

THE PORTRAYAL OF MARRIAGE THROUGH NETWORK SITCOM
TELEVISION PROGRAMMING FROM 1950 TO 2014

By

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ABSTRACT

Media is hugely influential in the way societal concepts are reinforced, and popular culture creates the ebb and flow of trends in the vacuum of a screen. Television programs set expectations of individuals in society by appealing to the masses all at once and invading the homes of American families. Using twenty-four television media texts from 1950 to 2014, the representation of heterosexual norms of marriage in live-action situational comedy pilots will be discussed, in addition to the way marital communication within this context impacts the portrayal of societal themes for both genders. The pilot episode is demonstrative of the format of the entire series, therefore it is crucial for establishing the relationship of the married pair. The couple's individual entities are characteristically defined in the initial episode of a television program, including the way they communicate with each other. Within the context of the portrayal of personal lives, the medium of television uses marriage to uphold existing beliefs and set the standard for society.

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-four sitcoms that were analyzed in this thesis, the married couples maintained traditional gender roles in their communication to each other, especially by presenting working women as inefficient when trying to blend a career and family. Television programs, especially primetime situational comedies (sitcoms) on network television channels (ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC) are far more likely to “reinforce traditional models of family than to promote nonconventional configurations” (Bryant 140). Networks are especially important gatekeepers because premium channels are less accessible.

Audiences use portrayals of television families as a standard for societal norms, so the expansion of gender roles for females and males should be an important goal of television production industry. Television both reflects American ideals and shapes attitudes of viewers. Married and divorced viewers use television’s images to guide how they behave in their own marriage (Bryant 344). In terms of family configuration, the television imagery may not match up to realistic statistics in the United States. For example, in the 1970s the number of families with only a mother as the head of the household far outweighed the number of single-mom families depicted on television (Bryant 155). But the specified gender roles between heterosexual couples has maintained the same message for the last sixty-four years.

If television is viewed as a social learning opportunity, married couples would be hard-pressed to find a portrayal of a couple with a progressive dynamic. Sitcoms from 1950 to present have strongly endorsed tropes of heterosexual white couples, and “although TV entertainment is not expected to be an accurate reflection of the society in which it operates, it can send messages to viewers about the relative importance of different occupations, lifestyles, and activities in our culture (Bryant 197). Additionally, studies have shown the immediate and subsequent marital

benefits of egalitarian marriages (LeBaron 105). By creating an expanded view of marriage, true couples can benefit from seeing equality within the power processes of the relationship as well as higher levels of marital happiness.

I Love Lucy

The first episode of *I Love Lucy* aired on October 15, 1951. In the start of the 1950s, televisions were just becoming popular in the average American home. Many critics blasted the medium as a brainless activity, including the President of Boston University at the time. Television also affected a popular form of entertainment, the movie theater. Movie attendance dropped nearly fifty percent from previous years—the expense of attending the theater was no longer worth it for many American families when they could view media at home. *I Love Lucy* was filmed in front of a live studio audience, replicating the theater experience on a smaller scale. The two stars, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez, were married on- and off-screen, adding to the high stakes comedy of the marital conflict between the two. The couple had to lie about their ages to the press because of the social stigma of Lucille’s six-year jump on Desi’s age. The pair also frequently commented to the press about how much they fought and how different they were. Studio producers also had difficulties with Arnez’s thick Cuban accent and pairing a “typical American girl” with a Cuban bandleader.

The pilot episode, entitled “The Girls Want to Go to a Nightclub,” introduced Lucy and Ricky Ricardo as a young married couple in Manhattan. The first scene depicts Lucy Ricardo (Lucille Ball) and Ethel Mertz (Vivian Vance) washing dishes together in the kitchen. The camaraderie between the two women is also a central point of the show as the friends try to escape their domestic domain together, never quite reaching their goal before relenting to the marital hierarchy. The two are hoping to convince their husbands to go a night club, the Copa Cabana, something Ethel was promised since being married. Simultaneously, Ricky Ricardo (Desi Arnez) and Fred Mertz (William Fawley) are relaxing in the living room and discussing how little they’ve done since their I Do’s. Frank even describes his marriage anniversary as an

“eighteen-year-old tragedy”. To get what they want, the women decide to try and “catch more flies with honey than with vinegar,” being overly sweet to their husbands. When the husbands catch on to their scheme, they joke about getting new dates to go to the boxing match. The competitive relationship between Lucy and Ricky is vibrant and the lack of trust between the pair is evident. In this relationship, Ricky’s employment and position as the sole breadwinner gives him full decisive rights. The two ladies again scheme to get the men to go to the Copa Cabana, dressing up as their dates and thoroughly embarrassing them until the men realize that it is their wives in disguise. In this episode, Lucy’s characteristic spontaneity and crazy plans are portrayed as bothersome and embarrassing.

I Love Lucy followed the early days of television’s sitcom formula without comment. As a couple, Lucy and Ricky are very different as a pair, but her wild antics are meant to complement his stoic nature. They both start the conflict, but Ricky actually escalates it by warning Lucy not to push him too far. It’s his way or the highway in their marital conflict resolution. Ricky ends the conflict through compromise, allowing the group to go to the Copa Cabana nightclub, which had been promised to Ethel for eighteen years. The episode concludes with Lucy and Ethel sitting at a boxing match. The friends are obviously disappointed, but they direct the communication of their frustration at each other instead of telling their husbands. It is a forward message that women are in a man’s world, and they are not taken seriously.

The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet

The longest-running live-action sitcom in history, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* focused on the Nelsons. Like *I Love Lucy*, the show featured the on-screen personas of individuals who were an actual off-screen family. Ozzie Nelson (himself) and Harriet Nelson (herself) were married parents of David (himself) and Ricky Nelson (himself). The show closely followed the

arc of the Nelsons' own lives and depicted the family as realistically as possible. The two boys' real-life marriages were eventually written into the show and their wives joined the cast. When the idealized 1950s style of the Nelsons did not reverse the sharp decline of ratings in the 1960s, the script was adapted to changing social trends. The show was never a hit show, but popular culture recalls it as the epitome of the nuclear American family in the early 1950s.

“The Rivals” was the pilot episode of the series, which aired on October 3, 1952.

Hotpoint Quality Appliances sponsors the show, so *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* begins with Harriet doing dishes. While still in character, she promotes her newest appliance, a Hotpoint dishwasher, emphasizing that the device is affordable for every American household. The television was one of many home appliances to market to American families, and its television sponsorships were used to sell other home appliances to its owners through an image of desirable family life with consumption casually woven into the fabric of its stories (Taylor 20). Though the product placement was direct, it was obviously effective—in 1950, 4.4 million families owned television sets and by 1960, 50 million sets had been sold. During the pilot of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, Harriet even makes a point to put Tollhouse cookies in the oven.

The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet emphasized communication with the mother figure, especially as Harriet references that she can get the boys to talk. In the 1950s, census information reveals that 83% of the families were traditional and that 78% of women with children didn't work outside of the home. Indeed, 66% of Americans did not agree with the concept of working women at that time (Winzenburg 6). In the show, the Nelsons' son David is in competition with Will Thornberry over who will take a girl to the upcoming dance. The pair discuss their children and little else, and they place immense importance on their son's advancement. During the episode, Ozzie speaks directly to his wife in a tone that indicates that he is in charge of the

household. Despite this, he still wants to impress other women and be presentable for other women—he finds the need to straighten up if David’s prospective date’s mother comes over. *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* presents an idyllic 1950s family with little at-home conflict and a peacefully sponsored presence, directly yet delicately developing the consumer tendencies of the American public.

Father Knows Best

The television program *Father Knows Best* aired in 1954. *Father Knows Best* was notable because it was viewed as a realistic portrayal of a family, though it was described, like many shows at the time, as a “consensual comedy,” meaning it applied to the lowest common denominator and did not fit the demographic programming of the later 1960s and 1970s. The title of the show solidifies Jim Anderson’s (Robert Young) dominant role—instead of being a partner, he is head of the household and his main role is guiding the path through life of his children. This program places the weight of focus on the relationship of Jim and his wife Margaret (Jane Wyatt) as two parents instead of man and wife. In contrast to *I Love Lucy* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, the themes of *Father Knows Best* also include moral outcomes instead of simply a collection of lines to laugh at.

“Bud Takes Up the Dance” is the pilot episode of the sitcom that had its early days on the radio. When the family first learns of Bud’s weekend plans—that Bud (Billy Gray) is going to his first school dance with a girl, they attempt to act like they haven’t heard about it from their chatty daughter Kathy (Lauren Chapin). Like the pilot episode of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, the fact that the eldest son is preparing to court a girl is central to the family’s life. They model themselves to look like a happily unscrupulous portrait when he enters, though he instantly senses their deceit. When his father welcomes him home and asks how he is, Bud

knows something is up, indicating that his father does not normally interest himself in the lives of his children. Bud becomes embarrassed and locks himself in the basement. Margaret insists that her husband convey diplomacy with their sensitive son, and they disagree about how to handle Bud's tantrum once he does petulantly lock himself in the basement. Jim visits Marcia, Bud's date, and finds that she is locked in the basement as well, embarrassed that Bud's dancing skills will exceed her own. Jim teaches her to dance and later convinces his son to learn to dance—the old-fashioned way. The father is the one who solves the problem, without his wife's help or guidance, which conveys the values of the time—although the wife is the coordinator of the home, she is not the breadwinner, strong enough to solve interpersonal problems, or able to teach the kids the waltz.

The Honeymooners

The 1955 to 1956 television sitcom centered around two married couples in the same Brooklyn apartment building and their marital relationships. The show had origins as a sketch on a 1951 variety show and grew from a darker tone regarding Ralph's frustrating marriage to a bitter and challenging wife, which still was reflected in the power struggle between the domestic partners. In the years after World War II, many families struggled with supporting a nuclear family, and many families transitioned to the suburbs. Upward mobility and the promise of the American dream, kept Ralph and Alice Kramden (Jackie Gleason and Pert Kelton) in the opportunistic city. The pilot episode, "TV or Not TV," marked the independence of the program's half-hour series and centered on the main character Ralph's purchase of a TV set with his neighbor-friend Ed Norton (Art Carney) after Ed's wife Trixie (Joyce Randolph) pressures Alice into asking Ralph for one. The husbands decide to split the cost of the set, which becomes a problem when the peace of the Kramden household is disturbed. Alice has no important

responsibilities other than cooking, cleaning, and general housework. Ralph actually threatens her physically multiple times during the episode using his catchphrase “You wanna go to the moon?”, and though she does not respond to these threats with fear, he is very aggressive in his communication tactics.

The Honeymooners reflected the consumption-driven aftermath of World War II. The larger economic shift that took place in the post-war period was representative of the cultural shift to the suburbs and the importance of being a picture-perfect housewife. Alice insists that Ralph is cheap because he won't buy her a washing machine, vacuum, and electric stove, which will improve her quality of life, especially her duties as a woman and wife. She has no purchasing power herself, but Ralph insists that her financial security is taken care of. *The Honeymooners* makes it clear that marriage is financial security for women and that a good husband is measured by what he can buy. Like Lucy in the *I Love Lucy* pilot, Alice uses niceties and sweetness to entice Ralph into giving her a television set, and like Ricky, Ralph is suspicious by his wife's sudden intimacy, which sends the message that husbands should be careful of their wives. Consumerism is also emphasized by their neighbors, the Nortons, buying an entirely new set instead of fixing their old one.

The episode also emphasizes that television is a life improvement. The influence of media is apparent as Ralph is obsessed with staying up to watch the *Late Show*. The importance of a positive portrayal of women is demonstrated within the show as television was an essential feature not only for the Kramdens, but for millions of American couples. The pilot revolves around consumption and how it will improve life for these individuals; it is essentially a commercial.

Green Acres

From 1965 to 1971, *Green Acres* aired on CBS. The sitcom starred Eddie Albert as a rich New York attorney who decides to move his materialistic wife Lisa Douglas (Eva Gabor) to a rural community and run a farm. The pilot episode “Oliver Buys a Farm,” which aired on September 15, 1965, sets up the remainder of the series as Oliver Wendell Douglas moves to his new acreage near Hooterville, which is a long way from Lisa’s beloved New York City. The iconic introduction and theme song melodically explain the difference between Oliver’s need to take advantage of the fresh air of the country and his wife’s acclimation to the convenience of a large city. The theme song also explains that Lisa has no input in the decision, as Oliver sings, “You are my wife,” and Lisa responds, “Goodbye, city life!”. He also bought a farm without his wife’s knowledge, though he had been warning her that he wanted a move to the country. The *Green Acres* announcer analyzes the movement from farm to city and admits that this is the only case in which someone gave up their Park Avenue penthouse to relocate to the country, demonstrating the appeal of the shiny city over the dirty country. The “cultural divergence of ingrained urban and rural values” is an important aspect of the entire series—the move to the country is not glorified, but is represented as a challenging but rewarding lifestyle while the city is portrayed as the easy option with less conflict (Magoc). The announcer also describes Oliver’s wife Lisa as “beautiful and sophisticated” because of her affiliation with the city. The flashback between the young Oliver and his father also shows the emphasis on an Ivy League education and having a professional career that was prevalent.

When discussing moving to a farm after their multiple moves within the city, Lisa exclaims, “You have everything a man could possibly want! A beautiful home, a wife who loves you, a successful law practice, yet you throw it all away to move to a farm!” Though future

episodes of the show revolved around the antics of the husband-wife pair and the odd characters in their farming community, the pilot episode placed greater emphasis on Oliver's wacky commitment to farming without validating it as a viable option for American families. Lisa must give up her friends and social life to humor her husband's hobby, which includes creating a field of corn on their Park Avenue penthouse balcony. Oliver's craving for independence from society emotionally distresses his prim wife so much that she calls Oliver's mother over, sides with Lisa and offers to take her in. Viewing from the "other side" (e.g. rural folk looking at city slickers or New Yorkers looking at hillbillies) creates a misunderstanding in value, though *Green Acres* created a discourse in social issues and differences. Oliver's ideal diverges from his wife's need, but they work together to compromise bringing Lisa to the farm to see how she likes it for six months. Oliver is obsessed with an American dream that differs from the material world of the cities and suburbs after World War II. Lisa expects a much more beautiful home than the one on the Haney property that Oliver bought.

The reason for its eventual cancellation was CBS's "rural purge," citing the irrelevancy to modern times. In 1961, FCC chairman Newton Minow labeled television, especially its "formula comedies about totally unbelievable families" as a "vast wasteland," and inferred that television was not interested in the public interest of its viewers but of advertisers and the economic gain of conglomerates (Minow 1961). Though his speech encouraged networks to expand their news programming options, situational comedies did not evolve to specifically target differentiated audiences. The success of situation comedies centered on more modern themes, urban demographics, and hegemonic values prompted CBS to cancel *Green Acres* and other small-town shows.

He & She

Like Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez of *I Love Lucy* and the Nelsons of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, an off-screen romance was also used to portray an on-screen one in the 1967-1968 sitcom *He & She*. In the short-lived series from CBS, Dick Benjamin and Paula Prentiss play Dick and Paula Hollister—a cartoonist of the popular comic “Jetman” and his wife, an overly caring social worker. The show was scheduled directly after the wildly popular *Green Acres*, which was an odd rural-to-urban transition for audiences and may have been the reason the show only lasted a single season. *He & She* was monumental in its use of Paula as a working partner. During the 1960s, women were rarely shown outside of their domestic domain in the “male, public, world of work” (Bryant 178). By the late 1960s, conventional portrayals of women in media were being challenged by organized women’s groups (Watson 69). Paula received a Primetime Emmy Award nomination for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series for her role as Paula Hollister.

The pilot episode was entitled “The Old Man and the She” and aired on September 6, 1967. The intimacy between the couple is clear in the introduction, which shows the pair running together, kissing, and laughing. *He & She* brings up issues of immigration instead of conniving and manipulating between the husband-wife like the pair in *I Love Lucy* or the female friends in *The Honeymooners*. The show also portrays actors as dramatic, conceited, and unhelpful. Paula Hollister wants to help everyone and is a superhero to many immigrants even through her extreme ideas such as adoption. *He & She* also portrays government agents as heartless and ineffectual. The firefighter neighbor (Kenneth Mars) also introduces the idea that if he were a government official or important politician, the agencies would bend the rules to let him stay, further exposing the corruption of the system.

Dick stays calm while trying to solve his wife's problem, acting as the superhero in this situation. The couple disagree frequently in the episode, but Paula is not afraid to ask for the help and support of her husband and the main conflict stems from an issue outside of the marital relationship. Giving power to Hollywood through Oscar North (Jack Cassidy), the star of Dick's "Jetman" adapted-to-television series. This also shows the power of large corporations and the powerlessness of individuals, ironically enough, through a television network program. The married couple eventually figure out how to keep Paula's Greek immigrant pet Panapolous in the United States through a work visa, representing the ability to override the system and achieve the American Dream all at the same time.

The Brady Bunch

The Brady Bunch is one of the most popular television programs of all time. The five seasons aired from 1969 to 1974 on ABC, and the single-camera setup allowed an intimate view of the unique family living situation of the Bradys. The blended family was created through the marriage of architect Mike Brady (Robert Reed) and homemaker Carol Brady (Florence Henderson). Mike Brady was widowed, while Carol was presumptuously divorced. Divorce was too risqué for television at the time, but *The Brady Bunch* boldly introduced a stepfamily into the network lineup. Though the familial values displayed in *The Brady Bunch* were "reminiscent of the sixties genre of family shows such as *Leave it to Beaver*," the wholesome family relationships were actually not representative of 1970s families (Marinucci 508). The show became more popular as a syndicated program in the eighties and nineties. Luckily, the popularity of *The Brady Bunch* does not correlate with divorce statistics in any year, indicating that the values of the show were not influential on the viewers of the program. However, the program did introduce stepfamilies as an acceptable family structure. The Brady clan did their

best to maintain normalcy in the family by painting Mike and Carol as equal partners in marriage and parenthood, though their children came from previous marriages.

The first season dealt primarily with the adjustment of the six children into the household. The pilot episode “The Honeymoon” aired on September 26, 1969, and sets the tone of the series with an introduction to Carol’s three girls, Mike’s three boys, and the Brady housekeeper Alice. The show promotes the extension of the traditional view of family. While Greg eats breakfast with his boys on the morning of his wedding, his oldest son Greg (Barry Williams) says that nervousness is the normal male reaction to getting married. This youthful view of marriage can be explained by the stereotypes of men being afraid of commitment while women only seek a solid relationship. Meanwhile, Carol is getting ready for her wedding, insisting that brides are “supposed to be” beautiful but that she looks awful. The importance that society places on marriage is evident in the scene—happiness stems from getting married, and to achieve that dream, a woman has to be attractive. During the 1970s, female characters were predominantly portrayed as married—this 46% contrasted with the 30% of male characters who were married on television (Bryant 140). The show also explains that divorce or widowhood is the “end of the world”. Luckily, the communication between Mike and Carol is healthy: they discuss their fears and relations with one another.

The old-fashioned values of pre-1960s sitcoms are carried on by the character of the hotel manager, an older gentleman who does not approve of already having a family before getting married. *The Brady Bunch* shows the difficulties of taking care of a stepfamily and the manipulation of punishments that come with caring for a partner’s children. However, the Bradys lived a luxurious middle-class lifestyle, portraying a very specific representation of the blended family.

All in the Family

Characterized by discussion of groundbreaking issues usually considered inappropriate for network television, *All in the Family* ran from 1971 to 1979 on CBS, following the World War II veteran and bigot Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor) and his understanding wife, Edith (Jean Stapleton). In 1971, the comedy won Primetime Emmy Awards for Outstanding New Series, Outstanding Series – Comedy, and Outstanding Continued Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role in a Comedy Series for Jean Stapleton's performance as Archie's tolerant wife. Archie expressed many of the working class's problems as his financial security seemed to slip through his fingers. His conservatism served as a representation of the cultural and political fragmentation during the Vietnam era of American history. *All in the Family* is conflict based and uses marital communication to represent and examine detailed social upheaval.

"Meet the Bunkers" was the January 12, 1971 pilot episode for the series. The episode begins with the Bunkers' daughter Gloria Stivic (Sally Struthers) taking the leading role to plan the anniversary celebration of her parents, perhaps representing the use of children as caretakers that was an important change in the 1970s. Archie describes Gloria's husband Michael Stivic (Rob Reiner) as an "angry white social democrat," and calls the sermon at church "socialist propaganda," much to the dismay of his devout wife. The pilot episode is heavily driven by the conflict between Archie, representative of the Baby Boomer generation, sparred against Michael—1960s counterculture—as the foils constantly bicker about who is to blame for the 1970s' societal and economic upheaval. The culture of protest that Michael grew up in is clearly offensive to the Bunkers, while Archie's racist and ageist tirades do not exempt him from guilt in the Stivics' eyes. The characterization of the younger generation as faithless and lazy is also representative of the era in which older Americans felt their offspring were focused on how they

can live off of the older generation instead of focusing on “what you got and how you can keep it”.

Edith and Archie are also portrayed as opposing forces. Archie does not express love or intimacy for his wife, while Michael and Gloria can barely keep their hands off each other. The sexual forwardness expressed on television in the 1970s was a fast progression from the separate marital beds of *I Love Lucy*. When Archie’s black neighbor Lionel (D’Urville Martin) makes a point about prejudice to Archie, it is clear that *All in the Family* portrays progressiveness and acceptance by exposing a character’s realistically ignorant attitudes and acted as a model for the 1980s generation. By 1971, cable television was making its mark in New York City with access to additional channels and programming. This changes the way viewers watched television by having categorized stations while the networks maintained a monotonous view of the American family. Cable television also fractured the audience into groups organized by interest, making it hard for the networks to contain a mass amount of viewers.

The Bob Newhart Show

Comedian Bob Newhart premiered his live-audience television program in 1972 on CBS. The pilot episode introduces Newhart as Robert Hartley, a psychologist who must juggle his wife Emily (Suzanne Pleshette) at home and his office mates and regular patients at work. The multi-camera sitcom was an extension of Newhart’s stand-up comedy routines. The first episode was called “Fly the Unfriendly Skies” and chronicled Hartley’s attempt to convince his height-averse wife to fly to New York with him and his similarly scared patients. As the first psychologist on television, Bob Newhart introduced a caricature of a sometimes neurotic therapist who dealt with his wife’s insecurities as much as his own patients’ problems. The episode begins, as many sitcoms have, with Emily in the kitchen with a neighbor. Hartley is helpful and calm and works

through the fears of his stubborn wife. The conflict in this program stems from an increase in technology and the couple's reliance on each other is the solution. In this episode, Emily is treated as one of Robert's patients, so he is accommodating to her weaknesses, though he initially just tells her she is being stupid because flying is safe. Her irrational fear also seems to stem from a connection of flying to the Vietnam War and the PTSD associated with that. Though the pilot episodes was about a weakness of Emily's, *The Bob Newhart Show* portrayed an egalitarian relationship between Robert and Emily and gave working women who were balancing work and marriage a responsible role model (Press 168).

Maude, which was on CBS from 1972 to 1978, also introduced a mental health professional in its premiere episode. In the *All in the Family* spinoff, Bea Arthur portrayed Maude Findlay, whose daughter Carol (Adrienne Barbeau) comes to dinner after seeing her psychiatrist. Maude immediately attributes Carol's visits to a complete lack of happiness and a failure of her part as a parent. She feels threatened by the inference of her failure and begins to scream at her daughter and create an emotional scene. Her fourth husband, Walter Findlay (Bill Macy) mediates the discussion and tries to ease her mind. When she goes to Carol's psychiatrist to get information out of him, she finds that she needs the therapy. Both of these representations of mental health professionals in *The Bob Newhart Show* and *Maude* give mental health a voice while also providing a comedic moment for the sitcoms' starring comics.

Happy Days

The Cunninghams reverted to an idealized view of a 1950s family because *Happy Days* was a period piece. The 1974 to 1984 series centers around young Milwaukee native Richie Cunningham (Ron Howard), who lives with his traditional parents Howard (Tom Bosley) and Marion (Marion Ross) and his younger sister Joanie (Erin Moran). In later seasons, the show

focused on Fonzie (Henry Winkler), the iconic character who became a regular after his breakout popularity. The first episode of the series was “All the Way,” which premiered on January 15, 1974 on ABC. The traditional marriage of the Cunninghams is portrayed through Richie’s eyes. Richie is excited that his best friend Potsie (Anson Williams) is going to help him ask out the girl of his dreams, Mary Lou Milligan (Kathy O’Dare). The pressure to hook up with girls and have sex at a young age is the forefront of discussion in the episode. Richie and Mary Lou make out but go no further, although Richie tells his friends that he went all the way. Howard advises his son that honesty is best when admitting what he did with a girl. It is clear that the norm for high school boys is to aggrandize an intimate experience to impress other male peers. In addition to the sexual content of the episode, Marion confides to Howard that fertilizers used in food now affects children’s height and attitude. Similar to executive producer Garry Marshall’s spinoff sitcom *Laverne & Shirley*, *Happy Days* employed 1950s stereotypes of women. The show once again emphasized traditional gender roles.

Soap

Soap was a sitcom, but unique because it was a parody of daytime soap operas, which have always been targeted toward housewives. The narrative included multiple overlapping melodramatic plotlines. *Soap* centered around the Tates—Jessica and Chester were married but often unfaithful. ABC aired the pilot on September 13, 1977. The show’s focus on sex and infidelity was alarming to many audiences. Censors sent a memo encouraging head writer and creator Susan Harris to tone down the sexual material and exclude offensive words and references to the Catholic Church’s indiscretions (“Taming”). All marital relations are overdramatic and extremely tense, alluding to the inauthentic portrayal of relationships on other

sitcoms. Networks used the tantalizing content to compete with cable televisions' excessive sexual material (Watson 117).

Another parody of soap operas at the time was *All That Glitters* (1977), which was about a corporate role-reversal in which executives were women and stay-at-home husbands were the weaker sex. With the tagline "God created Eve first, took out her rib and gave her a companion so she wouldn't be lonely," the show's unhappy reception showed that 1970s audiences were not accepting of the "blasphemous" themes, though the show debuted as a syndicated program on late-night television.

Family Ties

Family Ties premiered on September 22, 1982 on NBC and lasted seven seasons until its finale on May 14, 1989. Michael Gross and Meredith Baxter-Birney play Steven and Elyse Keaton, who are married with three children. *Family Ties* was uncommon due to its portrayal of the parents as the liberal icons—the liberal baby boomers who support feminist policies and John F. Kennedy. The conflict in the show often stems from the political tendencies of the pair's children, who mold their conservation ideologies on Reaganomics and Richard Nixon. The tagline of the show was "hip parents, square kids," and the disdain Michael J. Fox's Alex showed towards his ex-hippie parents bled into the real political preaching of the conservative party at the time (Haglund). Indeed, Michael J. Fox later won three Emmy Awards in a row for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy Series. *Family Ties*, particularly the pilot episode, was in direct opposition to the conservative parenting and liberal-minded youth of *All in the Family*'s 1970s run. In terms of the parents' relationship to their children, Alex was often show to be the rational and smart family member. Alex was an early portrayal of a young Republican and other Republicans related to his role as the black sheep of the family, especially in a time when

Republicans felt as though their values were constantly being attacked (Haglund). Alex has goals and values that are decidedly not drawn from his parents, and the difference in societal upbringing is clear. The Keatons are a tight-knit married couple because of their deep history, which includes 1960s protests and dressing with long hair and bellbottom jeans. By using the parents' activist slideshow as a way to alienate the children from the adults, *Family Ties* actually trivializes history and the accomplishments of previous generations. Steve and Elyse are on the same page about their morals, but there is a communicative barrier present between them and Alex.

Alex's goals are to date cheerleader Kimberly, who is ditzy with little to offer but has rich parents. To impress her, Alex lies about having a butler, sailing around the world, his father's job as a manager of a public television station, and learning polo. The emphasis on having money to be able to afford a certain lifestyle is often represented by Alex reading the Wall Street Journal. His parents, on the other hand, are uncomfortable with the intolerance of the Carlton Country Club that Kimberly's parents belong to. The Keatons also have two daughters, and their youngest, Jessica, already has a friend with a "personal crisis" at nine years old, which demonstrates the selfish and dramatic nature of her generation. Alex and his siblings, much to the chagrin of their parents, do not want to change the entire world, marking the television portrayal of a generation whose belongings are most important. *Family Ties* is an example of a sitcom that introduced two working figures in the home, the professional roles of both parents are downplayed to emphasize other hegemonic values of the 1980s.

Growing Pains

The Seaver family of *Growing Pains* were portrayed on ABC from the pilot episode on September 24, 1985 until the series concluded in 1992. The family structure of the show was

unique because Dr. Jason Seaver (Alan Thicke) performs child-rearing duties and works from home to allow his wife Maggie (Joanna Kerns) to return to a position as a television reporter. Jason continues to work from home, disallowing a representation of a woman being the sole breadwinner. In the opening scene, Maggie is shown as making food for the family. Jason brings up the fact that two-career couples need to remain frisky. Romantic interactions are a central part of their relationship.

In the pilot, the Seavers' youngest son Ben (Jeremy Miller) insists that his father's Band-Aid application was not up to par and questions why Maggie must return to the workforce. Even though he is only five years old, Ben believes in the mother-at-home approach, perhaps due to his mother's caring nature, which is in contrast to his father's clinical approach. Throughout the episode, Jason admits that even he is not ready for total responsibility, which causes Maggie to feel like she should be at home. Later, Maggie doles out the punishment when their older son Mike (Kirk Cameron) is arrested, and Jason doesn't instigate punishment unless she prods him too. The one-sidedness of the marriage reflects that the transition through 1980s sitcoms that positioned women at the head of the household cause women to gain a domestic domain but isolated the genders when the workplace was labeled as masculine. When Jason gets frustrated that his son could be so irresponsible, Maggie patronizingly points out that it is the same type of responsibility that she expects of her husband. TV dads were given more responsibility in the 1980s and 1990s, while women still carried most of the weight of parental duties.

Roseanne

One of the biggest award-winning situational comedies of the 1980s, in addition to one of the most popular, was *Roseanne*. It starred Roseanne Barr and John Goodman as Roseanne and Dan Conner, a working-class family hailing from Lanford, Illinois. The subjects dealt with

during the series were controversial, not the least of which were the portrayal of a low-income family and dealing with Roseanne's overweight figure. The show was applauded for showing Roseanne as a figure of equality, including the positive portrayal of female friendships and acceptance of appearances. "Life and Stuff" premiered on October 18, 1988 and introduced the Conners and their three children, Becky (Lecy Goranson), Darlene (Sara Gilbert), and D.J. (Michael Fishman). *Roseanne* is unique in that the lead female has many friends outside the home and has a social identity in addition to a work identity and family identity. Traditional portrayals of sexual objectification were reversed in the show as Roseanne saw men as physical objects. Females were also shown as having sexual freedom and asserting this sexuality, which was groundbreaking during this more conservative time.

Despite the praises for its encapsulation of progression, Roseanne still makes coffee and breakfast in the morning for her family and is the point of contact for the school conference. She wants her husband to fix the sink, while she does all other errands and chores. Rosie is foul-mouthed and lacks femininity but still adheres to her traditional gendered position in the family. Sports and hydraulics are a man's subject of conversation. Roseanne insists that she trained her husband and says a good man is created by women, removing mother's influence, macho media influence, and male ego. When she meets Becky's teacher for the conference, she ends up putting down the teacher, another working-class woman, and disagreeing with the behavioral problems theory, placing blame anywhere but herself.

When she gets home, Roseanne accuses Dan of being a constant beer guzzler with no accomplishments to show for the day. She even insists that fixing appliances is for husbands and taking care of everything else is for wives. It is also said that Roseanne may lose her credibility because she is heavy—playing the funny fat girl stereotype makes her less of a threat (Dresner

38). Roseanne doesn't do much about the inequality in her own home, and the pair are very consistently yelling at each other. The identification of *Roseanne* as a feminist ideal was increasingly examined in the 1980s. Though the actual comedienne Roseanne Barr was foul-mouthed and aggressive in her stances regarding women's rights, her situational comedy did not reflect her views. Her character is sassy and challenges her male-dominated workplace and home hierarchy, but ultimately does not succeed in changing her role as a woman. This gives women an ineffectual role model. Roseanne spoke out consistently about her domestic role, but her married life was unstable as a result.

Home Improvement

Home Improvement aired on ABC for eight seasons. Its popularity and critical acclaim are not to be undervalued—during its time on air, *Home Improvement* won every People's Choice Award it was nominated for and was nominated for many Primetime Emmy Awards and Golden Globes. The show was the launching point for Tim Allen, who played a masculine home improvement show host Tim Taylor. His wife Jill Taylor, played by Patricia Richardson, is never excited about having her own personal handyman around the house, as Tim tends to break things more often than fixing them. His show *Tool Time* is often used to portray the masculinity of the male figure as Tim's catchphrase "More power!" makes his studio audience laugh, though his use of power tools is sometimes improper. The pilot aired on September 17, 1991 and was the first look into the lives of the Taylors and their three children. Much of the humor in the show stems from the wacky antics of Tim, especially on his television show, where he explains that men are the ones to use tools because women don't know how to and wouldn't understand the weight of the equipment. This masculine-centered portrayal was actually a minority in the early 1990s—only 38.3% of families were headed by parents or married couples (Bryant 148). *Tool*

Time also uses scantily dressed women to bring the tools to the two hosts, implying that women are only there to look pretty and not work.

As he mockingly caricatures a nagging wife on his television show, Tim's wife challenges him by asking who he is attempting to portray. "The every-wife," he explains sheepishly. She has to order their son Brad (Zachery Ty Bryan) to stop running with a football in the house, and against his wife's request, Tim explains to his sporty offspring how to handle the ball properly. In order to go to a job interview, Jill has to threaten his measuring tape to convince him to stay and watch their kids. Tim does not conceal his lack of enthusiasm for his wife going back to work, insisting that he makes enough money so that she doesn't have to. Her desire for a fuller life and autonomy threatens his masculinity, but this was a common theme in the 1990s as a greater percentage of women found their roles in the workforce. Within the household, Tim and Jill vie for power over the dishwasher, with Tim insisting that it is *his* house and *his* dishwasher. He tries to fix it to create a dishwasher good enough for man dishes. His neighbor Wilson (Earl Hindman) advises him to "reclaim the male spirit" which he takes as encouragement to return to primitive behavior. His wife, by contrast, is described by Tim to their sons as more sensitive and needing emotional support and someone to listen when she doesn't get the job.

In the 1990s, primetime television programming mainly depicted single women as dominating the workforce and married women were still more likely to work in the home, insinuating that married women have reduced options and can rarely combine marriage and employment with any success. More than three-quarters of married males in 1990s programming were employed, compared to only two-fifths of married women, further perpetuating the

stereotype of males as breadwinners (Bryant 340). *Home Improvement* strengthened the hegemonic values that were portrayed with Tim's *Tool Time*.

Mad About You

Broadcast by NBC from 1992 to 1999, *Mad About You* followed New York newlyweds Paul Buchman and Jamie Stemple Buchman through the joys and challenges of their marriage. Helen Hunt portrayed the neurotics public relations specialist married to Paul Reiser's sarcastic documentary filmmaker character. In the pilot episode "Romantic Improvisations," which aired on September 23, 1992, the Buchanans try to improve their sex life by spending more time together, but each thinks the other had more social plans with friends. The opening scene begins with Jamie snoring. The two are naked, insinuating an intimacy between the pair. Jamie uses a pregnancy joke to get Paul to make the coffee; once they get out of bed, they split up responsibilities by negotiating chores and errands.

The two are both portrayed as working professionals. However, a blend of insecurity and high maintenance attitudes are exposed with Jamie jumps to conclusions, assuming that Paul doesn't like her outfit and running back inside to change. The Buchanans' relationship issues deal with working together to find domestic equality, a rarity on contemporary television. Jamie's sister Lisa (Anne Ramsay) is impressed that Paul and Jamie make time for each other to have sex and impresses upon Jamie the importance of being married and staying pretty. After having sex in the kitchen during their dinner party, Paul and Jamie are physically and emotionally closer. The Buchanans relationship is more egalitarian than many sitcom duos; their marriage allows both partners to find happiness in their careers and their marriage.

Everybody Loves Raymond

Ray Romano created this show with executive producer Philip Rosenthal, modeling after the duo's real life experiences. *Everybody Loves Raymond* followed the family life of Raymond Barone, his wife Debra (Patricia Heaton), their three children, Ray's brother Robert (Brad Garrett), and, too frequently for Debra's taste, Ray's parents (Doris Roberts and Peter Boyle). The show originally ran from 1996 to 2005 on CBS. The pilot episode aired on September 13 and featured Ray as a helpless father who was still babied by his parents. His wife, Debra, often asks him to do things and he works around those requests. Though Debra wants Ray around, the pilot episode begins with him coming back from a four day business trip. The couple then discusses that Ray had to propose three times before Debra accepted, only once he got a job. This demonstrates that to modern women, financial security is still important and a major draw for a husband. Though Ray and Debra often bicker, their "emotional expression in the contemporary television family" is reflective of modern American families, who also must negotiate the egalitarian relationships (Boelman 234). In *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Debra plays a matriarchal role within the household. Sitcoms usually focus on the domestic occurrences and often show the male struggle with relinquishing power and redistributing responsibility.

The King of Queens

The King of Queens was on CBS from 1998 to 2007 and focused on the lives of Doug and Carrie Heffernan, played by Kevin James and Leah Remini. The pilot episode of *The King of Queens* represents the responsibility that children feel toward their parents as well as the ineffectual lives of men if they do not have a woman in their lives. Carrie feels so guilty about her father's transition to an older lifestyle. Doug gives in with Carrie's emotional manipulation.

Though the portrayal of Remini's character Carrie as the attractive, successful, and independent partner is an "apparent role reversal," viewers of *The King of Queens* accidentally consumed the "same patriarchal ideology" of the 1950s situational comedies (Walsh 126). Men watch sports angrily together, don't know what a duvet is, have to play by family rules. Women looking at men like they are dumb. Making sacrifices for the family members of his wife, feeling pushed around and cheated. Doug puts his foot down and establishes rules for his houseguests. Doug showing "feminine" insecurities and Carrie has to boost his self-esteem by justifying those insecurities.

Yes, Dear

The series ran until 2006 on CBS and followed the lives of two couples and their children. Greg Warner (Anthony Clark) and Kim Warner (Jean Louisa Kelly) are the Warners, who are driven by perfection and maintaining an ideal family image. By contrast, Kim Warner's sister Christine Hughes and her husband Jimmy (Liza Snyder and Mike O'Malley), give less thought to a flawless family and more to enjoying life. The pilot episode of *Yes, Dear* premiered on October 2, 2000. In it, Kim and Christine receive a much needed reprieve from family life while their husbands are supposed to take the kids to a park. One criticism of the show, which was based on a 1970s British sitcom *Yes, My Dear*, often called one of the worst-ever sitcoms, is that the characters are too stereotypical. The comedy portrays the pairs as starkly opposite in their parenting techniques, but the foursome learns from each other in ways that are poignant in the moment yet repetitive in terms of decades of network programming.

Kim is clearly a neurotic being and worries a lot, as evidenced by her parenting books, entitled *Eating, When to Worry* and *Walking, When to Worry*. There is an enormous pressure on her to have her child up to par with other children around him because the blame will fall to her

and her mothering practices. She is the clear opposite of Roseanne, who has a very hands-off parenting approach, and more similar to Maude in that she is personally victimized if she is not construed as a model mother. The expectations of her parenting are not placed on her by her husband or her family, but her move to Hollywood and the social pressures that are tied to a town centered on image.

Christine, meanwhile, has less pressure about kids—their children like watching television all day and feeding the kids McDonald's. Jimmy portrays a male that has no family responsibility, which he describes as “the dream” and emasculates Greg's decision to help his wife by calling him “whipped”. He encourages Greg to lessen Kim's load by giving her “a little slack in the rope,” implying that she is tied to family life and that her husband controls that bond. When she finally agrees for a spa date with Christine, the anxious Kim quizzes her husband about taking care of Sammy, displaying no trust or belief that he can be a helpful parenting partner. Unable to relax, Kim wants to leave the spa, but Christine explains to her that in the end her child will be safe with his father. When Greg and Jimmy take their brood to the casino instead of the park, Greg captures Sammy's first steps on video. Jimmy pays a graphic designer friend to fix the background of the video, but Kim and Christine notice the obvious difference when Sammy is able to walk across a lake on film. The episode explains the expectations of capturing “firsts” and the immense pressure of parenting on both father and mother from upper middle class societal expectations.

Hope & Faith

The series premiered on ABC and ran from 2003 to 2004. In the pilot episode, which aired on September 23, 2003, Hope (Faith Ford) takes in her soap opera actress sister Faith (Kelly Ripa), who was just killed off of her show. In the first moments, Hope is cooking

breakfast for her family, a staple of sitcoms since the 1950s. She cleverly uses the security system to force her family downstairs. She also insists on her husband Charlie (Ted McGinley) and three children eating healthy by providing them a tofu scramble.

When Hope's oldest daughter Sydney (Nicole Paggi) has nothing to wear to school, Aunt Faith encourages her to look hot at fifteen, and the two laugh at Hope for being a prude. Meanwhile, Hope is trying to plan a sexy lunch date with her husband and uncomfortably visits a lingerie store before getting a call about Sydney in the principal's office. This episode strongly suggests that motherhood means there is no time for intimacy and that mothers can't be sexy, but it does imply that single women can use their bodies and sex in a manipulative way, as Faith uses her cleavage to convince the principal to let her niece out of a stricter punishment.

As a punishment for Sydney skipping school, the principal allows her to hold a bake sale at Faith's request. Hope protests, knowing that all of the baking will fall to her, which is what ends up happening when Faith and Sydney fall asleep on the couch. Overall, the episode projects the feeling that women can fall into the categories of responsible mom or incompetent "slut". While this view is not necessarily progressive, it summarizes the dichotomy that turn-of-the-century women struggled to balance as they were bullied, often by other women, for being too straight-laced or too loose.

'Til Death

Brad Garrett and Joely Fisher portray Eddie and Joy Stark in this 2006 to 2010 sitcom from Fox. The Starks have been married 23 years in the show, both work, and have a daughter away at college. Their marriage is pitted in direct contrast to the newlyweds next door, Jeff and Steph Woodcock (Eddie Kaye Thomas and Kat Foster). Jeff works at the same high school that Eddie teaches at, and Steph is unemployed and steadily working on her Master's. The pilot

begins with first grade children describing their ideal spouse. Two boys say, “A girl who is skinny,” as the first suggestion, followed by, “a girl scout who sells cookies and stuff.” The first girl pictured says, “A lawyer, so I can be rich”. It is clear that the expectations from gender roles and media stereotypes begin from a young age and permeate the decisions of American relationships. Not only are the children looking for principally physical or financial characteristics instead of personality and emotional compatibility, but they must strive to impress the opposite sex’s high standards.

The first picture of Jeff and Steph is them driving to their new home on their twelfth day of marriage, clearly still in the “honeymoon stage” and constantly making out. Meanwhile, Eddie and Joy are on their 8,273rd day of marriage, are extremely comfortable with each other, and like to spy on their neighbors. They are comfortable with each other. The pairs are at very different stages in their lives and relationships, demonstrated by the Woodcocks doing everything together, while the Starks are often disgusted by each other. Jeff receives a pool table catalog, explaining to Steph that they could use the formal dining room as a space for the pool table. “Pool table. That’s an interesting idea,” Steph replies; later, Eddie shares his marital wisdom with Jeff, explaining that Steph’s comment was female code for “No”. From Eddie’s perspective, men want fun, and women want to take the fun deep into the woods and shoot it with a gun. His cynical attitude towards marriage—that it’s just for someone to take you to hospital operations—startles Jeff. Eddie and Joy exhibit no clear or deep marital issues, but their marriage is not portrayed as truly romantic either. This episode connects to the desire of the American couple to still have fun once settling down, which is touted as impossible on many network television programs. Marriage is when you come home, sit down in front of the TV, and watch *‘Til Death*,

and many real couples never get up from the couch again in another instance of screen influencing or just reflecting reality.

Rules of Engagement

The pilot episode for *Rules of Engagement* aired on February 7, 2007 and the series ran on CBS until 2013. The show starred Patrick Warburton and Megyn Price as Jeff and Audrey, a couple which have been married for 23 years, and Oliver Hudson and Bianca Kajlich play their younger, just-engaged neighbors, Adam and Jennifer. David Spade concludes the primary cast with his portrayal of single bachelor Russell with ladies constantly on his mind. In the premiere episode, Jeff and Audrey link up with their new couple friends Adam and Jennifer during an art night, while Russell points out the flaws of marriage to Adam after he moves in with and proposes to Jennifer.

The episode begins with a title card that reads, “When you’re single, you’re exactly as happy as you are. When you’re married, you can only be as happy as the least happy person in the relationship.” The cynicism of this first title card sets the tone for the rest of the series and the portrayal of marriage in general. Jeff and Audrey’s long-term marriage, similar to Eddie and Joy’s in *Til Death* is first portrayed by Audrey scoffing at Jeff balancing the checkbook. While Jeff just wants to drink and watch baseball, Audrey craves couple friends and insists on setting a good example for their newly-engaged neighbors. As Adam and Jennifer discuss going to the art show with their martially experienced friends, Jennifer discusses setting Russell up, insisting that single men have commitment issues and need to be fixed by a woman. This not only excuses Russell’s bachelor behavior but makes it the woman’s role to tame. Adam also impresses his antiquated expectations of marriage onto his fiancée—hoping for cake while she insists she doesn’t bake, saying, “Am I allowed to vote?”. *Til Death* and *Rules of Engagement* are very

similar shows and they both show positives and negatives of married life through younger and older couples. The repetition of these tropes is what promotes stereotypes of marital relationships on television.

Modern Family

Modern Family premiered on ABC on September 23, 2009. The show focuses on three interconnected families and uses documentary-style interviews to expose the characters' true feelings. The series has won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Comedy Series for each of its first four seasons as well as a Golden Globe for Best Television Series—Musical or Comedy. The show stands out because of its portrayal of contemporary family structures. Ty Burrell and Julie Bowen play Phil and Claire, an often-clueless but enthusiastic realtor and uptight homemaker with three children. Ed O'Neill and Sofia Vergara play Jay and Gloria, Claire's father who recently married a younger Latina bombshell with a son with old-fashioned values. Mitchell and Cam are a dramatic and fun gay couple with an adopted daughter, and are played by Jesse Tyler Ferguson and Eric Stonestreet. In the pilot episode, Mitchell and Cam introduce Lily to the rest of the family, Claire tries to prevent her oldest daughter from getting too close to a boy, and Gloria's son Manny wants to profess his love to an older woman, much to Jay's dismay.

During the episode, it is clear that within the couples each partner is very understanding and knowledgeable of the positives and possible negatives of their partner, and each pair complement each other well. Claire uses the phrase "my kids," which Phil immediately corrects to "our kids" in their mockumentary interview sit-down, despite not being the household parent. Claire is definitely a perfectionist and insistent on how things will play out, and she is often exasperated by her husband's behavior while chalking it up to him being a dorky guy.

Meanwhile, Cam convinces Mitchell to tell his family about adopting a daughter because Cam knows that Mitchell will avoid the entire interaction.

There are many parallels between *Modern Family* and *Family Ties* – parents that can't relate to and sometimes become exasperated by their kids, a dumb one, a too smart one, and a sassy one. Pushed as an innovative setup with a traditional family, gay family, blended family, but the women are still dependent on one partner to bring home the bacon. Indeed, Cam and Mitchell fight about who is the man/woman frequently. The ideology of marriage is dominated by the male as females take “appropriate roles”. It is not clear if models of marriage and family have truly changed over time or if there are just more reference to societal progress within the medium. *Modern Family* still produces the stereotype that women must care about their appearance and are constantly competing with each other, as evidence by Claire and Gloria. These narratives trivialize women's problems as household issues and do not encourage any change.

Trophy Wife

Malin Akerman stars as Kate Harrison, a younger blonde wife who seems incapable of being in the housewife role without making tremendous mistakes along the way. *Trophy Wife* is unique in that it portrays not only the marital communication between a married couple, but with the husband (Bradley Whitford as Peter Harrison) and his two previous marriages to uptight doctor Diane Buckley (Marcia Gay Harden) and existential hippie Jackie Fisher (Michaela Watkins) in addition to the three kids he has. The show is representative of modern relationships that exist and portray the boundaries or lack thereof between family roles. The pilot aired on September 24, 2013 on ABC. Critics praised the sitcom for its realistic portrayal of difficult-to-navigate dynamics in stepfamilies and executive producer Lee Eisenberg insisted that the title

was “meant to be ironic” because Kate is often ostracized from other mom groups because of her youth. The assumption that Kate is marrying Pete, who is a lawyer, for his money is thoroughly examined during the course of the still-running series.

Kate is a fun and crazy single girl who wants a husband and family but hasn’t found the right guy yet. When she literally falls into Pete’s lap and breaks his nose at a karaoke bar, they find their senses of humor connect. The same night, Kate is introduced to Pete’s two ex-wives and three children. They are married less than a year later, and Kate wants to take parental responsibility for the children and the household. Her inability to cook is endearing and breaks the stereotype of other sitcom wives. Diane insists that no one expects her to be a parent and Kate’s trendier clothing also sends inappropriate signals.

CONCLUSION

Television is a multipurpose tool—it is an entertainment module, capable of telling the stories, fiction and nonfiction, of families and people across the globe and of measuring the health of American families through its portrayals of realistic units on television. Television is a system of representation and is “special because its socially constructed version of reality bombards all classes, groups, and ages with the same perspectives at the same time.” (Bryant 335). The same storytelling elements and narrative are designed to be watched by diverse audiences, but instead all promote the singular idea that women can have a marriage and family or a career, never both. Further research could be done on dividing portrayal of marriages into class groups and comparing the reality of American life. In addition, cable networks have a wider span of marriage portrayals which more Americans have access to as compared to the 1950s. Reality television is another medium for “real families” that may have an effect on viewers’ perceptions of marital communication.

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