

Agness Underwood's Historic Rise in an All-Male Newsroom: A Case Study

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Abstract

Agness Underwood (1902-1984) made history in 1947 when she was promoted from reporter to city editor, making her the first woman to oversee a major metropolitan U.S. newsroom. Employing a biographical research method, narrative analysis was used to examine Underwood's professional and personal life through her journalism work, articles written about her, personal artifacts, and author interviews of people who knew her. The data were then analyzed in terms of sex roles, personality traits, and leadership styles to construct a deeper understanding of this maverick journalist's accomplishments. The findings indicate the traditional masculine qualities she possessed, in combination with her personality traits and transformational leadership style, greatly contributed to her success.

Keywords

sex roles, leadership styles, personality traits, role congruity theory, women in management, 20th-century journalism, Los Angeles newspapers, Agness Underwood

Introduction

Desperate to help support her struggling family, Agness (Aggie) Underwood took a job at a local newspaper, filling in for a vacationing switchboard operator. It was intended to only be a 2-week position. Instead, it was the beginning of a legendary 41-year career that culminated with her becoming the first woman city editor of a major metropolitan U.S. newspaper. Underwood's editorship generated coverage by national news magazines, which published articles about the historic promotion and touted her as "America's *Only* Major Newspaper with a *Lady City Editor*" (Battelle, 1955). Underwood became a source of inspiration for female journalists wanting to break away from the women's section and become front-page reporters covering crime, politics, and other stories of importance. Underwood's success as city editor of a major metropolitan newspaper began in 1947, at a time when men held even more leadership roles than they do today, and has not previously been analyzed in terms of sex roles, personality traits, and leadership styles. This case study of Underwood examines her career and personal life and applies Bem's Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1974), traditional leadership styles, the so-called big five personality traits that affect leadership (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002), and role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002) to explain her unlikely success as a female city editor commanding a predominantly male newsroom. The recollections of Underwood's colleagues, in addition to artifacts from her archives and articles written about her, contribute to the field of sex roles by

explaining how this mid-20th century journalist was able to break through gender barriers. The unintentional progress she made paved the way for female journalists to have more meaningful careers and make a greater contribution to society.

Sex-Role Traits

The traits attached to each sex by society are often internalized to form one's self-concept and the perception of the opposite sex (Hoyt, Goethals, & Riggio, 2006; Kruse & Wintermantel, 1986). In turn, expectations regarding appropriate behavior can result in gender stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination against women (Kruse & Wintermantel, 1986). In the mid-1970s, Sandra Bem of Stanford University surveyed 100 male and female college students to determine their perceptions of male versus female traits, resulting in her eminent sex-role inventory of 20 masculine traits, 20 feminine traits, and 20 traits neutral in terms of sexuality in American society. The survey, which researchers use to conduct studies about psychological androgyny (Hoffman & Borders, 2001), has remained a constant in gender role orientation investigation (Beere, 1990). Over the years, society's

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rigid notions that humans have only masculine or feminine traits have been replaced with a lessening of stereotypes (Spence & Buckner, 2000) and a greater understanding of the complexities of the male–female construct (Choi, Fuqua, & Newman, 2008, 2009). This knowledge indicates individuals are capable of both traditionally male-oriented and female-oriented behavior, depending on how narrowly they view themselves, the specific situation, and social norms (Bem, 1974; Kohlberg, 1966).

Leadership Styles and Effectiveness of Men and Women

The concept of males as natural-born leaders is based in evolutionary psychology, which claims men have needed to be aggressive and competitive to win over a female mate (Buss, 2014). This theory of male dominance carries over into the workplace, where men are more likely to be company presidents and managers. Women, in terms of possessing managerial traits, have long been seen as inferior to men (Hennig & Jardim, 1977; Horner, 1972; Riger & Galligan, 1980). Thus, many women who want to be leaders have adopted a male-managerial model (Terborg, 1977) that favors male traits over female traits. However, with a growing number of women as leaders in business, politics, and academia, researchers have been examining gender differences in style and effectiveness (Northouse, 2013). While some say gender is not a factor in style or effectiveness (Van Engen, Van der Leeden & Willemsen, 2001), research shows women are more likely to lead in a more participatory, or democratic, manner than men (Van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). Women also tend to be more transformational leaders and exhibit more conditional-reward behavior than men (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003), although in recent years there has been a shift toward more male managers adopting a transformational style (Rutherford, 2011). In analyzing a large sample of managers mainly from the United States, Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) found women are more likely to demonstrate transformational leadership attributes in which they show respect and pride in subordinates, communicate values, express optimism, mentor followers, and show concern about their employees' needs. Yet male subordinates are more likely than females to undervalue a female boss (Ayman, Korabik, & Morris, 2009), even those who practice transformational leadership. It is more typical for women to reward followers for good performance. Men, on the contrary, tend to practice transactional leadership by showing concern about followers' mistakes and delaying intervention until a problem becomes severe. They also are more likely than women to exhibit the *laissez-faire* leadership style of being absent and uninvolved.

A discussion of female versus male leaders is incomplete without considering the “glass ceiling,” a term introduced to the masses by the *Wall Street Journal* (Hymowitz &

Schellhardt, 1986) which refers to the difficulty women face when trying to obtain management positions (Loden, 2008). Although U.S. women earn more college degrees—bachelor's, master's, and doctorates—than U.S. men (Catalyst, 2016), there is a disparity when comparing the number of women in leadership positions. Although women hold 51.5% of management and professional positions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016), only 25.1% are senior-level officials, 19.9% hold board seats and 4.6% are chief executive officers of S&P 500 companies (Catalyst, 2016). The reasons for the lack of top female leaders are many, including women juggling family and work issues more than men (Bowles & McGinn, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Female employees tend to have less responsibility than men (Knoke & Ishio, 1998) and when they are promoted, they are more likely than men to be in a leadership position that involves risk and criticism (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011). In his examination of the reasons why more women aren't leaders, Northouse (2013) points out women are less likely to ask for promotions to further their career goals (Babcock & Lashchever, 2003) or to negotiate (Small, Gelfand, Babcock, & Gettman, 2007) and they face gender bias and stereotypes that can be damaging to career advancement (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

The Big Five Personality Traits

An individual's ability to become a leader and excel in that role can depend in some regard on their personality (Judge et al., 2002). Psychologists have identified five personality traits, often referred to as the Big Five: conscientiousness, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Conscientiousness is displayed, in part, by self-discipline, striving for achievement, and creating order. The attributes of extraversion include assertiveness, warmth, and activity. Openness to experience can be observed through esthetics, feelings, and values. Agreeableness entails caring, trusting, and compliance. The last of the Big Five is neuroticism, which is defined broadly as a negative emotional state. Just how these personality traits relate to leadership was explored by Judge and his colleagues (2002) in an attempt to identify which traits can predict emerging leaders and which traits will contribute to their success. Conscientiousness and extraversion are more closely tied to who will become a leader, while openness to experience and extraversion are stronger predictors of one's success in that role. Agreeableness and neuroticism are less associated with leader emergence, while neuroticism is less associated with leader effectiveness (Eagly & Carli, 2007). As these researchers point out, there is not a very strong statistical relationship between any of the five personality traits and their effects on leadership, which indicates personality is only part of what makes someone a leader and contributes to their success.

Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders

Gender roles are based on society's expectations of desirable traits and behavior of the sexes (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These norms generally fall into two categories: what society thinks men and women actually do (descriptive) and what they ought to be doing (prescriptive or injunctive). These categories are further divided between communal (associated with women and subordinates) and agentic (associated with men and those of higher status). Society expects women to have more communal traits than agentic traits. However, there is also the expectation that leaders in task-oriented groups will display the agentic traits of being assertive, competitive, independent, and goal-oriented. Thus, incongruity exists when society encounters a female leader or even just pictures a woman as a leader. As predicted by the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002), there are two forms of prejudice: Women are less likely to become leaders because of society's stereotype of what makes a good leader and those who do assume a leadership role will be judged more harshly than men. Therefore, it is not surprising that a woman with agentic traits could jeopardize her employability and potential for advancement (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Since the 1980s, attitudes regarding women in leadership have become more supportive (Eagly & Karau, 2002), thus the difference between prescriptive norms for gender and leader roles could be reducing (Ritter & Yoder, 2004).

The Current Case Study

Employing a biographical research method, narrative analysis was used to examine Underwood's childhood, newspaper career, and personal life through her professional work, articles written about her, personal artifacts, and author interviews of people who knew her. These data were then analyzed using Bem's Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1974), traditional leadership styles, the so-called big five personality traits that affect leadership (Judge et al., 2002), and role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002) to construct a deeper understanding of this maverick journalist's professional accomplishments.

Relatively little has been previously written about Underwood, whose newspaper career started in 1926 as a temporary switchboard operator and ended in 1967 as assistant managing editor. Her 1949 autobiography documents her achievements as a reporter and her promotion to city editor, but it was written too early to provide meaningful introspection and reflection. Several newspaper and magazine articles were published during and after her career and there is a chapter devoted to her in a 2003 book about female journalists. However, the literature lacks analysis of her sex-role traits, leadership style, and big five personality traits and to explain her success.

This case study seeks to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What were Agness Underwood's masculine, feminine, and androgynous traits?

Research Question 2: What was Underwood's leadership style?

Research Question 3: Which of the Big Five personality traits did Underwood possess?

Research Question 4: How do these factors help explain how she was able to succeed as a female city editor in a male-dominated newsroom?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were identified through literature and the author's communication with working and retired Los Angeles journalists. The main criteria were that participants had to have worked directly with Underwood at the same newspaper, have worked for a competing newspaper, or be related to her. The author then recruited participants and conducted interviews of seven retired newsroom personnel in addition to both of Underwood's children. In addition, Underwood's personal documents and examples of published work, which are housed in the Special Collections and Archives at California State University, Northridge, were examined.

Procedure and Materials

Participants were contacted by telephone. Interviews lasted 30 to 45 min each, in which journalism colleagues were asked about their experiences working for Underwood, her mannerisms, and how she performed as a woman leading a newsroom dominated by men. Her children were asked about their childhood, interaction with their mother, and observations of her both as a mother and a journalist.

Results

Shaped by Tragedy and Challenges

By age 16, Agness Underwood had lost both of her parents, dropped out of high school, and was living in a homeless shelter in San Francisco. She found work at a department store and took a 3-month class at a business college in rapid calculation and comptometer operation before moving to Los Angeles to live with a relative. After realizing the relative only wanted to exploit Underwood in the movie business, Underwood took refuge at a Salvation Army home for working girls. She and another young girl obtained jobs as telephone operators, which allowed Underwood to save some money. She later worked as a waitress at a restaurant in

Los Angeles, where she met her future husband. Theirs was only a 3-week engagement because Underwood's unscrupulous relative threatened to turn her over to the police because she was underage and living on her own.

Four months after their wedding, Underwood had an ectopic pregnancy requiring surgery and hospitalization, leaving the couple saddled with medical bills. Money continued to be tight after the birth of their daughter in 1922 and son in 1925. Then her sister, who lived next door to her, committed suicide, prompting the family to relocate for a fresh start. Underwood heard about a temporary switchboard operator job at a local newspaper and applied. Whether she took the 2-week job because her husband refused to buy her stockings (Underwood, 1949) or out of pure necessity as her son recalls (G. Underwood, personal communication, March 10, 2013), it was the beginning of her extraordinary newspaper career that transcended traditional sex roles. The switchboard operator job at the *Los Angeles Record* in 1926 was Underwood's initiation into the newsroom. She worked the busy switchboard, relaying facts and quotes from reporters in the field to reporters in the newsroom who wrote the stories.

A Woman in a Man's World

Profanity, and occasionally the odor of alcohol, wafted through the cluttered newsroom, leaving Underwood fascinated by this "complex newspaper machine" (Underwood, 1949, p. 35). Some of the newsmen even gambled on the local horseraces as the results were spat out of the teletype machines (J. Jares, personal communication, March 16, 2013). Upon the return of the vacationing switchboard operator, Underwood was offered a job working for the women's section where she learned more about the newspaper business and practiced her typing skills. One day while the staff was working on a breaking news story about the kidnapping and murder of a young girl, the city editor asked Underwood to type dictation. "I was sunk. I wanted to be a reporter" (Underwood, 1949, p. 40). Recognizing Underwood's scholastic talents, the women's section editor, Gertrude Price, tutored Underwood in the basics of hard-news reporting. When she wasn't taking dictation from male reporters, Underwood wrote stories for the women's section and in her free time covered speedway races for the sports section.

Building a Stellar Career

Proving herself with a bylined news story—an interview with a man who planted the first cotton in California—Underwood was then assigned more regularly to "rewrite" duties in which she would take dictation from male reporters covering stories on location. While she was doing a rewrite of a major police story in 1931 about a shooting involving a deputy district attorney, a politician, and a former reporter, Underwood noticed key survivors had not been interviewed. She alerted her editor and was allowed time to track down

the sources, who gave her exclusive interviews. The resulting story solidified her as a hard-news reporter. Price, who had been secretly campaigning for Underwood to become a cityside reporter, told her, "The best reporters in town, with all their contacts, weren't able to get that story. You're a reporter—and a good one, Agness" (Underwood, 1949, p. 54). Despite her successes, Underwood felt unwelcomed by some in the clannish 1930s Los Angeles press corps who were fighting to hold on to their jobs during the Great Depression (Underwood, 1949). They resented anyone new in the business and while it was not explicitly stated in her autobiography, one can presume being a female hard-news reporter further complicated acceptance by her peers. However, she persevered, reporting on local natural disasters such as earthquakes and wildfires, interviewing famous people (including pilot Amelia Earhart), covering murder trials, and interviewing suspects and convicts.

A Natural Talent for the Newspaper Business

Many of her stories involved women as either the perpetrator or the victim. It is difficult to know definitively whether these female-centric stories would have been covered had Underwood not been on the newspaper's staff, but it is apparent her courage, keen observation skills, and lack of gullibility helped Underwood earn her standing in the male-dominated reporting field at a time when most women were relegated to writing feature stories for the "women's pages" of the newspaper. She had a knack for being the only reporter to secure important details and for noticing the finer points overlooked by male reporters (Cohen, 1984), which she occasionally shared with police investigators (Renner, 2015). Underwood was talented in the journalistic art of convincing sources to reveal sensitive information. Accused of killing his aunt and uncle, college honor student Leroy Drake was interviewed by Underwood in his jail cell. A newspaper photographer listened as Underwood said, "You poor thing. Now suppose you tell me all about it" (Renner, 2015, p. 65). Drake opened up and soon afterward pleaded guilty to serving his relatives poisoned coffee, a crime for which he spent 21 years in prison.

Besides visiting local jailhouses, Underwood often traveled to a women's prison located northeast of Los Angeles to conduct interviews with the convicted or to witness their release (Renner, 2015). Underwood's efforts to report stories that might otherwise be neglected by male reporters helped spare the life of a woman convicted of killing her husband, who turned out to be an abuser. When Nellie Madison was released from prison 9 years after her conviction, she gave the credit to Underwood, exclaiming, "You did it! You did it! I owe it all to you!" (Renner, 2015, p. 43). Underwood was assigned to stories that took her to gruesome locations, including the home of a couple who had been lying dead for 10 days and the autopsy of famous Hollywood actress Jean Harlow, ending up the only reporter to remain in the room

without becoming ill. One night while covering a brush fire, a sheriff's deputy told her the scene was inappropriate for a woman, regardless if she was a reporter. A higher-ranking law enforcement official overheard the exchange and said, "It's all right, lad. She's been to a hell of a lot more of these things than you ever have. Go on through, Aggie" (Underwood, 1949, p. 111).

From Black Dahlia Reporter to City Editor

Her reputation as a talented reporter increased even more with her coverage of one of Los Angeles's most notorious murders: Elizabeth Short, aka the Black Dahlia. Short's mutilated, bisected body was found in 1947 in a vacant, grassy field in Los Angeles. Police assumed Short was about 36 years old but Underwood's keen sense of observation convinced her Short was much younger, based solely on the condition of her breasts and thighs (Underwood, 1949). Five days after the murder of 22-year-old Short, Underwood interviewed suspect Robert M. (Red) Manley at a local police station jail. Other reporters were present but kept quiet while Underwood convinced him to tell his story and then proceeded to let him talk, without interruption. The newspaper accounts helped exonerate him. Underwood later reflected on the jailhouse interview:

A sob sister could have wept with and over Manley, interpolating editorial gushes to prove what a big bleeding heart beat in her breast. To hell with that. I'd rather have a fistful—an armload—of good solid facts, preferably quotes like Red Manley's. Then the story writes itself. Just give it a lead to fit the facts. (Underwood, 1949, p. 9)

Following the interview, she was abruptly taken off the story without any explanation and not given another assignment. After being told the next day she was back on the story, she was taken off again and suddenly placed on the city desk. In near disbelief, she had just become the nation's first female city editor of a metropolitan newspaper. Exactly why she was promoted, in the midst of working on the biggest news story of the year, remained a mystery to Underwood (Renner, 2015). When Underwood was named city editor at age 44, playwright and author Gene Fowler wrote a note to the manager who made the decision to promote her: "Aggie's topped us all in one respect—she bore children, reared them, did her housework, and became a city editor. Isn't this some kind of violation of union rules?" (Fowler, 1991, p. 200).

When Underwood became city editor, Los Angeles was teeming with news stories. World War II veterans were moving to the suburbs. Anticommunist rhetoric was increasing. And there was an upswing in violent crime (Historical Data From LAPD Annual Reports Dated, 1934–1951), including the murder of mobster Bugsy Siegel. Six daily newspapers in addition to three evening newspapers, some of them using "radio cars" equipped with a wireless phone to contact the

newsroom, covered the city and suburbs where a total of two million people lived. Her primary duties were assigning stories to reporters and photographers, then checking their work before the material was published in one of several daily editions of the newspaper.

Emerging As a Leader

Underwood had to quickly establish her authority as city editor, which started with creating a personal space that had an air of intimidation. Atop her desk situated in the corner of the big newsroom laid a baseball bat; a starter pistol was placed in a drawer. The bat was for threatening pesky Hollywood press agents who lingered too long in the busy newsroom. The gun was to liven things up during a rare quiet moment. Underwood would pull it out, aim it at the ceiling, and fire while saying, "Don't let this paper die on us today!" (Fowler, 1991). During the decade Art Ronnie worked at the newspaper, he heard it go off twice (A. Ronnie, personal communication, March 21, 2013). She also incorporated swear words into her vocabulary, which she had started doing as a reporter (Cairns, 2003; Fowler, 1991).

Consumption of alcohol was a cultural norm in most mid-20th-century newsrooms, even in outlying offices. Knowing she could not clean up their behavior, Underwood merely accepted it. On hot days, she arranged for a case of cold beer to be delivered to the copy desk (Fowler, 1991). When a reporter did exceptionally well on a story, she pulled out a bottle of whiskey and gave everyone nearby a sip (C. Dektar, personal communication, March 17, 2013). Sometimes she would join them after work for a drink at a local bar or would have a reporter join her family for dinner (Fowler, 1991). Another example of the male-dominated culture in which Underwood was a reporter and city editor was the horserace gambling and bookmaking that took place in the newsroom (J. Jares, personal communication, March 16, 2013).

She was considered a "sharp businesswoman who was able to run a herd of cats known as rewrite men" (H. Williams, personal communication, March 9, 2013). In an often-frantic newsroom trying to live up to the newspaper's slogan of "The First With the Latest," mistakes were made, like the time a reporter, who was nursing a hangover, turned in an obituary about the wrong person. While maintaining her tough exterior, Underwood ultimately was forgiving when reporters made mistakes. This resulted in mutual trust and admiration. For her 65th birthday in 1967, shortly before she retired, the staff gave her an US\$800 diamond pin, which she did not want to accept because, "You need the money more than I need this" (Keavy, 1975). Even Hollywood press agents, who were sometimes chased out of her newsroom, admired and respected her. On her 10th anniversary as city editor, Paramount Studios gave her an unusual present: a 6-foot-tall wooden bat engraved with the words, "To AGGIE: Best of Luck and Keep Swinging."

Table 1. BSRI Traits of Agness Underwood.

Item	BSRIF	BSRIA
Acts as a leader ✓	Affectionate	Adaptable ✓
Aggressive	Cheerful	Conceited
Ambitious ✓	Childlike	Conscientious ✓
Analytical ✓	Compassionate	Conventional
Assertive ✓	Does not use harsh language	Friendly
Athletic	Eager to soothe hurt feelings	Happy
Competitive ✓	Feminine	Helpful
Defends own beliefs	Flatterable	Inefficient
Dominant	Gentle	Jealous
Forceful ✓	Gullible	Likable ✓
Has leadership abilities ✓	Loves children ✓	Moody
Independent ✓	Loyal ✓	Reliable ✓
Individualistic ✓	Sensitive to needs of others ✓	Secretive
Makes decisions easily	Shy	Sincere ✓
Masculine	Soft-spoken	Solemn
Self-reliant ✓	Sympathetic ✓	Tactful
Self-sufficient ✓	Tender	Theatrical
Strong personality ✓	Understanding ✓	Truthful ✓
Willing to take a stand ✓	Warm	Unpredictable
Willing to take risks ✓	Yielding	Unsystematic

Source. Bem (1974).

Note. BSRI = Bem Sex-Role Inventory; BSRIM = Bem Sex-Role Inventory Masculinity; BSRIF = Bem Sex-Role Inventory Femininity; BSRIA = Bem Sex-Role Inventory Androgynous.

Many Honors

Underwood was the recipient of dozens of journalism awards and several honorary college degrees. Those included an award from Theta Sigma Phi (a national fraternity for women in the communications field, now called the Association for Women in Communications). She also was named Newspaper Woman of the Year by the Greater Los Angeles Press Club in 1961. The Los Angeles City Council declared July 16, 1962, as Aggie Underwood Day and she made a guest appearance on two popular television shows, “This Is Your Life” and “The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson.” Now holding the position of assistant managing editor, she decided at age 65 to leave journalism in December 1967. Her staff, which now included about six female reporters, were upset over stalled contract negotiations and had joined picket lines a month earlier. It appears the turmoil of the strike in addition to her age motivated her to retire. On January 24, 1968, her retirement party was held at the prestigious Hollywood Palladium. More than 1,100 people, including entertainer Bob Hope, paid to attend the event and bid farewell to a woman who broke through barriers in the workplace.

Discussion

Based on the literature and interviews with co-workers and family, Underwood possessed 14 masculine qualities, five feminine qualities, and six androgynous qualities identified in the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Table 1; Bem, 1974).

Evidence of Underwood’s 14 Traditional Masculine Qualities

The masculine qualities Underwood displayed were “acts as a leader,” ambitious, analytical, assertive, competitive, forceful, “has leadership abilities,” independent, individualistic, self-reliant, self-sufficient, strong personality, “willing to take a stand,” and “willing to take risks.” While self-confidence is not a specific masculine quality on Bem’s list, it can be argued that ambition is connected to self-confidence. In a profile story about Underwood published the year after she became city editor, author Alice C. Greene wrote, “Her one vanity is her ability to do her job, and that is rather self-confidence based on the fact that she knows her work thoroughly” (Greene, 1948).

She was a “fierce competitor,” according to Cliff Dektar, who worked for another afternoon newspaper, the *Los Angeles Mirror*, becoming “quite unhappy” whenever the *Herald-Express* was not first with a story (C. Dektar, personal communication, March 17, 2013). Two years after becoming city editor, Underwood flew to Dallas to receive the prestigious Headliner trophy from the Theta Sigma Phi, a national fraternity of women in journalism. According to a news story that ran in her newspaper,

She told the delegates that she never had trouble working with men. “My boys know that I’ve gone out and done the things that I tell them to do. Either you’re a newspaperman or you’re not; either you have it or you don’t.” (Agness Underwood of Herald Honored, 1949).

Evidence of Underwood’s Five Traditional Feminine Qualities

Underwood’s traditional feminine qualities were that she loved children, was loyal, “sensitive to the needs of others,” sympathetic, and understanding. Her children frequently called her at work, visited her in the newsroom, and sometimes even tracked her down while she was on assignment if they needed anything, such as gas money (E. Weed, personal communication, March 10, 2013). Her daughter described her as “warm and loving,” adding she simply could not do enough for her children. “She did everything a parent can do. She probably went overboard trying to give her love” (E. Weed, personal communication, March 10, 2013).

A Loyal Boss

When she won an award from the American Legion Auxiliary, Managing Editor John B. T. Campbell was quoted in a story

saying, “She has genius, ability, loyalty, and friendship” (“Legion Presents Trophy,” April 1, 1949). In what she considered a reward for her loyalty, the staff covering the early-morning Tournament of Roses parade each New Year’s Day never had a detectable hangover and thus were able to efficiently do their job. For her first Christmas as city editor, she gifted each staff member a tie she had carefully selected and wrapped 2 months earlier. They gave her an engraved watch. Perhaps the tragic experiences in her early life—losing her parents, being homeless, and living in shelters—motivated her to provide her children with a stable and loving home and to be “kind to other people, especially people down on their luck” (G. Underwood, personal communication, March 10, 2013).

Compassion for Her Employees

According to several people interviewed and the literature, Underwood was considerate of her employees, both professionally and personally. Although a reporter offered to come to work just hours after his son was born, Underwood told him to take the day off and rest as he had been up all night at the hospital (Underwood, 1949). She would refuse to tell an angry wife who called her at home whether or not her husband was on afterhours assignment. According to her son, “They knew who was boss but she treated them very well. She was good to all of them” (G. Underwood, personal communication, March 10, 2013). If someone was ill or had to care for a sick family member, she would arrange for additional sick pay (H. Williams, personal communication, March 9, 2013). Although the employees were members of the Los Angeles Newspaper Guild, Underwood took care of her staff better than what was required in their union contract. Once when a reporter’s wife called Underwood to say she was concerned about her husband’s drinking while working at a satellite office, Underwood made arrangements for him to work in the main office so she could keep a close watch on him (A. Ronnie, personal communication, March 21, 2013).

Did Not Compromise Herself

Although she possessed several feminine gender role traits, Underwood did not use her sexuality to get ahead in the news business, instead choosing to dress casually and not style nor color her hair (S. Slome, personal communication, March 12, 2013). In a profile story about her titled, “Madame City Editor,” she was described like this: “Almost completely devoid of personal vanity, she wears little makeup. She dresses in the office much as a typical housewife might dress for an afternoon’s shopping” (Greene, 1948). Underwood recalled the time a reporter, Bevo Means, and a photographer, Perry Fowler, kissed her on the cheek simultaneously then each one “scooted away to his assignment” (Underwood, 1949, p. 283). Then there was the time a male reporter told

her that her slip was showing. One reporter in particular, Will Fowler, was quite fond of her, perhaps even infatuated, having penned a handwritten note on an awards program: “Dear Aggie: You were the only city editor I ever kissed!” In his autobiography, he wrote that at her funeral he quietly “read a short love letter to Aggie” (Fowler, 1991, p. 206). Other than these sentiments, there was no evidence of any male colleagues displaying misplaced affection for her.

Evidence of Underwood’s Six Traditional Androgynous Qualities

Of the androgynous qualities she displayed—adaptable, conscientious, likable, reliable, sincere, and truthful—her ability to adapt was the strongest. At several times during her life, Underwood experienced personal and professional difficulties. But with each new challenge, Underwood relied on the traditional masculine traits of self-reliance, ambition, and willingness to take risks to help her triumph. As a conscientious journalist and mother, she earned respect from her co-workers and family members. While not the stereotypical mid-20th-century woman, Underwood was likable and displayed sincerity by being authentic and honest in her dealings with sources, co-workers, and family.

A Well-Rounded Individual

Indeed, Underwood possessed a wide range of qualities—masculine, feminine, and androgynous—that contributed to her leadership success. When she was feted as “Woman of the Year” by the Hollywood chapter of B’nai B’rith, a Herald-Examiner columnist wrote, “She’s sentimental, shrewd, tough, gentle, cynical, soft-hearted, ruthless, blasé, naïve, stern, easy-going, and exact” (Jackson, 1963). *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jack Smith, who worked for Underwood in the early 1950s before being hired at the *Times*, once gave this description of the legendary journalist:

She was at the peak of her awesome energies and stunning intuitions, and in autocratic command of a cityside staff of oddballs, some of them gifted, and most of them as loyal to Aggie and as steadfast under fire as soldiers in the old British square. (Fowler, 1991, p. 201)

Underwood’s Personality Traits Contributing to Her Becoming a Leader

Examining descriptions of Underwood by her former coworkers, it can be determined she possessed personality traits that contribute to effective leadership (Judge et al., 2002). Of the Big Five personality traits—conscientiousness, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and neuroticism—people who are conscientious and extraverted are most likely to become leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Underwood displayed conscientiousness by having high

standards for her professional work and being dependable. She displayed extraversion, the trait most likely to predict leadership, by being sociable and assertive. With her desk in the newsroom and not in a separate office, she was in proximity of her employees and on occasion she socialized with them after hours. Underwood was certainly an assertive journalist. As a reporter, she demanded access to courtrooms and active fire scenes even though she was sometimes rejected because of her gender. She conducted many jailhouse interviews with suspects and obtained the stories of several imprisoned women, which required assertiveness to get access. As city editor, she was assertive by standing behind her desk as she gave out assignments. When she needed a copy boy to take a story from her desk to the typesetters in another room, she yelled, "Boy!" She prided herself on not taking "any back talk, insulting loafing, or smart-aleck insubordination" (Underwood, 1949, p. 292).

Underwood's Personality Traits Contributing to Her Success as a Leader

Extraversion, in addition to a personality trait referred to as "openness to experience," can help predict the successfulness of a leader (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Underwood exhibited openness to experience by her willingness to become a hard-news reporter in the early 1930s, at a time when the occupation was a novelty for women. The fourth personality trait, agreeableness, was displayed in the way she genuinely cared for her employees and family. When she was honored by city officials near the end of her career, Los Angeles Councilman Karl Rundberg said, "It shows that she has heart and humility, that she is not a truly hardboiled city editor who has no emotion" (L.A. honors Herald-Examiner City Editor, 1962). She accepted faults in her employees and yet was kind to them. If she had any insecurity or hostility, which the researchers refer to as neuroticism, it was not outwardly displayed. Her strong, outgoing personality caught the attention of then-Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron, who made this comment in 1949 when Underwood became the first woman to receive the "Women of Achievement" trophy of the L.A. County Council of the American Legion Auxiliary: "I have seen a lot of Aggie and I respect and admire her. She is a good reporter whose personality wins everyone" (Agness Underwood of Herald Honored, 1949).

Underwood's Leadership Style

Based on descriptions by her coworkers, Underwood was a transformational leader (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978), recognizing the strengths and weaknesses in her employees, challenging them to work hard, and having high expectations (House, 1976). Acting in an ethical manner, she gained the trust, respect, and admiration of her all-male staff. She also displayed a democratic leadership style because she encouraged and nurtured her employees to be self-directed so subordinates

would be motivated to reach their personal goals. Among the many documents in Underwood's archives is a typed notecard with the name Gene Sherman at the top. Sherman, who had covered the Black Dahlia murder and won the 1960 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for the *Los Angeles Times*, referred to the notes while introducing Underwood at an awards ceremony that year for notable Los Angeles, area women. His notes describe her as "a crafty and ingenious reporter, dedicated and tough but very effective city editor, yet a very warm and natural person" (Sherman, ca. 1960).

Conclusion

Underwood earned the respect of the men with whom she worked and led by exhibiting a tough exterior while displaying a softer, more compassionate side on an individual level. She was able to achieve this through her intelligence, genuineness, resilience, and strong work ethic. *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jack Smith described her as "a tough, sweet, bright, fair, and infallibly intuitive newspaperwoman" (Smith, 1972, p. E-1).

A devastating and crafty competitor for stories when she was a reporter and a dedicated, unrelenting city editor, she has managed simply by being her natural self to remain warmly feminine while sticking doggedly to the hurdy-gurdy occupation she loves with fervor

wrote Sherman after she received the Woman of the Year in Journalism award from *Times* publisher Norman Chandler in 1960. Indeed, Underwood's ability to not just be accepted but be respected by men in the newsroom, police patrol car, and courtroom made it easier for women journalists in Los Angeles and throughout the country to cover hard-news stories involving serious crimes (Renner, 2015). Underwood's need for emotional connections helps explain her actions as a mother and a newspaper colleague, argues Cairns (2003), who wrote a book chapter about Underwood.

Resilient and Irrepressible

Despite all she endured in her life, starting from such a young age, Underwood did not become embittered. Starting with the premature death of her parents, she seemed able to cope and adapt to changes in her life, many of which presented daunting challenges. Her inner confidence allowed her to take action when necessary, as evidenced when she married her husband, which allowed her to break away from a manipulative relative and start her adult life, and when she took a 2-week job, despite having young children at home, so she could help her struggling family. She also dealt with disappointments related to society's expectations of women in the early and mid-20th century. When she started working at the *Los Angeles Record* in 1926, women in California had had the right to vote for 15 years; nationwide, women were voting for

just 6 years. Most women spent their entire lives as mothers and homemakers, or if they worked outside the home they often were teachers, nurses, or secretaries. Life events and circumstances that would have left some people dejected, disillusioned, and cynical only helped to mold Underwood's character as resilient and irrepressible, yet having empathy for those whose lives were marred by poverty and violence.

It's been a long, tough journey since then. I'm working harder than I ever did in my life—and I'm enjoying it. My life has become newspapering and I know it. I suffered cruel jolts as a child and as a young woman, but the Lord has been good to me. I know that, too. I ask him to give me the strength and courage to keep on working. (Underwood, 1949, p. 296)

Although it was challenging to collect and disseminate news in the mid-20th century, it is apparent from the literature and artifacts in her archives that Underwood thrived as both a reporter and a city editor, enjoying the excitement and the purposefulness of her job. "As I drive home and see newsboys hustling late editions of the Herald-Express, I feel a glow of accomplishment. I know my day has been productive" (Underwood, 1949, p. 281).

Not a Women's Rights Advocate

She did not use her groundbreaking promotion as a platform to fight for women's advancement in the workplace. In her 1949 autobiography and several interviews afterward, Underwood distanced herself from the women's rights movement. She did not view herself as a crusader nor a champion for her gender. She chose not to engage in debate about the glass ceiling that kept women from management jobs and leadership positions. The way she saw it, "Being able to do the work is not a matter of sex" (Underwood, 1949, p. 3). In fact, she seemed to resent women who could be viewed overly bossy, saying, "The woman who has been given authority, then becomes strident and throws her weight around is just the kind I'd like to slug with that baseball bat on my desk" (Underwood, 1949, p. 292). Several years after her retirement, she said in a magazine interview,

I don't agree with "women's lib" advocates. Women who have the ability and who are willing to work will get there. I worked as a person, not as a woman—as a staff member determined to produce not only the results expected of me, but to try to beat the opposition . . . In a field where men were more numerous I strove as vigorously as I could. (Silhouette (of) Agness Underwood, 1973, p. 34).

Perhaps she was too enchanted with the news business to take the time to analyze the reasons for her success. Or maybe it simply did not matter to her. But as this analysis shows, her masculine qualities, certain personality traits, and leadership style contributed to the reasons why she was chosen to be the country's first female city editor and provides an explanation for her success.

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