is meant to be uplifting. Sympathetically drawn, Ellen remains spunky despite the many obstacles she faces in her life, restrictive abortion laws among them. She and other women like her, the movie implies, are victimized by these laws. Ellen's story is meant to offer some justification for the feminist struggle to change them, and for the continuing fight to uphold the Roe vs. Wade decision.<sup>10</sup>

### Methodology

To date I have conducted focus group interviews with twenty-five groups of two to five women, usually in the home of one of the respondents.<sup>11</sup> Of these, four working-class pro-choice groups, three working-class pro-life groups, and two middle-class groups from each perspective viewed Roe vs. Wade; four working-class pro-choice groups, two working-class pro-life groups, six middle-class pro-choice groups and two middle-class pro-life groups viewed Cagney and Lacey. My total number of respondents to date is eighty-three.<sup>12</sup> To obtain respondents, I located individual women who were representative of groups I wished to sample and who were willing to invite several of their friends to an interview. Middle-class informants had completed four years of college and were themselves employed in professional positions or were married to men employed as professionals or executives. Working-class informants had two years of college or fewer; if married, their husbands had a similar educational background and were working at blue-collar jobs.<sup>13</sup> The contact women were located through newspaper advertisements and announcements that were made at Ann Arbor PTA meetings; pilot groups were located through undergraduate classes at the University of Michigan. I explained to the respondents that I was interested in studying friend groups in the homes of one of their members. I screened over the telephone the proposed composition of groups to ensure that they contained representatives of the social groups I sought. My research design provided a fairly naturalistic environment for television viewing, and also attempted to create a situation in which respondents would feel comfortable while discussing sensitive issues (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Agar 1980; Morley 1986). It also gave me the opportunity to observe the way people talk about morality in a semi-public setting.

The interviews began with a series of questions about the respondents' activities as a group, their typical pattern of discussion about moral issues, and about their television viewing habits. Later I asked them to describe and discuss their experiences with either their own decisions about unwanted pregnancies or that of friends or relatives. They were encouraged to talk about the considerations that women they know made in order to reach their reproductive decisions, and to give me their thoughts as well on the topic. The respondents then viewed either a thirty minute version of the Cagney and Lacey abortion episode from which sub-plots and commercials had been edited, or the first thirty-five minutes of the Roe vs. Wade television movie (using identical wording, I told each group how the story ended following this segment). After viewing the tape, the women were asked specific questions about their reactions to the positions expressed by the characters in the show. Prior to each interview, respondents completed a questionnaire

concerning basic demographic information, media use habits, and general opinions about abortion: following the interview, each respondent was paid twenty-five dollars in the Cagney and Lacey interviews, twenty dollars in the Roe vs. Wade interviews. The sessions generally lasted from two-and-a-half to three-and-one-half hours. All group interviews were taped and later transcribed and coded.<sup>14</sup>

### Pro-Choice Working-Class Responses

**Mrs. Herrera.** Working-class pro-choice groups are unified in their almost universal affection for and support of the character of Mrs. Herrera, in contrast to their rather divided response to the character of Ellen Russell, whom I discuss in more detail below. Mrs. Herrera, it seems, is a relatively uncontroversial heroine of a television abortion story. Pregnant within marriage, working hard in school, worried about her husband, and troubled over the morality of abortion, Mrs. Herrera faces her abortion decision in a way which makes her as acceptable to these women as she is to middle-class pro-choice women, and even to some pro-life women as well. Working-class pro-choice women particularly find it easy to identify with Mrs. Herrera's struggle to be upwardly mobile. Yes, they agree, it is difficult to finish school while caring for a child and receiving welfare. One woman even recalls her social worker's advice to delay schooling until her children are of school age:

#### GROUP 2:

1: Well, in her situation I could see why she'd want to do it. She'd be better off doing it than to have the baby and have to give up everything and then, you know, not be able to take care of her kids in the future. It's really, really hard to go to school when you have kids and people try to make it look like there's a chance and there isn't. There's almost this much chance...one in a million people make it. I'm trying right now to go to beauty school and get help from the state, and the lady's just telling me, don't even try it. The lady from the welfare office, she's saying, you won't be able to afford to pay the babysitter, you won't be able to do this. I don't want to give you such a negative aspect, but they told me not to do it. She said, you're going to bury yourself in trying to pay for daycare. You are only going to get forty-three dollars a week, which is not enough for the amount of hours that you are going to need daycare. She says we don't like them to even try until their kids are in full time school, that's what she said.

Other working-class pro-choice women mention the fact that the disabled Mr. Herrera might need care as well, worrying that Mrs. Herrera will be unable to meet the needs of her husband as well as her child. They see her desire for an abortion as understandable in this light. In all, reactions to Mrs. Herrera are relatively untroubled and supportive. Women in these groups find that her situation presents a strong argument justifying legalized abortion.

**Ellen Russell.** Ellen Russell's situation provokes a more troubled reaction. Ellen is received by pro-choice working-class women on a continuum which ranges from lukewarm approval to extreme disapproval. While women do not tend to condemn Ellen's right to abortion, they disapprove more generally of her lifestyle and the circumstances which led to this unwanted pregnancy in

particular, as in these comments:

GROUP 3:

- 3: she was not the type to raise a child, definitely. Not her lifestyle was not that...I don't think it would be conducive to raising a child. Of course there are a lot of children who live with carnivals and things of that nature who are truly remarkable people. Her own personal lifestyle however, leaves something to be desired there. She's rather loose there....
- 4: She needs to get a little more responsible with where she's sleeping around or what she's doing while she's there though. A little more responsible sex.

and these:

GROUP 1:

- 4: Well, she [Ellen] made me feel that abortions only happen to roughnecks.
- 1: Yeah, that's what they made it look like too.
- 4: Yeah, she looked like a little slut. Like a little motorcycle mama to me. Somebody that's on the streets, you know.

In fact, some women object explicitly to the fact that Ellen's case was used to illustrate abortion. Why not invoke the image of middle-class women in abortion clinics, the woman quoted above goes on to assert:

GROUP 1:

4. But that's not true [that it's only women like Ellen who have abortions]. Doctors wives can have one. Attorneys wives, you know. You can be a well to do woman and still want an abortion. You don't have to be a street person and they made it look like only the bad people, you know, what was it, an attorney or a judge, not too long ago was in the paper was quoted saying something about abortion would be legal or you could get an abortion if you've been raped by a black man. Something, what was this just recently, he had to come back and give an apology on the TV and that sort of thing, saying OK, I don't agree with this either, you can be raped by anybody and still want an abortion. Well, this kind of made me feel like that because she was from a rough part of town or she acted rough and tough and she like to hang out in bars and all this....that's not reality. In reality any woman could need an abortion whether she's on the streets, in a fifty thousand or four hundred thousand dollar home.

In contrast to Mrs. Herrera, who aspires to middle-class status, Ellen Russell's character is extremely non-middle-class identified. She is a working-class woman who appears to have no real prospects of leaving her class, nor does she actively seek them. Among pro-choice working-class groups, there are two different sets of responses to her character which mark two distinct forms of working-class identity. Women's evaluations of Ellen vary in relation to how working-class identified vs. middle-class

identified women are themselves. Initial pre-television interviews indicate that women vary widely along this dimension. I will consider the responses to the character of Ellen in particular, and to Roe vs. Wade in general, made by members of one prototypical group chosen to represent each category.

### Working-Class Identified Women

While some working-class women see themselves as no different from and/or aspiring toward the middle-class, others construct a very different self-identity, one more working-class identified, in my terms. The latter is well-encapsulated by the words of one woman who asked me what groups I was interviewing. Wanting to respond honestly but unwilling to use explicitly the terminology of social class, I rather euphemistically responded that I was sampling different occupational groups. My subject responded "Oh, you mean high-class, middle-class, and no class, like us!" Another woman, from another working-class identified pro-choice group, explains that I could feel free to use her own first name (though as a matter of policy I did not), since "No one who was a professor would know who I was." This lack of concern for anonymity contrasts sharply with middle-class identified women's attitudes; often they are so concerned with anonymity that they take a false first name from the very beginning of the interview tape, a position uncommon among the women I interviewed. The former quote belies the acknowledgement, by women of the working-class identified group, that they are not identified with, nor do they necessarily aspire to, membership in the middle-class. The latter emphasizes the assured sense of anonymity and invisibility women in this group experience, based on the feeling of discontinuity from other more mainstream social groups. In the discussion which follows, I choose the group from which the former quote originated as my prototype group ("GROUP 1" of working-class pro-choice groups viewing Roe vs. Wade), used here to represent the working-class identified category.

Working-class identified women tend to be suspicious of middle-class authority, in ways middle-class identified women are not. Their speech is littered with references to their distrust of middle-class (and, by extension, societal) authority. For example, consider these comments made about the doctor who treated Ellen:

GROUP 1:

AP: What did you think of the doctor? When she went to see the doctor?

4: Scaredy-cat. My first impression was he just doesn't want to lose his license. You know how easy it is to sue a doctor right now, malpractice suits, I mean. It's just like in our hospitals today, you can go in for any kind of surgery and the first thing they have you sign is those arbitration or whatever they're called. So this guy is just covering his own ass. It's getting harder and harder to find a doctor that will deliver babies. It really is. So I felt like he was just like any other doctor [tone here is sarcastic], he's covering his ass. It's not legal in that state, so don't come to me for something. [said sarcastically]

1: [He's just saying] I don't know nothing about it.

4: Yeah, [he's saying] I'll do nothing illegal [said in scornful, derisive tone].

Women betray extreme cynicism about the entire legal profession in the tone and content of these remarks.

Derision of Ellen's doctor carries over into this group's evaluation of other professional characters on Roe vs. Wade as well. Along with their respect for Ellen's independence, the group strongly criticizes Ellen's attorneys for "using" her to further their own careers. On the show, the attorneys tell us that they have not been entirely honest with Ellen, in that they never told her this was their first case. Indeed, after the first verdict, Ellen accuses them of misleading her into thinking the case would be decided in time for her to have an abortion (the show leaves the facts surrounding this issue somewhat ambiguous). However, in the show a balancing attempt is made to picture the concern which Sarah Weddington in particular has for Ellen in several conversations the two are shown to have. Yet Weddington fails to call Ellen after her baby is born and in general does not take much time out from her more productive life to be overly solicitous (although the reader should note that not all of these interactions are shown in the segment viewed by groups).

The group responds to this situation as follows:

GROUP 1:

AP: What did you think of how the women lawyers handled their contacts with her? The way they treated her?

4: I don't think they were very fair and honest with her right up front. I think they misled her. I don't think she realized in the beginning how long it really would take.

3: Well, they didn't tell her either, [that it would take] two months.

4: And then here you see her all of a sudden and she's got this big old belly. And I think they took this case on....they believed in it and they believed in woman's choice, but I think they did it to set their career off. I think it was done selfishly on their part, because like they both said, we're not telling her the truth, neither one of us have ever litigated.

AP: So you thought the women lawyers were sort of misleading her?

3: I think so, I think they were just trying to further themselves. I don't think they really came down to the bottom line with her and I don't think she was really smart enough to question them thoroughly enough on the situation.

1: It was just any light of hope.

2: They told her in May and it was March, she was just like...

4: She was in limbo, she didn't know what to do. She was just believing what they told her.

3: Since there was nothing available at that point in time in Texas, that they would give her some alternatives. But they didn't even suggest

anything. I think they did it to further their own careers and they're probably rich wealthy lawyers now.

In answer to my question as to whether the lawyers should have helped Ellen obtain a legal abortion in New York, the group goes on to say that they should have, mentioning several other ways the attorneys might also have helped Ellen once they realized their case would not be resolved in time for her to obtain an abortion:

- AP: Do you think they should have given her the money to go to New York to get the abortion?
- 2: You know, that crossed my mind, that if they would have really cared, you know, they could have probably done that. They looked like they...
- 4: Had they have done that, wouldn't that have just thrown the case right out the window and they--wouldn't that have thrown the case right out the window. Wouldn't that have stopped all court procedures had they have done something like that?
- 1: How would they know?
- 3: She was using a fictitious name anyway.
- 4: Well, that's true, that's true.
- 3: Why couldn't she have gone to some abortion clinic or Planned Parenthood or however they did it at that point in time in New York and used another fictitious name. Who's to say where the money came from. How would anybody know where the money came from. Unless one of the three said something.

Women in this group are much more effusive in detailing the possible ways her attorneys might have helped Ellen than are women in other pro-life and pro-choice groups, even though most agree that the attorneys used Ellen. This detail flows from the group's generally critical attitude toward professionals and authorities of any kind.

In contrast to their critical attitude to authority, working-class identified women are less critical of Ellen herself than are any other working-class women interviewed. While this doesn't translate into particularly effusive affection for Ellen, working-class identified women do see some redeeming qualities in her character. One woman, for example, praises Ellen's unwillingness to go on welfare, attributing it to her "pride" and independence:

GROUP 1:

- 2: You know, that one remark she made, I'm not trash...
- 4: I tend to believe some people would just as soon live off the streets before they would ask for any kind of help. Maybe she [Ellen] was that way.
- 3: Too much pride.



4: Yeah, her pride stepped in before she would ask the state for help, or whatever the case would be. Maybe that's her case. I don't really know her character, but...

These women find Ellen's pride and stubbornness admirable.

Working-class identified women are also more inclined than others to note some parallels between Ellen's character and situation, and themselves, or others in their families or friend groups. In this, they show evidence of identification with Ellen. One woman in the group, after viewing the show, begins retelling the story of her niece whom she had mentioned in the pre-television discussion, noting at several points her similarity to Ellen. Like Ellen, her niece had one child as a teen which relatives had (almost entirely) raised, and had become pregnant soon after with a second child. My respondent had paid for her niece's abortion of the second pregnancy:

GROUP 1:

4: She [her niece] had an abortion to keep from having another child raised by her mother and her aunt. *Similar to this case [italics are mine]*.

AP: Do you help out financially with her child?

4: Um huh. We did, now we're not so much.

AP: Is she working?

4: Well, she had jobs off and on, but now she's living with someone on a more permanent basis that he's financing them. He's taking care of her and her six year old. We don't have to help them anymore. But, during her sowing her wild oats more or less, she got pregnant again and it was just a mutual agreement by all of us for her to have this abortion. I don't feel bad that she did.

AP: Do you think she regrets that? Does she think she made the right decision?

4: No. She made the right decision. She wasn't very far along at all, she was maybe six, eight weeks. Just enough to know she was pregnant, it wasn't like the kicking and the moving and the feeling and the you know, it was like oh shit, I missed my period, I'm pregnant, now what do I do. You know, I've got one kid that my Mom's got taking care of, *similar to this girl here you know, real similar [italics are mine]* except in my niece's case, she knew that it was not a permanent thing. Now, she has her son, they have a wonderful life and things are working out for them. And she's grown up a lot. She's in her twenties, she's more settled, you know, but it took her awhile. That's [how it is] with these girls, they don't realize when they're young and they have these babies, that life's not a bowl of roses here if they don't have a loving family to help them and to take care of these children for them and financially help them.

Women in this group have had, either personally or through family connections.

experiences which lead them to accept the way Roe vs. Wade portrays Ellen's lack of resources. Unlike pro-life women in particular, who (as I explain elsewhere; Press 1992) insist that Ellen has not fully tapped all family resources available to her, these women feel that at times such resources do not exist. One woman, a young unwed mother receiving financial support from her parents, recognizes this:

GROUP 1:

2: Yeah. I know I'm lucky. I know a lot of people that have a baby and they don't get any help.

Another woman continues:

GROUP 1:

4: Yeah, they're in a world of hurt. For them they need the choice of maybe being able to have an abortion. Because you're already struggling, you know, if you're a young girl and you're out there struggling your ass off to make ends meet, what's the burden of bringing another one into that struggle.

Women in this group both admire aspects of Ellen's character and identify with her as well.

#### **Middle-Class Identified Women**

Working-class women who are middle-class identified, on the other hand, see themselves as essentially members of the middle-class already. Unlike working-class identified women, they take great pains to construct a picture of themselves which maintains complete separateness between themselves and the "lower" members of their class, e.g. people who don't work responsibly, don't have drive and ambition, take too many drugs or drink heavily, "drifters," and people who have irresponsible sex. One woman characteristically differentiates herself from those "others" who would accept public assistance as follows:

GROUP 3:

2: Many of us may have been in a situation at one time or another where we've struggled and we've made real hard attempts to avoid using those sources or may have been denied those sources for various reasons.

In the following discussion, I rely on the remarks of a group I've chosen to represent the prototype of the middle-class identified pro-choice perspective (Group 3 of the working-class pro-choice groups). All four women in the group were managers, or assistant managers, at a large retail chainstore--by coincidence, the same store at which one of the women in my working-class identified group worked in a lower position.<sup>15</sup>

Contrasting with their working-class identified counterparts, middle-class identified women are relentlessly critical of Ellen's character. Many of Ellen's unconventional traits directly offend women in this group. For example, unlike women in the working-class identified group, these women interpret Ellen's unwillingness to go on welfare as evidence of ignorant "Texican" attitudes about who is trash, and who isn't.

Women in the middle-class identified group fill in the narrative's

"unsaid." completing Ellen's character sketch with qualities and background which ultimately make her an even more striking object of disapproval. One often-criticized but only sketchily drawn aspect of Ellen's situation, for example, are the circumstances under which she became pregnant for the second time. We don't know anything about the baby's father or her relationship with him. All she does tell us is that he is "not interested," presumably in helping Ellen either to raise the child or to obtain an abortion.

One member of the middle-class identified group, however, articulates in some detail her belief that Ellen probably sleeps around: "I don't sleep with a man three days after I meet him," she ventures, implying that Ellen does precisely this (although there is no information to this effect on the show! except a similar and similarly unsupported accusation made by Ellen's mother). This woman, and others in the group, are quite willing to fill in the (particularly negative) details of Ellen's character which they feel may be lacking, thus embellishing her character with a series of negative qualities not necessarily intended in the television portrayal, but perceived nevertheless by group members:

GROUP 3:

- 4: She obviously did not want to be pregnant. Obviously. She didn't seem to be in a long term relationship. It sounded like it was just some guy passing through town or one of the other carnies...OK I've know him for a month or two months or however long. Personally I don't go to bed with somebody three days after I meet them, but that's just me (laughs). It just seemed it wasn't that she was in this long term involved, stable relationship. [It was] not even necessarily long term, it seemed like it was just like a one night stand basically. Oops, I got pregnant. You've got to be a little more careful, you know.
- 3: She even said to her father and mother, he was just a guy. That's too bad.
- 2: I think it seemed like she was constantly in an environment where drinking might be available. She might have been drunk at the time of the pregnancy, you don't know.

These women reconstruct the details of Ellen's life in an extremely unflattering light. While Ellen is portrayed as a working-class heroine, another of television's prototypical disadvantaged women seeking an abortion, she is received in this light only some of the time, by some women; others resist this portrayal, as indicated here.

The group jump off from their discussion by using their construction of Ellen's character to rationalize their plan to sterilize women who have had too many abortions, thus draining either government money or bleeding insurance companies dry. Such irresponsible behavior, they reason, should be stopped, particularly when their taxes or health care costs are affected because of it, or when it wastes doctors' valuable time:

- 4: Those are the people who line up frequently, using abortion as birth control. There's a whole lot easier, cheaper, less painful ways to have birth control, than to keep getting abortions. We have people at work that [say things like] "I think I'm pregnant again, I don't think I can go through my fourth abortion." You're twenty-two, what do you mean

your fourth abortion? "Well. I didn't want to go to the drug store..."  
Well, then cross your legs and go home!  
[Several jokes made my group members here.]

AP: Do you think that people like that should also have access to abortions?

4: I think they should have access to voluntary sterilization.

3: Precisely.

4: Have sex three times and you're out here...No, I...[Laughter]

3: There has to be some kind of control. We need a national computerized system here. Get an abortion in Boone, Kentucky,...and then if they move to Ypsilanti, Michigan to get another abortion, that's it chick. Twice and you're out! I'm serious, OK? We are the government [emphasis is mine], we have a responsibility to stop all this endless waste. It's a waste of money, it's a waste of good professional time. Why should some doctor spend all the time aborting some woman? I know one who has had seven abortions! I'm ahead of you. Why should some doctor spend good medical time and taxpayers money or anybody's money to keep aborting the same person over and over again?

These women recoil from a situation in which abortions are too free and easy to obtain, constructing a vision which would rely on centralized authorities to promote responsible behavior by limiting women's access to them. This group shows no hesitation invoking societal authorities to discipline the lives of women they feel are too free and easy. In fact, they identify with these authorities explicitly in their speech: "We are the government."

Most strongly criticized by these women generally, in Ellen's case, is what is seen to be her lack of self-reliance. Ellen is a woman "looking for a handout," the very type of person most likely to end up with a free ride from the welfare system, and probably the least deserving of it. They find Ellen's job search, and her continual complaint that she cannot find work, to be unconvincing: "She kept saying she kept trying to find a job, that there wasn't any work. Yet she could go out and have fun with her friends" (GROUP 3, Respondent 2). Ellen gets no credit, as she did from the working-class identified women, for her reluctance to go on public assistance (although somehow, given the group's attitude, it seems that she should). For this group, her other irresponsible qualities completely override this virtue.

Most telling of the group's particularly accepting attitude toward authority, and in sharp contrast to their working-class identified counterparts, is the way middle-class identified women characterize Ellen's relationship with the middle-class attorneys who take her case to the Supreme Court in an attempt to legalize abortion. While working-class identified women criticize Ellen's attorneys for using her to get ahead, this group simply acknowledges this situation matter-of-factly, in a tone suggesting this is the behavior to be expected of attorneys. When I ask them if they thought her attorneys ought to have flown Ellen to New York to obtain a legal abortion, they chant an indignant "no" in a unison which rarely occurs in group interviews of this nature. The reason? Ellen did not "contract" in advance with her lawyers for this kind of help. Perhaps had she been shrewd enough to demand it in the beginning, she might deserve it. But then, of

course. Ellen was anything but shrewd. And rather than garnering their sympathy through her naivete, in their view Ellen ought to pay for her lack of sophistication and strategy. Her attorneys owed her no help, nor did she deserve any. In fact, the group react with some disbelief and shock that I would even mention this as a possibility, as though they can't quite believe anyone could take this position. It seems to offend their most basic convictions in the importance of self-reliance for individuals. In contrast, working-class identified women also mention Ellen's failure to drive a hard bargain with her lawyers, but they do so in a more sympathetic way, indicating compassion for Ellen's inability to look out for her own interests more successfully.

Overall, the middle-class identified group's responses to Ellen's character and criticisms of her actions help women in this group to construct their own identities in opposition to hers. The group's tendency to separate themselves from Ellen's character and social group is emphasized by their reconstruction of the experiences of the daughter of one of their members, a reconstruction which contrasts markedly with the working-class identified woman's tale of her niece described in the section above. In this case, a group member's daughter, Arlene, had become pregnant while still in high school, causing her to drop out of school and have an abortion. Shortly thereafter, she became pregnant again, this time deciding to keep the baby, although she remained unmarried. She later married the father briefly, and was now divorced. She was currently working, caring for her daughter, and planning to attend school part-time at some point in the future.

Members of the group collectively assume an unusual, almost reverent tone when discussing this girl's experience (my research assistant refers to this as the "sainthood" of Arlene), which stands out clearly from the rest of their discussion and is particularly remarkable when compared to the tone they later assume to discuss and evaluate Ellen's character, as in these passages:

GROUP 3:

- 3: Arlene is a very mature young lady, always has been. Her actions at that time may not have been considered mature, but her decisions were correct for her at that time....
- 2: She has an unusual confidence and responsibility. I think a lot of that comes from the support that she's received. It's an unusual circumstance in that she has a real friendship I think with her Mom and with Pete [her stepfather].

Group members repeat several times "Arlene is an exceptionally mature individual" and variations thereof. No one criticizes Arlene's character, despite her actions (dropping out of school, becoming pregnant repeatedly, aborting one fetus, keeping another, then marrying and quickly divorcing the father). Ellen, on the other hand, disliked strongly by all group members, is criticized as morally "loose" and irresponsible for actions strikingly similar to those of Arlene's.

While the group's regard for her mother's feelings certainly accounts in part for their reluctance to criticize Arlene, what comes across in their discussion is the feeling that the women strongly believe what they are saying. While my interpretation (corroborated by my research assistant) could of course be mistaken, the women really seem to like Arlene, and to admire her strength in surviving and making the best of difficult circumstances. I conclude that the divergence in this group's feelings toward Arlene and Ellen

may be accounted for by their desire to separate themselves from "those immoral" working-class people like Ellen, that one sees on television and hears about in the news.

This interpretation is strengthened by the group's view of welfare abusers:

GROUP 3:

2: Of course the trade that we're in, we get to see misuse of welfare money, continuously.

4: Oh, they misuse foodstamps like you wouldn't believe.

3: If you've ever read foodstamps, if you ever looked at the books or actually read what you can do with them foodstamps, you can buy lobster if you wish and they frequently do...You can't buy soda, you can't buy tobacco, of course you can't buy alcohol, but if you wish to have a lobster dinner for your friends and you can all come up with enough welfare money, you can have a lobster dinner. You can buy steak.

In general, this group strongly disapproves of the "lazy, irresponsible" people who receive government assistance. The system is flawed, people have no incentive to work, and ultimately they'd like to see it wiped out altogether.

Group members' more hypothetical, theoretical views on the subject, however, contrast sharply with their descriptions of the actual people on welfare that they meet at work. One woman, for example, takes job applications at her place of employment (a large discount supermarket-hardware establishment). She sympathetically describes applicants coming to her who "should have been paid yesterday," single fathers whose children haven't eaten in days, for example, and others in extreme need of aid. She and the group strongly agree that these people are in need of assistance. When discussing them, they criticize the welfare system for not being generous enough, for not meeting the needs of such people quickly enough. The woman in charge of hiring such applicants goes on to describe the decisions she must make regarding their work abilities. Often such people "need a chance," as she puts it; they could be efficient workers despite their lack of experience, high school degrees, or other paper qualifications. These attitudes toward the actual people she encounters in the course of her job, many of whom end up as her co-workers, contradict the way she and her friends characterize the scheming masses on welfare, and also with the way they seem to place Ellen in this category, despite Ellen's insistence on remaining off welfare. Again, such contrasts might be explained by this group's desire to separate themselves and those they work with from the bulk of working-class and poor people "out there," thereby strengthening their construction of, and identification with, a middle-class identified subject position. In sum, in this instance working-class women in my middle-class identified group put aside their personal experience in favor of expressing more abstract commitments to principles often untouched by their own specific experience. Mass media are often evaluated similarly, with reference to their commitment to principle rather than their own experience with reality. When experience and principle conflict, the conflict is often decided in favor of the latter rather than the former. The political meaning of this tendency may become clearer in my discussion below.

## Conclusion

Working-class pro-choice women's responses to the television characters of Mrs. Herrera and Ellen Russell may be divided into two main prototypes. In contrast to their essentially sympathetic response to Mrs. Herrera, working-class women's responses to Ellen questions, rather than assumes, the perspective of Ellen's middle-class creators who sympathize with her while creating a narrative which almost disempowers her entirely. What unifies both sets of pro-choice working-class women's responses is that each group resists this disempowering presentation of Ellen's self, objecting to its fundamental terms and logic. To working-class pro-choice women in both groups, Ellen can take charge--or at least, can assume more control--of her life than she is pictured as capable of doing. One of the reasons Mrs. Herrera fares so well in comparison with Ellen is precisely because she is interpreted as in control of her destiny, while Ellen is not. Neither group of women is willing to relinquish this vision of control. Perhaps in the end, they identify too strongly with television's working-class women, and refuse to concede a lack of control in their own lives, as they do in Ellen's.

Class and group differences in these responses correspond to the different languages invoked in defense of the pro-choice position by members of these two groups. Preliminary data indicate that middle-class pro-choice women embrace a uniformly liberal language to justify their support of an individual's right to make her own, private decisions (Press 1992). This language is qualified, however, in the case of pro-choice working-class women, as their responses to its mass media incarnations illustrate. Media afford them the opportunity to respond to middle-class perspectives on working-class life, and to resist them by putting forth their own interpretations and evaluations of such experiences. In this way an alternative working-class identity is constructed--their own.

Middle-class identified working-class women resist the sympathetic middle-class constructions of their own identity which pepper the mass media. Rather than acknowledging the limitations of class, these women steadfastly deny the existence of any limits at all. They resist the liberal, therapeutic<sup>16</sup> worldview which acknowledges with sympathy the personal problems and handicaps faced by many in our culture, and which Ellen's portrayal automatically calls up in my study's middle-class respondents. Instead, they embrace more conservative threads in our culture. They oppose the welfare state, insisting that we are all equal, and that government ought to be limited, allowing us to obtain what we deserve by dint of our own hard efforts and perseverance. This belief in a low profile for government also leads this group to embrace generally pro-choice tenets concerning abortion. Yet the group's adherence to the pro-choice perspective is a qualified one. The right to abortion ought not to justify an irresponsible freedom for women. Women giving evidence of exercising their freedom irresponsibly ought to have that freedom curtailed. In addition to the rhetoric of rights, then, the group invoke notions of the good as well, in their moralistic interpretation of Ellen and in their prescriptions concerning the ways in which immoral behavior ought to be curtailed. This is the "communitarian" strain in their thought (Sandel 1984). Communitarianism contrasts community-based notions of what is "good" to the Kantian liberal rhetoric of "rights" most often used to support the pro-choice position in our public political discourse. A qualified, communitarian pro-choice perspective better describes the group's position than does our more customary, undifferentiated use of the pro-choice label to

construct a pro-choice political subject.

The communitarian strain evident in the middle-class identified group resonates in part with that evident in pro-life rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> But while the pro-life vision is utopian, envisioning a community wherein all families are stable, and each sacrifices to care for others in the human community at large, these pro-choice women are much less utopian. They envision a hierarchical community where the smarter and more able must care, however unwillingly, for those less intelligent and responsible. In this view, the latter ought to pay for their burdensome qualities: the danger of abortion, welfare, and unemployment benefits is that things may become too easy for them, threatening the triumph of the sensible--themselves, and the authorities with whom they feel interchangeable.

For working-class identified women, in contrast, the dangers are reversed: more restrictive abortion laws may mean that central control of women might become too easy for the authorities that reign, persons whose interests are inevitably at odds with their own. Working-class identified pro-choice respondents also resist media portrayals of their condition. Like their middle-class identified counterparts, women in this group dislike Ellen, finding her irresponsible and irritatingly--but unconvincingly--helpless. Yet rather than blaming Ellen entirely for her plight, they are suspicious of both the professional and familial authorities--the doctor, her lawyers, her mother--she deals with. Television's benevolent professionals do not impress them in the least. Ellen's salvation lies not in obeying authority and conforming to society's rules, but in learning to navigate these rules to the best of her ability, as do these women in the course of their lives. For this group, criticisms of television focus on articulating and exposing its sanctioning of authorities and the rights of authorities to interfere in women's lives.

Whether or not these women personally condone abortion (and often by their own admission they do not), women in this group are reluctant to invoke societal authority to outlaw it. The group remains unconvinced that they should support the authorities which rule their society and communities. In their experience, such authority is more likely to persecute them than to work to secure their rights. The group's propensity, then, is to support policies designed to limit the authorities' reach, as is the case with the pro-choice stance on abortion. Unlike the middle-class identified group, working-class identified women do not put their faith in notions of the good which then must be supported by societal and community authorities. Consequently, their liberal support for the right to free choice is more unqualified, as they are reluctant to allow authorities any more personal power over their lives than the considerable and sufficient amount which, in their view, is already exercised.

The mass media readily capture a both a moralistic attitude toward abortion, as well as a rights-oriented defense of the pro-choice position, in their portrayal of "generally acceptable abortions" on entertainment television. Both the characters of Mrs. Herrera and of Ellen Russell are painted sympathetically, as poor women who find they must make the extremely difficult decision to abort unplanned children. Middle-class women accept these portraits at face value, while working-class women do not.<sup>18</sup> Instead, working-class women make distinctions and judgments within these television images of their own group.

Some judgments result from some working-class women's aspirations toward middle-class identity, and consequent rejection of a fixed working-class



identity for themselves or any other members of their class. If easy access to abortion for all women must be somewhat sacrificed in the construction of this alternative identity, the middle-class identified women are willing to pay this price, in part because they believe it won't affect "sensible" people like themselves. Middle-class identified women's responses to television images, in these instances, can be seen as evidence that they resist hegemonic interpretations of abortion dilemmas and hegemonic constructions of their own identities as subjects. But the basis for this resistance is an ultimate conformity to hegemonic notions of what upward mobility, middle-class identity, and middle-class membership really mean. In this sense, then, working-class women in this sub-group are ultimately thwarted in their attempt to truly resist dominant meanings and definitions of their identities, actions, and of the parameters of their world.

Pro-choice working-class identified women offer a different order of critique. They reject not only middle-class created images of themselves, but those created to portray the middle-class as well. Their overall skepticism of television maintains a distance from it which is absent for their middle-class identified counterparts. These women more successfully maintain their guard in the face of mass media's efforts to define their own self-identities. Their own constructions do not match the public incarnations of the pro-choice subject to which the media have helped inure us. As Glendon notes, public "political rhetoric has grown increasingly out of touch with the more complex ways of speaking that Americans employ around the kitchen table, in their schools, workplaces, and in their various communities of memory and mutual aid" (1991:xii). My goal in this paper has been to illustrate some of the differences between the way the pro-choice political subject is constructed in our public political rhetoric, as incarnated in the mass media; and the ways in which pro-choice subjectivity is constructed by members of two groups of pro-choice working-class women. Glendon's warning is well illustrated by my findings here. I hope through this study to achieve a more sophisticated view of the ways in which concrete political subjectivities are constituted in our society in response to their more undifferentiated incarnation in dominant media forms.

With this study, I present an example the new tradition of feminist research studying the popular cultural audience. Unlike more traditional audience research, the methodologies I employ here allow women to speak for themselves, and with each other, in the context of television viewing, questionnaire answering, and in-depth interviewing. The focus-group methodology allows women to engage in semi-public discourse during the interview, allowing us to observe and interpret differences between this type of discourse as it occurs in the presence, and absence, of television. My focus on social class differences among women (and racial differences in the larger study) adds a dimension to feminist audience research which has too often either over-generalized from white middle-class samples, or ignored class and racial differences among women altogether. Information about the ways in which different groups of women form and express their identities as subjects against the background of hegemonic cultural and media discourses will, I hope, help us to develop further notions about the forms of subjectivity which characterize postmodern society. Perhaps further awareness of these forms will lead to increasingly more effective ways of coming to know and understand the varieties of subjectivity we continually encounter in our work and in our lives.

## Notes

1. This has been written about extensively in the anthropological literature: see, for example, Rabinow 1977; Geertz 1983, 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986.
2. See Long (1989) for a detailed overview of the work currently being done in feminist cultural studies.
3. Some theorists have challenged the necessity of this dichotomy. Jayrantine and Stewart (1991), for example, argue that quantitative methodologies are in no way inherently non-feminist, and can often be used as effectively (or in some cases, more effectively) as qualitative methodologies to support feminist theoretical positions.
4. See Harding (1991) and Tong (1989) for a good discussion and critique of essentialism. Also, see Scott's (1988) review of several then-current works in feminist theory whom she criticizes for this tendency.
5. Both Ginsburg and Luker have noted that the social class constituencies of pro-life and pro-choice activist groups differ, pro-life groups appearing more working-class in character.
6. The categories of "pro-life" and "pro-choice" are, as I argue elsewhere (Press and Cole, forthcoming), falsely dichotomize working-class women's actual positions on abortion. Interviews reveal that women often disagree with the basic presumptions behind the existence of these two opinion categories. I retain use of these two categories here, however, for descriptive purposes.
7. These labels are coined primarily from tendencies exhibited in women's pre-television discussions. In these rather far-ranging discussions, women answer the following questions:
  1. Go around and introduce yourselves (to us).
  2. How do you spend your time as a group?  
(Do you ever watch TV together as a group?)
  3. What do you and your friends (e.g., this friend group) talk about?  
(Edging into moral issues.)  
(See if abortion comes up.)
  4. I'm interested in studying morality. Do you think morality is an abstract thing, or does it come up in your everyday life as something you have to think about?
  5. Are moral issues generally covered in the news that you read or hear? Have you heard or read much about abortion in the news recently? What sorts of things have you read or heard discussed? What do you think about recent developments regarding this issue?

6. One of the moral issues people are talking about today is the issue of abortion. Did you every know anyone (a friend, family member, or one of you if you want to talk about this here), man or woman, who had to make a decision about whether to have or not have an abortion. that you wouldn't mind telling us about here?

OPTION I.

7. What were the choices that were considered in this case? (Marriage and childbirth; adoption; abortion; single motherhood?)

8. How did you feel about the decision that was made in this case? How hard a decision was it, and what made it hard?

9. Open to this group: what would you have advised this person to do in this case?

10. What would you have done if you were in her position (or if you were her boyfriend)?

11. Do you think current abortion laws are moral?

OPTION II.

7a. What would you do if you found out your close friend was pregnant; she was not married and not planning to be married; and she came to you for advice. What sort of advice would you give? Would this be difficult for you to decide?

8a. What options do you think she should consider?

9a. What would you do in her position? Would it be a hard decision?

10a. Do you think current abortion laws are moral?

Working-class women's answers to these questions can be grouped into two main categories, based on their relationship to authority. The first are women who seem comfortable identifying with reigning authorities in our social and political system, themselves primarily middle or upper-class ("middle-class identified" women). These women identify themselves as the same as middle-class women, although by my measures they would be considered working-class. The second group are anti-authoritarian women who do not identify with middle-class authorities ("non-middle-class or working-class identified"). These women hold views which are not generally supportive of social authorities in the U.S. Post-television discussions reveal that they do not identify themselves in the same category with the middle-class characters on the television shows I showed them. I am indebted to my research assistant Elizabeth R. Cole for coining the labels "middle-class identified" and "working-class identified."

I have chosen the two groups upon which this paper focuses out of the twenty-five total groups I have interviewed to date (this number excludes

pilot groups and individual interviews I have also conducted). Methodology is more fully explained in the section devoted to it below, and in Press (forthcoming). In the broader study upon which this paper is based, I look at middle-class and working-class women's responses to these images in four representative episodes of prime-time television shows; I contrast pro-life and pro-choice groups in each category, and include groups of predominately black women as well as the predominately white groups I discuss here. Women in the two groups I discuss here happen to occupy different positions within the working-class. The middle-class identified group are composed of low-level managers. Members of the working-class identified group work in positions likely to be classified as "below" those occupied by the other group; their connection to the more stable working-class is more tenuous, with some women supporting themselves with relatively transient work. Of course, one must be careful of generalizing this link between ideology and position based on the small sample my study includes.

8. See also Press and Cole (forthcoming) on dissonance within the pro-choice discourse, and on the inability of this category to articulate adequately a particular political discourse and subject position.

9. My analysis of this episode is indebted to Condit's (1990) discussion.

10. Roe vs. Wade was broadcast at an extremely critical time in the politics of abortion in the U.S. It coincided with an increase nationwide in state-level struggles to pass laws prohibiting the use of public funding for poor women's abortions. Ellen's story certainly serves as an example to those campaigning for restrictions against state-funded abortions of the difficulties poor women seeking abortions might face in the absence of available state funds.

11. See Krueger 1988, Glick et al. 1987-88, Basch 1987, Watts and Ebbutt 1987 on the methodology of focus-group interviews. Most women interviewed to date have been white, although some groups include black women as well. My research assistant Elizabeth R. Cole is currently conducting a series of groups composed predominately of black women.

12. In addition to the groups included here, as part of my pilot study I also interviewed two groups of men (one pro-life, one pro-choice; both middle-class), and four women individually. I have also interviewed a series of additional groups (five as of this date) who viewed an episode of the television show Dallas which pictures abortion, and plan another series of interviews focusing on groups viewing an abortion episode of Hill Street Blues.

13. Women's class membership is not always easy to assess. Rubin (1979:214-215) discusses the difficulties she encountered in determining the class status of women as opposed to that of families. While she attempted to define social class in terms of a combination of education and occupational factors, in the case of women, often married to--or divorced from--men of dissimilar educational background or occupational status, confusion often resulted. Rubin's baseline requirement regarding class were as follows: working-class women should have no more than a high school education and be married to a man with a similar educational background who was working at a blue-collar job;

middle-class women were defined as those with a college education or more, married to a man with a like educational background who worked in one of the professions or at a managerial level in business or industry. Often, however, the backgrounds of married couples were dissimilar; in these cases, Rubin was forced to make a judgement regarding the class background of the women she interviewed which could not be traced to any inviolate, objective set of categories set up in advance, as she explains:

In some instances, a husband's status still clearly determines the wife's; in others, it clearly does not. Those are the easy ones. But that leaves the cases where there is no clarity. Then the investigator stumbles in the dark, hoping the evidence in the empirical world will be compelling enough to facilitate a reasoned and reasonable class assignment. In this research, that task was made somewhat easier by the fact that I had before me the life history of each respondent along with data about each member of the families of origin and of procreation. By examining that broader picture, it was possible to assign a respondent to a given class with some assurance that the conceptual category and the empirical world were a reasonable fit. (Rubin 1979:216-217)

My experience in this regard was similar to Rubin's. In some cases, women's class status was clear; in others, less so, and some judgement on my part was necessary, judgements I felt qualified to make since we had background questionnaire data on each participant. Although I tried to screen group membership for this purpose, groups were not always entirely uniform; in this case, I had to make judgements concerning the overall composition of the group.

14. The following categories were used to code each interview; post-television categories differed according to which show women watched in each case:

There are 8 broad classifications of codes:

- I. Money and Parenthood
- II. Concern about Morality of Abortion
- III. Definitional Problems
- IV. Experiences
- V. Concepts from Gilligan
- VI. Emotional Reactions to Abortion
- VII. Themes from Cagney and Lacey Episode
- VIII. Miscellaneous

The classifications are only given for clarity; the transcripts are actually coded using the codes printed in CAPS and numbered with arabic numbers (1,2,3).

#### I. Money and Parenthood

##### 2. JOB

includes mentions of job, work, working conditions

##### 3. SCHOOL/Education

includes mentions of mother's education, pursuit of education plans or dreams of seeking education, difficulty of financing education, ed. aid programs

4. WELFARE (adc, afdc, foodstamps, other aid)  
mentions of receiving welfare, desire to (or not to) receive welfare, discussions of women on welfare, adequacy of welfare to support a family

5. CHILDCARE  
mentions of childcare arrangements, difficulty of getting reliable or affordable childcare, beliefs about the appropriateness of childcare

6. DEMANDS of Pregnancy/Motherhood  
statements which express an appreciation for the difficulty of childbearing and rearing (non-financial; see item #7)

7. FINANCEKIDS  
mentions of the financial demands of raising kids, whether as an abstract fact, or specific arrangements made by themselves or families they know (may often overlap with WELFARE, SCHOOL or MEN codes)

8. FFSUPPORT  
mentions of support from family and/or friends in childrearing duties, whether financial or otherwise. Could also include lack of or desire for such support

## II. Concerns about Morality of Abortion

9. LIFE  
concerned about the life of the fetus, or the belief that the fetus "is a life"; belief that abortion is murder; belief that life begins at conception

10. VIABILITY  
belief that abortion is wrong "after a certain point"; concern that it is difficult or impossible to determine at what point viability occurs, or at what point abortion is murder

11. AB-BCONTROL  
belief that abortion "as birth control" is morally wrong or problematic; objection to women having multiple abortions

12. QUALITY  
Concern for the quality of parenting a woman could offer a child, used either when discussing the abortion decision ("I couldn't be a good mother at that time") or when discussing women who "should not have been mothers" (e.g. drug addicted mothers); Concern for quality of life of the potential child (often used in conjunction with FINANCKIDS); concern for the plight of "unwanted" kids

13. RELIGIOUS  
Religious objections to abortion (e.g. "the bible tells us...") May often be coded with LIFE; belief that abortion is a sin

14. POORWOMEN

Abortion should be legal/available to help poor women. (If the woman describes how poverty shaped her own decision, use FINANCKIDS, but if she generalizes to the plight of poor women in general, use this code also)

III. Definitional Problems

15. LIFE/CHOICE

expresses dissatisfaction with the terms prolife and prochoice because they do not accurately describe her own opinion (e.g. "I'm pro-life but also pro-choice") or because they do not accurately describe the position of the activists

16. COULDNTDO

believes abortion should be legal but "I couldn't do it myself"

IV. Experiences

All codes in this section must also receive one of these three? codes:

19. SELF

describes an experience that happened to the woman relating it

20. OTHER

describes an experience that happened to a person known by the speaker

21. MEDIAEXP

describes an experience that happened to a character in a media treatment of the issue

Other experience codes:

22. SURPPREG

surprise pregnancy, unplanned pregnancy

23. BRTHCHANGE

the experience of childbirth or motherhood changed views on abortion

24. SURPCHANGE

unplanned, unwanted pregnancy changed views

25. EXPCHANGE

believes that experiences in general change views (unrelated to abortion) (if this belief is not held due to experience, this code does not need a SELF or OTHER code)

26. LONGEFFECT

believes that or has observed that, abortion has long term effects for women and/or their families (if belief is not held due to experiences, this code does not need SELF or OTHER code)

27. DECISION

describes the process of making a decision about the disposition of an unplanned pregnancy

## V. Concepts from Gilligan

### 17. JUSTICE

Mentions of fairness, equality, concern for rules (principle over the situation)  
obligation, duty, commitments  
concern for rights (e.g. freedom; "women have the right to make own decisions" . or "women have the right to their own bodies")  
critiques of authority, justness of laws, policies (including on welfare and abortion)

### 18. CARE

Effects to others  
interdependence/maintenance of relationships  
well-being of another/avoidance of conflict  
care of self v. care of others  
situation over the principal  
abortion is such a personal choice, others cannot make it for you

## VI. Emotional Reactions to Abortion

### 28. RELIEF

relief or other positive emotion after abortion

### 29. REGRET

regret or other negative emotion following abortion

## VII. Themes from the Cagney and Lacey Episode

### 30. LOCKROOM

Cagney and Lacey argue whether one must take a stand on abortion

### 31. CRENSHAW

the pro-life protest group leader

### 32. HERRERA

the poor Latina woman facing and unwanted pregnancy

### 33. CAGDAD

Cagney's father argues abortion is wrong because of church doctrine

### 34. LACEYABTN

Lacey describes her own abortion as a college student

### 35. TVACTIVIST

mentions of the right to life activists/protestors on the tape

### 36. ID

which characters do the respondents identify with?

### 37. REALISM

do they find the depictions in the episode realistic?



38. THINK

response to first question after the tape viewing "What'd you think?"

39. BALANCED

was the presentation in the tape balanced, fair?

VIII. Themes from the Roe vs. Wade TV Movie

40. ELLEN

includes criticisms, comments, and evaluations of Ellen's character

41. ELLEN/MO

includes any mention of Ellen's mother

42. ELLEN/FA

includes any mention of Ellen's father

43. LAWYERS/WO

includes any mention of the women lawyers Sarah Weddington and her partner, including comments on whether they treated her fairly or should have helped her more

44. LAWYERS/MEN

includes any mention of the male lawyers pictured in the show

45. CHERYL

includes any mention of Ellen's daughter Cheryl

46. MONEY

includes any mention of Ellen's financial condition, including using this as a reason to justify her abortion; also includes mention of Ellen's search for work and working habits

47. AB/ADOPT

includes any mention of Ellen's desire for abortion, and decision to give her baby up for adoption; also includes comments on whether Ellen should have kept her baby or not as another alternative

IX. Miscellaneous

48. MEN

includes mentions of men as spouses/partners, as fathers of children, their reliability, etc.

49. BCONTROL

mentions of birth control, use of birth control, the relation of birth control to the morality of abortion

50. ABORTIONALT

mentions of alternatives to abortion (adoption, better birth control, etc)

51. WOMEN

views on women's roles; belief in the equality of women (may also need a JUSTICE code); concerns about inequalities between the sexes

52. ACTIVIST

mentions of political activism (on abortion or other issues)

15. To my knowledge, these women did not know each other, nor did they know that the other had participated in the interview. Women from each group independently answered an advertisement I placed in the newspaper.

16. See Bellah et al. (1985) for a fuller description of middle-class worldviews in our culture. In particular, they describe the "therapeutic" perspective, and the origins of liberalism in middle-class outlooks generally.

17. See Sandel (1984), particularly the introduction, for a fuller definition of "communitarianism," and a description of the different incarnations this position can assume.

18. Again, please see Press (1992) for fuller explication of data on middle-class women's responses to these characters, which in the interests of brevity was omitted from this paper.

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