

**A MODERN FAMILY: THE PERFORMANCE OF “FAMILY” AND FAMILIALISM  
IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION SERIES**

**by**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **A Modern Family: The Performance of “Family” and Familialism in Contemporary**

#### **Television Series**

by

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This dissertation addresses the complexities inherent in contemporary television articulations of family life and organization that construct the discourse on the American family since the mid-1990s. In addition to surveying the history of a number of television genres, such as father-centered series, teen-oriented programming, multigenerational family series, and reality TV, the dissertation uses textual analysis to examine how television frames and constructs “the family,” while also attempting to locate this construction within larger political, social, and cultural contexts. I argue that the socio-cultural evolution and construction of parenthood, marriage, and childhood have led to alternative definitions of “family” in contemporary television programming; however, specific case studies indicate a seemingly resilient commitment to, or performance of, a particular familial idealism. Each chapter concludes with notable case studies that offer an in-depth examination of various depictions of families, the kinds of “family values”

they promote, and the way they continue to perform familialism even as they depict modern-day familial realities.

The goal of this dissertation was to provide a better understanding as to both why a mythic “ideal” family has inhabited our cultural consciousness for so long, and how recent television series offer a space to question the appropriateness, authenticity, and usefulness of the dominant familial ideology to the twenty-first century family. In the end, what it found was that even amidst a multitude of diverse sentiments and structures of families on television, the most successful images of family continue to be bound to a performance of familialism that reaffirms the values deeply rooted in the nuclear family.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: PERFORMING “FAMILY” AND FAMILIALISM ON TELEVISION

*Family*. Its iconography influences political rhetoric, entertainment narratives, social mores, and consumption ethics. Battles – both literally and politically – have been fought for its preservation, and social movements have centered on its transformation or rejuvenation. *Family*. Bourdieu (1996) writes that it is a “constellation of words” that “while seeming to describe social reality, in fact construct it” (19). Media scholar Sarah Harwood (1997) describes it as “a configuration of fluid relationships, intersecting through reproduction, affection, common interest and power, constantly in process” (37). *Family* evokes within each of us a particular image; a confluence of past, present, and future that is all at once idyllic and poetic yet impossible and amorphous. We often refer to the halcyon days of old – misleadingly known simply as “The 1950s” – when suburbia housed individual families charged not only with raising a next generation, but also taking up the symbolic fight against Communism or any subsequent challenge to America’s ideological center. Despite being infused with affectionate nostalgia, our cultural imagery of marriage, parenthood, and childhood is often fraught with contradiction. Our familial expectations – inspired and affirmed by decades of nearly static images of domesticity – are now overwrought and muddled as our familial experiences often fail to capture the flawless picture we imagined. At the same time, we ridicule and criticize these same sentimental notions in order to enact a broader definition

of family – one that may universalize the value of family but does not necessarily warrant a homogenized experience.

Social historians and media scholars alike acknowledge that family is a social construction articulated through both public and media discourses. Family, as Bourdieu (1996) argues, is an ideological device whereby particular relationships become valorized and legitimated as the norm. As society's dominant storyteller, television both creates a particular version of family and assails it at the same time (Gerbner et al., 1994). The pervasiveness of the television in the home – the place intrinsically connected to the creation of the family – and the fact that since its inception many of its narratives have centered on the family, makes television a useful site to observe the complex discourses used to construct what we believe family to be, how it is accomplished, and the way in which it behaves. Still, as a social construction “family” is constantly “in-process,” revised, or contested. Its portrayal on television is bidirectional; it is mutually shaped by and mutually effecting the socio-cultural history and politics under which it is produced (Feuer, 1995). Thus, the familial images evocative of post-World War II domesticity as seen in *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), among others of the era, are conceptually different from Norman Lear's “relevancy” sitcoms in the 1970s such as *All in the Family* (1971-1979) and *Good Times* (1974-1979) or the Carsey/Werner productions of the 1980s and 1990s that shift from the “ideal” family in *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) to the dysfunction of the blue-collar matriarchal family in *Roseanne* (1988-1997), or from the struggle of single parenthood in *Grace Under Fire* (1993-1998) to the urban friends-as-family dynamic of *Friends* (1994-2004). And yet, one basic through-line exists in all of these shows: the *performance* of family, its underlying ideology, is resolutely infused

with a predetermined and nostalgic set of values for domestic relationships “invented” during a confluence of circumstances. Just as Judith Butler (1990) acknowledged that gender is performative and constructed as though one “true” iteration or *norm* exists, family, too, is a cultural fiction endlessly reproduced to sanction a particular kind of familial norm – one that often obscures the alternative families that might contradict it. Even though television shows play to the day and age in which they exist, many use contemporary familial patterns, troubles, and experiences to allude to a “proper,” “natural,” or “right” kind of family. What this dissertation intends to reveal is the ways in which a hegemonic family is established, reproduced, and appropriates other kinds of families within the discursive space of television.

### **Television and the Family “Myth”**

The pervasiveness of television in our society allows it to construct “mythologies,” or ideologies, about our lives that ultimately inform our cultural sensibilities. We often discount its power to shape everyday norms, seeing it as merely a reflection of the world in which we reside. Bourdieu (1996) writes, “what we regard as a reality is a fiction, constructed to a large extent by the vocabulary that the social world provides us with in order to describe it” (19). Television offers us this “vocabulary” by way of the images it presents and the particular ideology it endeavors to acculturate. Even though “family” strikes a distinct picture for each of us, it has long been interpreted or framed on television in a way that valorizes a certain “right” configuration of the White patriarchal nuclear family of two opposite sex parents and their children. Nevertheless, as with any hegemonic ideological concept, its persistence and power is constantly under threat because the systematic and idealized version of “the family” is neither universal

nor exact. Yet, the televisual image of family life and values continues to inhabit our collective construction of the family we wish to access and experience. What's more is that we consent to these characteristically unattainable images – these “pure figments of thought” – with the hope that eventually they become an objective reality (Bourdieu, 1996, 21). But where did the hegemonic construction of family spring from and is it still relevant today? Why is there a propensity to describe “family” as a universal experience if not all families can conform to the explicit ideological *norm*? How can *family* preserve its symbolic power when politicians and religious figures maintain that it is “in crisis,” under duress, or altogether extinct?

There is no denying that today families are incredibly diverse. It is no longer uncommon to observe single parenthood, gay and lesbian families, or multigenerational households on television. Moreover, marriage and parenthood are not always compulsory in the creation of a family. By the end of 2010, news outlets began to cite United States Census data indicating an accelerated downturn in marital rates within the American populace. According to the Population Reference Bureau, the data suggest that young adults (25 to 34 years old) are delaying marriage “or foregoing matrimony altogether” (Mather & Lavery, 2010). The data also indicate that, “the proportion of young adults in the United States who have never been married now exceeds those who are married” (Mather & Lavery, 2010). The proportion of those aged 18 or older that are married – 48 percent – is now the lowest percentage recorded in more than one hundred years (Dougherty, 2010; Tavernise, 2011). Writing in the early 2000s, Amy Benfer (2001) had already noted that single parenthood and cohabitation was rising precipitously. Today, *traditional* households – those consisting of individuals related by marriage, adoption, or

birth – encompass less than half of all households. One traditional household, the *nuclear* or *conventional* family (used interchangeably here), which is comprised of an intact heterosexual married couple with children residing in one household, was the only family category to decline between 2000 and 2010, from 24.1 percent to 20.2 percent of all households (Francese, 2011; Hastings, 2011). In 1970, nuclear families encompassed 40 percent of all households, whereas today, they only account for 20 percent (Hastings, 2011). Speaking broadly, television has notably adapted to shifting kinship arrangements; although, portrayals remain symbolically linked to the hegemonic norm. Television may no longer overtly and literally emphasize the patriarchal nuclear family, but it does subtly perpetuate a discourse that defers to the qualities and values inherent in the mythologized nuclear family. The physical and psychological structure of families on television is shifting away from the nuclear ideal, but series still acknowledge it (sometimes mockingly) as an important piece in the overall historical makeup of *the family*.

This dissertation addresses the complexities inherent in contemporary television articulations of family life and organization that compose its discourse on the American family since the mid-1990s. In addition to surveying the history of a number of television genres, such as father-centered series, teen-oriented programming, family melodramas, and reality TV, the dissertation uses textual analysis to examine how television frames and constructs “the family,” while also attempting to locate this construction within larger political, social, and cultural contexts. I argue that the socio-cultural evolution and construction of parenthood, marriage, and childhood have led to alternative definitions of “family” on television, yet specific case studies indicate a seemingly resilient commitment to and preservation of the nuclear family – what will hereafter be termed



Familialism. The goal of my dissertation is to provide a better understanding of both why a mythic “ideal” family has inhabited our cultural consciousness for so long and how recent changes to the television landscape have provided a space to question the appropriateness, authenticity, and usefulness of the dominant familial ideology to the twenty-first century family. Notable case studies presented here offer an in-depth examination of these depictions, the kinds of “family values” they promote, and how they continue to *perform* familialism even as they depict more modern familial realities.

### **Re-mediating the Family on Television**

Television has long imparted knowledge or instructed its audiences on how to think about and configure domestic life. Media scholars John Fiske and John Hartley (1978) note that television’s “bardic function” re-presents our everyday cultural perceptions, thereby “articulating the established cultural consensus and implicating the dominant value-system” (66). Still, like any hegemonic construct, “the family” has been constantly reworked, contested, and remade (Tincknell, 2005). It is also through television that the cultural figure of the family has been pathologized and problematized. In fact, while some programs are steadfast re-presentations of the iconic nuclear family (e.g., *The Cosby Show*, 1984-1992; *Growing Pains*, 1985-1992; *Family Matters*, 1989-1998), others articulate an underlying anxiety for real-life families overburdened by these unrealistic expectations (e.g., *Married...with Children*, 1987-1997; *The Simpsons*, 1989-) (Jones, 1992). Yet, despite the diverse compositions of families currently presented on television, and, more importantly, the persistent and compelling claim that family values are in steep decline because of it (Popenoe, 1988), television continues to favor this elusive illusionary ideal.

“The family,” as conveyed by television, centers on a married couple and minor children living together in an affectionate and materially comfortable household. A review of the socio-cultural evolution of domestic life – detailed in chapter two – reveals that this nuclear family has existed since the sixteenth century; however, the “separate spheres” ideology that we have come to associate with the hegemonic norm began in the mid-nineteenth century. “Separate spheres” speaks to the gendered labor and childrearing practices within the household, whereby productive (work) and reproductive labor (childrearing) are divided along gender lines (Skolnick, 1991; Stansell, 1982). Nevertheless, a confluence of economic and social circumstances after World War II led to the reaffirmation of the White, patriarchal, nuclear family as the dominant ideal in America composed of the breadwinning patriarch and nurturing mother and homemaker. This model family was a key piece of the American dream for those searching for security and stability in postwar society and the consumption ethos that permeated it. Constructed as the cultural norm, the emulation of this soon-to-be iconic patriarchal nuclear family coincided with the birth and infancy of television, which conveniently and strategically used familial imagery to develop and market products and values that would encourage families to mold themselves after the nuclear ideal for the betterment of both the private and public sphere.

Television quickly became a fixture in the home – a technological hearth whereby the family could gather – and a “window to the world” at large. The mutually beneficial relationships between television, consumption, and familialism generated a new socially constructed definition of “the family,” one that continues to remain dominant even today. As a device for representing various experiences and events, television narratives have

rarely strayed far from the hegemonic nuclear family and related appraisals on gender, race, and class – strange, given more statistical assessments of “the family” that have uncovered how inauthentic the nuclear experience was (Coontz, 2000). Thus, television, with its growing ubiquity within the household and steadfast reliance on the nuclear family, contributed to the internalizing of this ideal as the dominant social value system within the American consciousness. In other words, television became more than just an object for family viewing and entertainment, but a technology through which the viewer might internalize the family and its acceptable attributes.

This is not to say that television has always envisioned the “family” in the same way, only that accepted notions of what the family entails have been with us for multiple generations and exist within many kinds of narratives. Objects of study, such as demographic information, audience reception, and reoccurring familial themes, have been collected to further determine the relationship between television and the American family. Often dominated by questions of race, class, and gender, previous research on the family has been marked by assessments of changing familial roles, values, and ideologies. For media studies, in particular, what has become apparent through myriad methodologies is that familial narratives are diverse in nature (Skill & Robinson, 1994), salient to audiences (Brown & Hayes, 2001), and that exposure to familial depictions can affect expectations and beliefs regarding the perception of real-life families (Buerkel-Rothfuss et al., 1982). But, these depictions are laden with particular ideologies and each media text is a site for contestation and struggle (Hall, 1980). Still, conceptually, depictions of the “family” remain limited. Television scholar Derek Kompare (2004) notes, “While expectations change over time and under various circumstances, the

normative structure itself is constant. For instance, while there may be new or alternative conceptions of family (e.g., extended kinship, single parents, etc.), these are still separated from groupings that are somehow *not* family” (101).

In *A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home* (2008), film scholar Murray Pomerance argues that depictions of families “are relentlessly pedagogical, teaching us how to pose, think, behave, acquire, imagine, remember, fear and anticipate members of families in real life” (8). This has been particularly true of sitcoms; their main function, as television scholar Gerard Jones (1992) explains, is “to show the American family to itself, to open an alternate family room within our own” (5). Jones goes on to say, “Some shows hold up models of what our culture thinks we should be like,” while “others enable us to dispel some anxiety by laughing affectionately at those who have even more trouble dealing with daily life than we do...Both types reassure us that there are others out there like us, that we will always work out a way to get by” (5). Still, the model that television is partial to replicating, originating from the domestic sitcoms of the mid-1950s, was a historical anomaly and therefore difficult to embrace in real life (Coontz, 2000; Osgerby, 2001). In some ways television has tried to respond and promote the acceptance of new domestic sensibilities, kinship structures, and marital and parenting styles, but, for the most part, reproduces a hegemonic norm as a cultural and social goal for American families (Harwood, 1997; Tincknell, 2005). Consequently, this project was greatly motivated by an attempt to both understand how media constructions of the family have changed at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and the ways in which the conflation of the “real” family with the “as-seen-on-TV” family complicate these representations in contemporary culture.

## **What is Familialism?**

Over time, as noted in the next chapter, television has depicted shifts in familial relationships, particularly portraying non-nuclear and fictive kin structures – whereby an individual self-ascribes friends or coworkers as family. Yet, media scholar Deborah Chambers (2001) affirms, “the range of meanings about ‘family’ depends on the narratives, groups of images and discourses that operate through a variety of texts and areas of knowledge” (25). Even today, as viewers witness non-nuclear familial forms both in real life and on television, assumptions about “the family” have developed based on certain repeated images of domestic life on television, expressly that of a household unit comprised of a breadwinner husband, full-time mother and homemaker, and their dependent children (Stacey, 1990). Sociologist Judith Stacey (1990) denotes *this* as “the form of a family life that many mistake for an ancient, essential, and now-endangered institution” (5).

Despite the diversity of portrayals of family and family life that have developed or become more prominent since the mid-1990s, this dissertation argues that the nuclear family remains the ideal construction because of its underlying affirmation of familialism.<sup>1</sup> Familialism refers to an ideology that promotes the resurgence of the family as an institution and emphasizes commitment to the family as a unit over the individualistic needs of its members (Kauffman, 1993; Revillard, 2007). It is familialism, rather than the nuclear family, that many yearn for (Farrell, 1999, 164). Familialism relies on “the reciprocal sense of commitment, sharing, cooperation, and intimacy that is taken as the defining bonds between family members. Familialism makes the home a base to

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<sup>1</sup> Familialism and Familism have been used interchangeably across different disciplines such as Law, Social Work, Feminist studies, Media studies, and Psychology.

which you can always return when your independent endeavors fail or prove unsatisfactory” (Dizard & Gadlin, 1990, 6-7). In essence, familialism is an ideology employed in various rhetorical instances – be it political or cultural – that attempts to “salvage what is most positive about family-as-community, while at the same time [can be] used to reinforce some of the conservatism associated with gender and family hierarchy” (Bathrick, 2003, 156). For instance, during the postwar era, familialism was employed as a political device that solicited suburban nuclear families to come together in the service of strengthening the nation. At the time, this kind of familialism could only be achieved within the boundaries of the patriarchal nuclear family.

While this philosophy of “family first” did help stabilize the nation, it ran up against the economic and social realities that families faced in the 1960s and a general cultural turn towards individualism in the 1970s and 1980s. Deborah Chambers (2000) asserts that the social history of the family “challenges the persistent ideology of familialism,” or at least how familialism became synonymous with the *nuclear* family considering the “shifting meanings of family life” (198). Although television continues to valorize the nuclear family as if it was the norm, it is important to recognize that familialism, and ideology generally, is not a “monolithic entity, but a site of struggle” (Harwood, 1997, 6).

Familialism has evolved over time, moving away from strict political and social contexts of patriarchal familial organization to be more directly associated with a cultural value that emphasizes close family relationships and the importance of love, obligation, and cooperative attitudes within the familial dynamic (Demo et al., 2000). Today, familialism, as it is represented on television, is being utilized for a different kind of

cultural convergence. Unlike the postwar era, the family rituals that are acted out on television are in service of letting go of a particular definition of family – that is, less importance on blood ties in favor of the emotional and psychological security and fellowship that a family can and should provide. It is no longer the strength of a nation that is of concern but the survival of the American family itself, and, in turn, how the unconditional and unwavering support of family members is essential in order to *perform* family. Familialism, then, becomes a necessity in order for “the family” to change and respond to shifting demands in familial and cultural values. It is a valorization, not simply of the *patriarchal nuclear* family, but of the importance of family in any form as long as its members conscribe to and affirm “family first.” Thus, depictions of family life on television – particularly non-nuclear iterations – always return to the family facing adversity together and reaffirm the primacy of the familial institution despite the fluctuating characterization of what “family” entails.

### **The Performance of “Family” and Familialism on Television**

Critical television scholarship views television as a site for potential ideological meaning generation; however, though each text is laden with particular ideologies, the actual process of meaning-making remains a site for contestation and struggle. The reliance on a particular hegemonic discourse, here the nuclear family and its inherent familialist ideology, is of particular concern because television has long been a cultural tool for the socialization of dominant ideologies concerning all individual subjectivities. The family itself has become a site where the internal politics of individual subjectivities

(e.g., race, gender, and class) are often played out and, in turn, affected some subtle changes in how television depicts family life. For a simplistic example, second-wave feminism's struggle to acquire equal footing for women at home and at work has played out in the gradual acceptance of working women (and mothers) on television; though this did not come without laborious and degrading first efforts. In fact, evolving discourses surrounding gender, race, and class have generated most of the ruptures in traditional familialism, and therefore are typically the focus of much of the previous academic research on representations of the American family in popular culture (see Bodroghkozy, 1992; Butsch, 1992; Lipsitz, 1992; Zook, 1999).

Television provides a repetitive and often restricted set of perspectives within its programming and therefore enculturates within its viewers preferred values and behaviors of *family* and domestic life. Thus, television has not only made fast work of defining what "the family" should be, but also how one can gain symbolic membership within the oft-articulated version it depicts by conforming to the hegemonic norm (Fiske & Hartley, 1978). This raises further questions about power and agency that develop in how we theoretically construct "the family," and ultimately, the implications television discourses may have on viewers and their internalization of what "family" means.

For the television family, deviation from the dominant ideology has led to examinations largely discussing the social construction of motherhood (see Douglas & Michaels, 2004) and fatherhood (see Butsch, 2011, Hanke, 1998; Harwood, 1997), but not necessarily extended kinship structures, adolescence, or family life beyond the post-World War II era. This dissertation examines depictions of families that consist of biologically related or adopted family members, more explicitly the parent-child



dynamic. While focusing on the parent-child dynamic may exclude some configurations of family, such as childless couples and reconstituted sibling relationships (see *On Our Own*, 1994-1995; *Party of Five*, 1994-2000; *Charmed*, 1998-2006), it does, on the other hand, allow for broader interpretations of *family* as the dissertation discusses single, teen, and gay and lesbian parenthood; non-married couples; extended and multigenerational households; and nuclear families.

As an ideological concept, “the family,” built from a mythical homogeneity of values and structure, often denies a diversity of family life that exists in reality, both in the past and the present (Coontz, 2000; Stacey, 1990). Writer Diana Gittins (1993) argues, “An ideology that claims there is only one type of family can never be matched in reality, for it presents an ideal to which only some can approximate, and others not at all” (167). Despite our continued reliance on an ideal definition of “family” as inherited by the mythology presented on television, “family” is actually a difficult term to explicate because of the diversity of circumstances in which it is constructed. Thus, this and any other research on the portrayal of family on television may be taken to task for its particular definition of *family*.

### *The Twenty-First Century Family*

“The family” has long been fashioned into a powerful symbol that can be exploited beyond the domestic space; and yet, “it is more diverse, more fragile, more fluid than in the past” (Skolnick, 1991, 220). Throughout history, the American family – both in reality and on television – has taken on multiple and shifting labels ranging from “Victorian” to “Modern” and “Post-Modern,” with each drawing on and constructing the family under the social, cultural, and economic circumstances within which it existed.

Like any disciplinary field that aims to understand a socially constructed concept such as “the family,” these labels have been fraught with contradiction and controversy with no real distinct organization of characteristics or time frame consistency. The difficulty in offering a title that could both swiftly define and incorporate the contemporary family and its elements will likely always be a point of contestation among academics. While Judith Stacey proposes the terms “postmodern” or “recombinant” family to describe contemporary family arrangements, others employ post-feminist or post-patriarchal to delineate a point of radical social and cultural transformation of kinship organization (see Mann, 1998; Probyn, 1997; Therborn, 2004).

None of these labels, as explicated by previous scholarship, have offered a comprehensive or constant catalog of *de rigueur* components that characterize a specific kind of family. Moreover, one cannot say with conviction that the nuclear family and its inherent ideology have vanished from the small screen. There has been no specific defining moment that can firmly mark a capstone to the mythologizing of the nuclear family unit; yet there is no doubt that new kinds of families – perhaps, post-nuclear families – are emerging on television and have been in existence and visible for quite some time in reality. Without having a feasible terminology to fall back on, I henceforth elect to unite the different familial types – that is, nuclear and non-nuclear iterations – examined here under the epoch in which they exist: the twenty-first century family.

Encompassed within the technologically sophisticated, fast-paced, consumption-oriented global economy, the twenty-first century family has not completely displaced the nuclear ideal but has brought forth a more diverse representation of the familial unit. Working mothers, single parenthood, blended and adoptive families, even revised

articulations of the married couple, each diverge from the two-parent, two to three child nuclear unit reminiscent of the postwar era and fall under this category. Today, television acknowledges families of different cultures and classes, though they are still overwhelmingly White and middle-class; are comprised of a companionate marriage (or partnership) structure for couples or a single and working head of household; demonstrate egalitarian attitudes towards gender roles; maintain an involved and engaged relationship with children and teens; and explore a variety of social issues more complexly than past iterations of families on television. Images of the twenty-first century family do not necessarily indicate a general decline in family values, as has been suggested by some critics, but instead present an adaptation of and reaffirm familialist ideology.

### **Mapping the Dissertation**

Whereas previous scholarship on mediated familial representations often debates the merits of popular depictions of families, either by categorizing them along a positive or negative cultural spectrum (see Douglas, 2003; Popenoe, 1988; Stacey, 1990) or explaining how they instruct and model respectable familial behavior (see Coontz, 2000; Haralovich, 1992; Lipsitz, 1992; Spigel, 1992b), this dissertation examines particular articulations of *family* and the ways in which they develop what it means to *be* a family, *create* a family, *reinforce* familial values, and *represent* the family in the twenty-first century. Like Ella Taylor's *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (1989a), Nina Leibman's *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (1995), and Jane Feuer's *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (1995), the dissertation locates these modern-day familial constructions within larger political, social, and cultural contexts. Similar to Betty Farrell's *Family:*

*The Making of an Idea, an Institution, and a Controversy in American Culture* (1999), Deborah Chambers' *Representing the Family* (2001), and Estella Tincknell's *Mediating the Family: Gender, Culture and Representation* (2005), the dissertation also addresses how these depictions continue to promulgate a familialist ideology.

The second chapter continues the broader discussion of the socio-cultural evolution of the American family, as well as chronicles both the history of the family on television and previous research related to mediated representations of the family. Of particular importance, here, is how television essentially constructed an ideal version of "the family," which has since been heavily mythologized in American culture. Many contrast the twenty-first century family to the mythologized nuclear ideal, but this is not necessarily the case as becomes evident when these two histories are synthesized and made clearer in the chapters that follow. Though the twenty-first century family does often diverge from the hegemonic norm in the manner of structure, it also showcases a capacity for appropriating nostalgic family values so as not to permanently disengage from expectations long held within the American imaginary.

Next, the dissertation looks at four popular subgenres: father-centered series, teen-oriented programming, multigenerational family melodramas and comedies, and reality television. These particular subgenres, thus far, have not been central to research related to the American family on television. None of the genres is a historical first of its kind; each originates in the late-1960s and 1970s. However, in today's post-network television era, these genres have evolved to be more reflective of recent socio-historical changes in the American family. Much of the previous work related to television and its relationship to the American family has examined genres such as sitcoms (Dalton &

Linder, 2005; Douglas & Olson, 1995; Haralovich, 1992; Jones, 1992; Lipsitz, 1992), melodramas (Landry, 1991; Modleski, 1982), or multiple genres within a historical context (see Cantor, 1991; Douglas, 2003; Leibman, 1995; Taylor, 1989a).<sup>2</sup> While each of these genres continue their dominance in television programming, it is important to recognize that today many individual genres have become hybridized, expressing not only a combination of stylistic features but also a significant ideological shift (Langford, 2005). Comedy and melodrama, in particular, have become more of a modality of a narrative than an explicit genre (Williams, 1998). Many contemporary television series draw extensively on and now regularly incorporate elements of action, comedy, and drama. The four subgenres – perhaps thematic genres is better – under investigation here not only experienced a surge in popularity at the turn of the century, but have also increased their emphasis on the familial experience.

First, “Resolving Flawed Fatherhood Through Domestic Masculinity” examines father-centered television programming, specifically “guy-coms” and “missing mother” series, which explores the difficulties men have in reasserting their place within the domestic space while also trying to adapt to new paternal domestic duties – what historian Margaret Marsh (1988) refers to as “masculine domesticity.” In re-examining the patriarch’s power within and duty to his family, both television premises illustrate the complicated renewal of men as the domestic entity responsible for raising children. These series highlight the patriarch’s effort to maintain a culturally prescribed hegemonic

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<sup>2</sup> Much of the previous (and notable) research regarding television and the American family has focused on the sitcom genre, while either neglecting or casually mentioning its dramatic counterpart. While the goal of this dissertation is to discuss other popular genres of television programming, because sitcoms have perpetually centered on familial dynamics, they will greatly inform any historical analysis of television programming.

masculinity even as masculine domesticity becomes ever more significant to the strength of the familialist family dynamic.

In a day and age where teen pregnancy has returned to the forefront of conservative ire while, at the same time, been employed as an entertaining narrative device for film and television, teen-oriented media have seized an opportunity to examine what constitutes a family and the social institutions that have developed to shore up the cultural capital of “the family.” Chapter four, “Pathologizing the Family in Teen Pregnancy Narratives,” explores how teen pregnancy has become more than the standard issue-of-the-week dramatic device. In fact, television has taken more dramatic license in exploring the complexity surrounding a teen’s decision to “parent” their child. What is no doubt surprising about the recent rise in series centered on unplanned teen pregnancy and the ensuing consequences of a teen mother’s decision to “parent” her child, is the way in which these series depict an underlying conflict between a teen’s struggle for independence (i.e., separation from the family) and the desire for and commitment to the familialist family.

According to media scholar Kenneth MacKinnon (2004), current television programming, particularly family melodramas, reveals the constructedness and precariousness of the family. Even the “dysfunctional” families inherent in many recent television shows still assert the significance of the familial institution. Chapter five, “Familial Multiplex: Familial Melodrama and Familialism in Multigenerational Families,” examines television series featuring an extended or multigenerational family and the internal and external social pressures that challenge and reconstitute the family week after week. Familial crises and intergenerational melodramas essentially become mechanisms

that cultivate a rebirth in familial fellowship and reinforce familialist values. Even though these series depict a variety of familial dyads (e.g., gay parents, single mothers, nuclear families, etc.) and exhibit intergenerational disparities, in the end, they reaffirm the primacy of the family and its capacity to prevail over life's obstacles.

Finally, chapter six – “Real Familialism: Reality TV, Spectacle Families, and the Performance of Family” – examines what I call “spectacle” families, those that defy the nuclear family unit norm in some notable way such as through substantial familial size, celebrity, bizarre behavior or disability, yet celebrate their nonconformity. Recently, spectacle families have been a staple of reality television – a profitable niche in documenting so-called “ordinary” families on television for audiences’ voyeuristic pleasure. The families under surveillance in reality TV offer a performance of contemporary family life that neither conforms to the idealistic familial archetypes so prevalent in television sitcoms nor supports the intense pathos of dysfunction rampant in familial melodramas. Instead, “real(ity)” families synthesize unconventional family dynamics with the cultivation of conservative family values. Reality TV presents an attractive occasion to examine modern-day familialism within the protracted surveillance of popular and self-defined “ordinary” families.

## **Conclusion**

The fact that television families have always been of great ideological importance to the American people as more than simply fictional images must be taken into account when seeking to understanding how television captures the experiences of modern-day families (Douglas, 2003). The discourse surrounding the American family on television, particularly when it is used as an opponent to traditional family values, as political and

religious leaders are want to claim, implies that television families are developed in concert with facets of real families (Coontz, 2000). In other words, while television families may affect changes in real family life, it is more likely that television reflects the evolving experiences of real families, which includes how they deviate as well as become a derivative of the nuclear ideal. Audiences both find humor in and praise families that break from the symbolic *ideal* family, but we also cling to a stable “norm” – to familialism – to connect us together in a more emotionally compelling universal experience.

Today, what remains clear is that “the family” as an ideological construct is highly contested as we craft our families in a variety of ways. Whether or not the nuclear family remains dominant on television, it no longer resembles the Andersons of *Father Knows Best* or the Cleavers on *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-63) – the heralded 1950’s “Golden Age” families. Instead, the twenty-first century family is “diverse, fluid, and unresolved” (Stacey, 1990); a family intact but troubled as it is subjected to social stresses brought on by the heavily propagated idealized version of itself. Amidst sociological and cultural chaos, twenty-first century families are burdened by the labels of “atypical” or “untraditional” and have subsequently become the faces of a supposed “crisis” in the family. On the surface there is something inherently different about the depiction of the twenty-first century family on television. There is an apparent diversity in organization that mirrors reality in a way previously made invisible by the domination of the nuclear family unit. However, these diverse family structures are still embedded with the idealization of the nuclear family, thereby further complicating television’s construction of the modern American family.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

As a technology for social discourse, television “helps to shape not only beliefs, values, and attitudes, but also subjectivities, people’s sense of themselves and their place in the world” (Morreale, 2003a, xi). Therefore, the way we tell stories about the family creates the fundamental base by which we define our families and ourselves. Although the taxonomy of the family may change – as noted in the social history of the family below – the *family discourse* we use to talk about family is endowed with “a set of cognitive presuppositions and normative prescriptions about the proper way to conduct domestic relationships” (Bourdieu, 1996, 20). This discourse of familialism, an amalgamation of the evolution of kinship structures and values with the complicated portrayal of family on television, is dispensed to naturalize a socially defined version of “family.” And yet, as media scholar Deborah Chambers (2001) notes, “familialism is something that has to be reinvented and continuously achieved in everyday interactions with others – we *do* rather than simply *have* family” (169). Hence, this dissertation examines the *performance* of a familial norm in popular television genres at the turn of the twenty-first century and the ways in which particular series express and adapt this familialism to families that deviate from the presumed nuclear norm.

But first, as cultural studies scholar Herman Gray (1995) has argued, we cannot understand the complex cultural meanings of television’s representations without

situating the texts “in terms of the cultural discourses in which these representations are produced and the social locations across which these images and representations circulate” (45). Additionally, because “family” is a socially constructed concept and therefore takes on the meaning of the discourse that produces it, it is important to note how it has been “reshaped within particular historical contexts” (Chambers, 2001, 26). Therefore, what follows is an attempt to both contextualize the forthcoming analyses through a socio-cultural framework of the family and its uneven reflection on television, and position this dissertation within an established network of critical television scholarship surrounding the family on television. By the end of this chapter, the reader should have gained a better understanding of the cultural myths that have established our idealization of “the family,” the challenge this familialist ideology has faced as kinship structures outside the nuclear ideal have thrived, and the ways in which television has underpinned our conceptualization of “family” although it is often charged with engendering an irreversible deterioration of family life. Despite the ideological assumption of one “right” kind of family, history illustrates that there is no inherent construction of family but a shifting collection of principles of familial arrangement.

### **The Socio-Cultural History of “The Family”**

Modern-day familial organization is often compared to its post-World War II *nuclear family* predecessor during the so-called “golden age” of the family. However, recent scholarship (see Coontz, 2000; Farrell, 1999) has debunked this patriarchal, nuclear family as an oddity within history – one that came about due to a confluence of economic, political, and sociological factors that will likely never be seen again. As sociologists Arlene and Jerome Skolnick (2001) note, “Today most don’t live in ways

that conform to the cultural [norm] that prevailed in the 1950s,” particularly in terms of the breadwinner/housewife dynamic that was common for the time period (1). Instead, they continue, “Family life in the United States is a complex mixture of both continuity and change” (3). From shifts in marital arrangements to the delineation of “childhood,” the family has never been uniform in structure by any means; yet, deviation from the hegemonic norm of the companionate nuclear family, whether by means of single parenthood, divorce, blended, or adoptive families, continues to incite anxiety over a perceived “crisis” in the American family. Below is a short reconstructed history of the American family from its pre-Colonial past to muddled present a decade into the twenty-first century. This section is meant to help contextualize the oft embellished imagery television has offered to the American populace. Media scholar William Douglas (2003) indicates that the “congruence between television families and real families is inexact” and often skewed from reality (3). Thus, this abridged narrative offers some perspective on how “family” has been narrowly defined in theory yet amorphously practiced.

### *The Nuclear Family and “Separate Spheres” Ideology*

Though seemingly a twentieth-century construction, the nuclear family first emerged in the sixteenth century households of Euro-American settlers when sex role separation in the domestic setting became ever more stringent in stark contrast to the clan-like egalitarian gender composition of previous generations. This hierarchical familial situation, whereby women and children were subordinate to the authority of the patriarch, continued well into the nineteenth century with men taking an active role in child rearing (Bloch, 1978). According to historian Lisa Wilson (1998), “partnership in marriage was both an ideal and a reality in colonial New England,” though this “loving

partnership” remained governed by men (78, 88). Although changes in economic circumstances, namely the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, would transform the domestic household and modify certain particulars of gender roles, it would not alter the general adherence to the nuclear family form. The agrarian subsistence household prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which allowed for some flexibility in domestic labor practices between men and women, transformed once men left the private sphere – particularly child rearing – to the purview of women as necessitated by growing industrialized labor practices (Cowan, 1976; Farrell, 1999). Prior to industrialization “most families were rural, large, and self-sustaining,” but as work was removed from the domestic space families became much smaller (Cowan, 1976, 1). Men as the family breadwinner came to dominate the burgeoning middle class in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and became a cultural icon for working class men hoping to earn a family wage. This “separate spheres” ideology – whereby fathers’ parenting role declined and mothers became virtuous paragons of rearing the next generation of society – became dominant during the Victorian age (1840s-1900s), despite the fact that only a quarter of families in the real world were financially able to *be* this kind of family (Farrell, 1999; Skolnick, 1991).

Near the turn of the twentieth century, the “unequal arrangement of gender power” in the domestic space did not wane even as companionate marital unions based on spousal attraction instead of matrimonial duty began to emerge (Pasco, 1989, 634). “Separate spheres” ideology became central to the conception of the White middle class and its patterns of family life (Stansell, 1982). In contrast, African American families, which to this point had relied on egalitarian gender roles and featured adaptive kinship

structures that included non-blood relations, tried to emulate “separate spheres” ideology; but this dominant family form was reserved for Whites as most African American families could ill afford to keep women away from assisting with the family income. For white Americans, the Victorian conception of family coincided with the new “urban industrial society with low birth and death rates, the rise of political democracy, the growth of science and technology, and the spread of mass schooling and literacy” (Skolnick, 1991, 22). As the new century began, women were presented with opportunities outside of the domestic space starting with advancements in higher education attainment. The genteel lifestyle afforded to the middle-class caused further disenfranchisement for working-class women doubly burdened with productive wage labor and unpaid domestic or reproductive labor. Moreover, a budding consumerist culture, brought about by mass production and advertising, widened the division between classes and would eventually change Victorian austerity to favor increased (respectable) leisure activities and a new role for women as family purchasing agent. Despite a broadening philosophy towards women’s abilities in the public sphere, women were still consigned to the limited freedom only the home could provide. Although gender and class remained “crucial constitutive elements of middle-class self-definition” (Bederman, 1992, 6), it was “separate spheres” domesticity that would continue to permeate familial values well into the late-twentieth century (Stansell, 1982).

#### *A New Kind of Companionate Family*

By the 1910s and 1920s, a new iteration of the companionate marriage surfaced emphasizing family cohesiveness and emotional ties unlike “its more hierarchical Victorian predecessor” (Jacobson, 2001, 231). According to historian Christina Simmons

(1979), this companionate marriage attempted “to adapt to women’s perceived new social and sexual power” (55). Now, mutual attraction, along with sexual intimacy and general companionship, was necessary for a good marriage. The idealized mother of the Victorian era was replaced in the 1920s by the “wife-companion,” in which motherhood was downplayed in favor of “an emphasis on [a woman’s] role as a wife and on the romantic eroticized dyadic relationship of the heterosexual couple” (Farrell, 1999, 107). At the same time, men began to re-develop their position within the home by spending more time at home after work than in leisure activities and by pursuing more affectionate relationships within the family. However, the burgeoning sexual revolution – accompanied by the suffragette movement and World War I – was followed by “rising divorce rates, falling birthrates, [and] changing roles for women,” which led “people to believe that the family was in a terminal crisis” (Skolnick, 1991, 20). Sociologist Arlene Skolnick (1991) argues that despite the appearance of the abandonment of the patriarchal nuclear family, young couples were merely revising and adapting the previous kinship form to new circumstances. Skolnick goes on to say that the new companionate marriage model – “emphasizing affection, friendship, and happiness” – was just an elaboration of Victorian themes (20). Yet Stephanie Coontz (2000), a historian of marriage and family, notes that in the late 1920s and early 1930s “the independence and isolation of the nuclear family” from the extended kinship network was cause for a renewed anxiety.

More often than not, changes in familial organization have coincided with cultural developments in women’s history. The first Feminist movement, intrinsically connected to women’s suffrage, brought about new considerations for (White) women’s domestic duties and aptitude for working outside of the home in *pink*-collared jobs. Education,

advancements in birth control, and the pursuit of economic independence each disturbed widely held beliefs about domestic and gender role ideology. However, shifting definitions of masculinity also played a significant role in modifying familial arrangements – at least in terms of the father’s place in the domestic space. Classified as a new “masculine domesticity,” gender historian Margaret Marsh (1988) observed an increase in men adopting more responsibility in the day-to-day tasks of childrearing and domestic details. This construction of men’s masculine domesticity was heavily influenced by the new companionate marital paradigm, economic circumstances that allowed men to devote more attention to their families, and the development of an early suburban lifestyle (Marsh, 1988). For Marsh, masculine domesticity “offered an alternative to feminism: men would acknowledge the importance of the domestic sphere, not only rhetorically, but also by assuming specific responsibilities within it” (181). Importantly, neither companionate marriage nor masculine domesticity altered essentialist attitudes supporting men as head of the family (Chambers, 2001). But just as this new domestic “balance” began to blossom, circumstances arising from the Great Depression threw domestic relations into a tailspin of contradictions.

### *The Nuclear Family as Historical Fluke*

The Depression permanently upended the strict observance of Victorian marriage and parenthood, as impoverished families could no longer sustain the genteel lifestyle thought to be necessary for the separate spheres dynamic (May, 1980; 1999). Economic conditions “accelerated the influx of married women into the workforce,” but it did not provide the liberation feminists had alluded to during the 1920s (Coontz, 2005, 218). Women’s wage labor threatened middle-class family dynamics and scarce employment

opportunities often forced family members to separate. Although divorce rates declined during this decade after spiking during the 1920s (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988), the economic depression “suppressed couples’ willingness to marry and have children” (Douglas, 2003, 90) and, in some respects, put an end to any progress on restructuring gender roles within the American family (May, 1999). Familial economic difficulties notwithstanding, historians Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg (1988) and Stephanie Coontz (2000) all claimed that the Depression had a beneficial effect on the family by reviving the “social importance of kin and family ties” (Coontz, 2000, 13). The values of family bonding would later underscore the revitalization of the nuclear middle-class family after World War II. Meanwhile, the government took on a larger responsibility for familial well-being as New Deal programs assisted families financially with the introduction of welfare policies and Social Security. The tumult of the 1930s was later compounded by America’s entrance into World War II, which only intensified women’s presence in the workforce and the breakdown of the nuclear family.

Historian Stephanie Coontz (2000) refers to the post-war period (1945-1960) as a “historical fluke, based on a unique and temporary conjuncture of economic, social, and political factors” (28). World War II ended America’s precarious economic situation and fundamentally restored the nuclear patriarchal family and resurrected Victorian middle-class ideals (May, 1999). Marriage and birth rates skyrocketed as a postwar vitality saw the hardships of the Depression disappear in light of increased economic opportunity and the expansion of the middle-class (May, 1999; Osgerby, 2001). The U.S. Census Bureau (1975) reported that the number of “solidly middle-class families grew from 12.5 million to 19 million between 1947 and 1953.” Middle-class suburban families revived the



companionate marriage, though this was, once again, not an equal partnership by any means. The confluence of economic prosperity, mass consumption, and suburbanization produced a familial model dramatically different than anything preceding it or further iterations to come (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). The *nuclear* family became emblematic of the nation-state in both political rhetoric and consumer advertising, characterized once more by the companionate marriage, the breadwinner/housewife dyad, and the delineation of childhood as well as adolescence (May, 1999; Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). The mass media, particularly the emergence of television, was influential in disseminating this hegemonic family and, as will be discussed in the next section, rarely deviated from a picture of blissful domesticity and consumption. Television programming and advertising, along with government propaganda, extolled the utopian “American Dream” and requisite purchasing power for all, but it was only guaranteed to those who would assimilate to this particular vision of suburban, patriarchal domesticity.

Many families were still excluded from this prosperity and optimism in the 1950s (Coontz, 2001). For example, although the middle-class expanded significantly, the redistribution of wealth remained unavailable to racial minorities still subjugated by segregation and other racist policies. Though postwar prosperity may have successfully “blurred class lines, it only sharpened racial divisions” (May, 1999, 9). Moreover, despite expanding opportunities for women at the end of World War II, there was a surge in family life and a reaffirmation of domesticity that rested on distinct roles for women and men (May, 1999, xiv). Propaganda campaigns previously used to support the war effort heavily promoted the re-domestication of women to the home as a natural segue to men returning from the front. The home became the basis of stability after years of economic

and social volatility – a place laden with traditional gender roles and a resurrected husband-provider ethic (Douglas, 2003).

*Underlying Tensions Mount Against the Nuclear Family*

The 1950s was the first time that a majority of Americans could (seemingly) secure their own piece of the American dream and the nuclear family model. According to Coontz (2001), “family life and gender roles became much more predictable, orderly, and settled in the 1950s” as the nuclear family household surpassed unmarried, extended, and adaptive kinship homes (34). Burgeoning Cold War insecurities further reinforced the domestication and containment of women within the home as a necessity for a strong America (May, 1999). Television programs modeled “how families were *supposed* to live,” falsely reassuring *all* viewers of the ease with which they could achieve this new way of life (Coontz, 2001, 36). Continued racial segregation, class stratification, and gender role disparity in the home and labor force began to undermine the seeming perfection of suburban domesticity, and when the baby boom generation came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, contempt for their parents’ conformity led many to rebel against the domestic and social codes of *conventional* family life. Young women, especially, found the domesticated homemaker image repressive and began to resist the idea that they could only find fulfillment in the domestic space raising children (Meyerowitz, 1994). Socio-historical scholars point to Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as a crucial turning point in domestic relations and foundation for the second-wave Feminist movement, revealing the inner turmoil and desperation of housewives (Coontz, 2011; May, 1999; Mintz & Kellogg, 1989). At the same time, men battled the dehumanizing nature of the “organization man” and the pressures of the breadwinner marriage (Coontz,

2005; Ehrenreich, 1983). Fathers struggled to reconnect with their children and locate their place within the domestic space as more than the family disciplinarian (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). In the end, the family-centered culture prevalent in the 1950s was ultimately overrun by “materialism, consumerism, and bureaucratic conformity,” intensifying a counter-cultural desire to break free of the conservative oppression of nuclear family idealism (May, 1999, 13).

As reported by Coontz (2005), various social movements of the 1960s and 1970s such as the New Left, Civil Rights, and Second-Wave Feminism, combined with a tremendous escalation of women in the work force, disillusionment from the Vietnam War, and advancements in birth control all created further changes in familial norms. Between 1966 and 1979, the divorce rate doubled, more women postponed marriage, and the number of children born out of wedlock climbed as married couples began to have fewer, if any, children (Coontz, 2005, 261). The breadwinner/housewife dyad stereotype no longer applied to many families, yet the mass media continued to portray this image as the familial ideal (Coontz, 2005; Mintz & Kellogg, 1989). In reality, single parenthood increased, particularly the proliferation of female-led households in both White and African American families, leading to a new discourse on the work-family balance (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988; Skolnick & Skolnick, 2001). Women’s “Double Day” previously discussed in the mid-1920s, in which women worked – for less pay than their husbands – but were still required to take full responsibility for children and domestic duties, resurfaced as the maligned “Second Shift” in the 1970s and 1980s (Hochschild, 1989). Both sides of the political spectrum debated the merits and detrimental effects of working-motherhood on the family structure, but rarely, if ever, did men receive the same

scrutiny. Young feminists critiqued nuclear family idealism that embraced compulsory motherhood and men's negation of unpaid domestic labor, and the labor force created a space to explore the independence of being single. Even as the economic recession in the 1970s further circumvented many women's ability to *choose* to stay at home, women were still inundated with an outdated cultural idealism of conventional domestic dynamics.

#### *A Renewed Panic for "Family Values"*

If the 1970s solidified a second Feminist movement, it also marked another inauguration of crisis rhetoric with regards to the decline of the American family. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter launched a nationwide White House Conference on Families to examine the difficulties faced by American families and install governmental programs on both the local and national level to return the institution of the American family to prominence (Alexander, 1981; Levitan & Belous, 1981). The growing commonality of divorce, falling fertility rates, shifts in sexual, social and religious attitudes, and the expanding welfare state all gave way to a general family malaise (Levitan & Belous, 1981). The Conference invoked a venerable return to "family values" supported by cultural conservatives and narrowly defined what constituted a *legitimate* family as the nuclear patriarchal family (Ribuffo, 2006). Political proselytizing would continue well into the first Bush presidency (1989-1993) buoyed by what Brigitte and Peter Berger (1983) termed "neo-traditionalism," a moral panic about single parenthood, and liberal legislation on divorce and abortion (Harding, 1999). The New Right launched a rigorous anti-feminist movement during the Reagan era, pointedly criticizing career-minded women by hailing the importance of a stable familial environment and its

subsequent dependence on motherhood (Faludi, 1991; Stacey, 1987). Anxiety related to the AIDS crisis and the rise in teen pregnancies aided in exacerbating the “crisis” discourse (Mintz & Kellogg, 1989). And by the end of the 1980s, the politics of familial restoration was reduced to a racialized discourse as unfair and unfavorable comparisons were made between the breakdown of White middle-class families and the challenges faced by minority families, particularly the so-called deadbeat dads and “Welfare Queen” mothers that supposedly plagued African American families.

This conservative backlash and “family values” motif endured in the early 1990s, developing “its platform around the politics of nostalgia for the traditional family, even though the defining characteristics of that tradition were rarely articulated or subjected to critical scrutiny” (Farrell, 1999, 10). Social historian Betty Farrell (1999) suggests that by the 1990s, “a concern for revitalizing family values [had] become a staple of public rhetoric, a rallying cry not only of the religious Right but a wide range of social commentators of all political persuasions” (10). The 1992 presidential race between George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton became a “culture war” of epic proportions with Republicans raging against the “liberal agenda” they predicted would irreparably weaken not just the family but also, by extension, the nation (Morrow, 1992). “Family” was once more employed as the bastion of American strength to stave off waning global preeminence. The U.S. Bureau of the Census (1997) reported that between 1970 and 1996, “the proportion of all single-parent households with children under the age of 18 grew from 13 percent to 32 percent,” most of which were maintained by mothers (cited in Farrell, 1999, 57). Consequently, this focus on family also sparked renewed attention to men and their families, as fundamentalist groups like the Promise Keepers, Focus on the

Family, and the American Family Association equated resolving the “crisis” in American families to re-establishing men’s commitment to the home – including sharing domestic duties and childcare with women, but not abdicating their position as head of the family. Aggressive morality talks from the New Right would continue into the new century, but “family values” remained inherently subjective – crafted from “memories of a golden age” of family that perhaps never was and inherently excludes most American families (Morrow, 1992).

### *What is the Twenty-First Century Family?*

At the same time that the discussion of family values “turned into a polarized, often angry political debate” in the 1990s, it also facilitated a more expansive definition of “family” aided by the Clinton campaign’s recognition and acceptance of all forms of families (Skolnick & Skolnick, 2001, 2). The “popular discourse about the family” often exaggerated its decline, when it was only the “very narrow definition of family – two biological parents, in their first marriage, with a full-time breadwinner husband and a full-time homemaker wife, and two or three children” that had become less prominent (Skolnick & Skolnick, 2001, 3). As noted throughout this section, the nuclear patriarchal family – though a staple of political rhetoric and public idealism – was rarely, if ever, a tangible “norm” for American families. Yet, even today, the nuclear family – the 1950’s version that is heavily romanticized – perseveres with what sociologist Michael S. Kimmel (2004) calls a “misplaced nostalgia:” a “timeless trope that all family forms ought to emulate” (118). The ongoing discourse of “crisis” fails to account for the fact that “family” has never been fixed and no one version the rule. Unfortunately, as media scholar Deborah Chambers (2001) argues, the “cultural myth [of the nuclear family] is a

regulatory force that impacts our lives at a very personal level” – a powerful discourse “within the collective imagination” (1).

As illustrated in the next section, the familial discourse has been internalized due in large part to the imagery of family life television has presented. The family and a certain kind of “family values” continue to be “deployed as a metaphor...to support particular social hierarchies and perpetuate inequalities of race and gender” (Chambers, 2001, 33). Now, in the twenty-first century, how do we classify “the family” beyond the ideological “norm?” Sociologist Judith Stacey (1990) asserts we are in the midst of the “Postmodern Family,” whereby “contemporary family arrangements are diverse, fluid, and unresolved” (16-17). She goes on to say that, “Americans today have crafted a multiplicity of family and household arrangements that we inhabit uneasily and reconstitute frequently in response to a changing personal and occupational circumstances” (17). Stacey also argues that African American matriarchal and White working-class families pioneered the alternative models of domesticity we frequently see today, while other scholars equate contemporary familial forms with a post-feminist or post-patriarchal family in which the social enfranchisement of women has radically altered the patriarchal ideology of domesticity (see Mann, 1998; Probyn, 1997; Therborn, 2004). Nevertheless, Chambers (2001) contends the “post-” labels “attached to new, diverse family forms” merely “conceal the hierarchical nature of familial structures of power that still continue to operate in society” and our deeply entrenched patriarchal family values (129). Hence, even now in the new millennium, we still try to perform the “conventional” family even if we cannot strictly conform to its tenets. Instead, we experience an assortment of distinguishable familial forms that are both complex and

comfortable, such as dual-career and single parenthood, blended and multigenerational families, or gay and lesbian families.

### **The History of the Family on Television**

Television articulates our social and cultural values, often shifting to reflect evolving worldviews and dominant ideologies. Drawn from interconnecting social, political, economic, and historical elements, television becomes a mechanism through which we build an imagined community – a sense of unity among the disparate populace, though this process is not without tension or resistance (Anderson, 1983; Morley, 2004). Television creates a common culture (Scannell, 1989); while at the same time functions as an apparatus that constitutes “its audience by the ways in which it represent[s] them” (Hall, 1993, 32). In the end, it inculcates a particular set of ideologies – especially concerning the family – by confirming a mediated view of culture that viewers can emulate, while also indicating ways in which viewers can gain a sense of cultural membership by conforming to the hegemonic norm (Fiske & Hartley, 1978). Notably, television remains a site of contradiction for the representation of “the family” because it simultaneously represents it as a universal experience while also constructing it “as a fragile, threatened entity requiring support for its survival” (Harwood, 1997, 5).

Portrayals of familial domesticity have had a dominating presence on the small screen since its inception in the late-1940s. As both an apt space for the incorporation of commercial strategies and a means to provide “least objectionable programming,” family series have a long and successful past on television. Moreover, with each passing decade, these fictional families have often reflected the changing social mores of the time (Brooks, 2005; Taylor, 1989b). Media scholars Dan Brown and Tammy Hayes (2001)



suggest that viewers see these television depictions of families as models for desirable and appropriate familial behavior, despite the understanding that these images are inaccurate or unrealistic. Not only has the fictional family been used to qualitatively assess “how the American family is doing in the real world” (Robinson & Skill, 2001, 139), but also to examine how television typically endorses, and subsequently reinforces, the nuclear family structure (Moore, 1992). Long considered a conservative ideal, this type of family has been a hallmark of television series since the postwar era and the foundation for constructing the White, middle-class bourgeois family.

#### *Postwar Constructions of the Family*

The introduction of television coincided with the rise of utopian discourses about post-World War II suburban domesticity and conspicuous consumption (Spigel & Mann, 1992). Television propaganda campaigns assisted not only with the re-domestication of women to the home, but also helped create a drive for commercial goods that would help everyone achieve the new American dream. Class became a major component of this new bourgeois culture as the government and television both supported the notion of an expanding middle-class community, while cinematic representations of domestic upheaval (e.g., the Douglas Sirk melodramas or *Rebel Without A Cause*) intensified the yearning for stable households. Late-1940s television families were depicted as working-class, European immigrants who presented the accessibility of the “American Dream” (Brooks, 2005; Leibman, 1995; Lipsitz, 1992). According to cultural studies scholar George Lipsitz (1992), the ethnic situation comedy assisted the transition from pre-World War II economic hardships to the post-World War II push for commodity consumption.

Ethnic family sitcoms such as *I Remember Mama* (1949-1956) and *The Goldbergs* (1949-1954) helped explain and legitimize transformations in consumer spending by deftly incorporating material wealth into a boon for strong familial relationships (Brooks, 2005; Jones, 1992; Leibman, 1995). Both of these ethnic sitcoms also depicted “the drama of the death of traditional culture [and] the creation of a universal national culture (Jones, 1992, 45). Ethnic sitcoms allowed viewers to bid farewell to the past while also offering “models for the creation of the new homogeneous system to which postwar America was committing itself” (Jones, 1992, 46). Commenting further, Lipsitz (1992) argues that, “commercial network television emerged as the primary discursive medium in American society at the precise historical moment that the isolated nuclear family and its concerns eclipsed previous ethnic, class, and political forces as the crucible of personal identity” (85). These sitcoms, though seemingly contrary to class consciousness being enforced in American society, nevertheless helped address cultural anxieties of families transitioning to a new era of economic and social circumstances.

While these ethnic sitcoms helped assimilate and Americanize immigrants, they failed to examine or acknowledge racial tensions rampant in the late-1940s and 1950s for other ethnic minorities. Blackness, in particular, was virtually non-existent on television at the time. Even though postwar idealism was pervasive across all demographic groups, families of color were still excluded from suburbia, and thus unable to partake in this new American prosperity (May, 1999). Racial segregation still prevailed in the postwar suburbs and consequently, minorities were denied opportunities for upward mobility granted to working-class and immigrant families (May, 1999). Yet, even those who were

denied access to the American dream still coveted this new family-centered culture depicted on television.

Television's early ethnic familial narratives also emphasized traditional familial gender roles (Brooks, 2005; Leibman, 1995). In *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (1992a), television scholar Lynn Spigel chronicles the impact of television's introduction into the home and its influence on family relations. Spigel notes that not only did the television become part of the family's daily routines, but it also informed and influenced domestic gender relations and brought about a restoration of "faith in family togetherness" and consumption (3). Thus, men were presented as the breadwinners, while women stayed home to raise the children. At the same time, series such as *The Life of Riley* (1953-1958) and *The Great Gildersleeve* (1955-1956) portrayed men who were often bumbling and ineffectual in the domestic space (Brooks, 2005; Jones, 1992). However, only a short time later, ethnic comedies were soon replaced by the suburban domestic comedy that increasingly revolved around the patriarchal middle-class nuclear family unit (May, 1999).

This portrayal of idealized White, middle-class domesticity – America's new bourgeois family – became the "primary means of reconstituting and resocializing the American family after WWII" (Haralovich, 1992, 112). Spigel's (1992a) work offered a thorough discussion on the phenomenon of the "white middle class" during the postwar era, which she interprets as "a set of social identifications encouraged by the media rather than to real individuals whose identities were more fractured and complex" (6). Moreover, Spigel noted that the term was particularly utilized "to level class and ethnic differences in order to produce a homogeneous public for national advertisers" and

universalize the familial experience for all (6). In fact, the suburban, White, middle-class family eventually became a commodity itself as advertising began to play on kinship structures to legitimize both the ideal nuclear dynamic and the products that would maintain the institution of the family (Haralovich, 1992; Spigel, 1992b).

### *Suburban Family Sitcoms and the Nuclear Family*

Suburban family sitcoms proliferated during the mid-to-late 1950s and early 1960s, starting with *Father Knows Best* in 1954. *Father Knows Best* attempted to teach social lessons and demonstrate proper family conduct through its narrative (Jones, 1992). Television scholar Gerard Jones (1992) noted that, “by 1957 new shows were appearing in clear emulation of *Father Knows Best*. Of eight sitcoms premiering that fall, three offered instructive families. Only those three survived the season, and each was a solid success, going on to last five or six years” (123). The rise of paterfamilias on television – or the father as head and authority figure of the family – coincided with the rise of the “organization man,” leaving the home as the only space where men could once again exert their authority and masculinity (May, 1999). On television mothers became relegated to the background, with depictions reiterating housewifery and motherhood, yet also showing mothers as deferring to their husbands in all family matters including child-rearing (Brooks, 2005, Leibman, 1995). Although television still emphasized the social and political importance of motherhood to women, it was the father’s role being emphasized and relied upon to solve familial problems.<sup>3</sup>

Television scholars such as Mary Beth Haralovich (1992) and Nina C. Leibman (1995) wrote defining pieces pertaining to the family as it was presented on television in

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<sup>3</sup> A more in-depth narrative of the portrayal of fatherhood on television in the post-war era can be found in Chapter three.

the 1950s and early 1960s – particularly television’s persistent depiction of distinct gender roles (i.e., “separate spheres” ideology). Analyzing suburban domestic sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*, Haralovich explains how these series mediated the importance of the suburban housewife and “realigning family gender roles” to middle-class family life (113). The portrayals of paterfamilias and suburbia in the domestic sitcoms of the period instructed viewers on how to assimilate and achieve “the comfortable environment and middle-class lifestyle that housing and consumer products sought to guarantee for certain American families” (114). Importantly, household success lied with the homemaker as purchasing agent and subordinate maternal figure.

Contrarily, Leibman’s work attends to the “vague sense of dysfunction” that seemed to underscore “television’s supposedly ideal and harmonious familial clans” (1). Grounded in industrial analysis of both the film and television industries, Leibman examines the patterns of representation of American family life in domestic sitcoms, though she defines them as family melodramas because they are “characterized by the same familial strife and reconciliation that form the foundation of the feature-film domestic melodrama” (5). She also tracked the popularity of the domestic sitcoms and, much like this dissertation, questioned the rigidity of the familial “myth” they put forth.

Despite the segregation of gender roles, one thing remained clear within these television narratives: “the ‘American way of life’ [was] embodied in the [white] suburban nuclear family, as a cultural ideal if not a universal reality” (May, 1999, xx). And yet, as Deborah Chambers (2001) argues, “the humor in family sitcoms relied precisely on breaking the codes of the idealized family. The genre of the sitcoms acted as a barometer of family values *through* familial dysfunctionality” (72). Hence, it was the resolution to

these familial disruptions that actually imparted the ideal codes of conduct for the family. For Chambers this meant, “the vulnerability of the white, nuclear family could be alluded to in order to underline the need to ‘work at’ producing the ideal family ‘for real’” (72). As the 1960s came to a close, the nuclear family comprised 38 percent of the families portrayed on television, but the underlying real-life tensions so often glossed over or easily solved on the small screen began to take their toll (Albada, 2000; Skill & Robinson, 1994).

### *Social Change and Domestic Upheaval*

Television’s reliance on the idyllic suburban family remained steadfast until the 1960s when social movements, such as the anti-war and counter-culture movements, created a tumultuous time for the nuclear family (Schatz, 1991). Although ever-present, television narratives began to de-emphasize the nuclear family in favor of single-parent households (e.g., *Bachelor Father*, 1957-1962; *Family Affair*, 1966-1971; *Julia*, 1968-1971; *The Doris Day Show*, 1968-1973; *The Courtship of Eddie’s Father*, 1969-1972). Notably, these non-nuclear families were twice as likely to be depicted as headed by a father than a mother (Skill & Robinson, 1994), with nearly 30 series throughout the 1960s featuring a single father (Kearney, 2004).<sup>4</sup> Television westerns, in particular, featured a number of single-parent families, such as *The Big Valley* (1965-1969), *The Guns of Will Sonnet* (1967-1969), and *The High Chaparral* (1967-1971). Even prior to the turbulent 1960s, *The Rifleman* (1958-1963) depicted a widower raising his son on a ranch in 1880’s New Mexico, while also trying to maintain law and order on the frontier.

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<sup>4</sup> According to sociologists Irwin Garfinkel and Sara McLanahan (1986), television’s emphasis on single fatherhood was in stark contrast to reality where throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, mothers headed almost 90 percent of single-parent families.

A similar premise marked another popular western, *Bonanza* (1959-1973), which chronicled the adventures of Ben Cartwright and his adult sons in 1860's Nevada. Both Westerns, embedded with conservative values, highlighted the father-son relationship and importance of family amidst the chaos of shifting cultural mores. Meanwhile, sitcoms such as *Bachelor Father*, and later *My Three Sons* (1960-1972), *Family Affair*, and *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, featured father figures trying to reconcile their bachelorhood with fatherhood. Instead of merely exploring the father's ability to maintain law and order within his own household, these sitcoms also constructed the paterfamilias as "single-and-dating" in order to find a new "maternal figure" and in need of outside assistance to sustain nuclear family values; that is, each of these shows featured a manservant or relative who helped run the household and raise the children.

At the same time, television did its best to track the burgeoning changes to the nuclear family by holding fast to traditional domestic narratives or slowly adopting, though ultimately containing, challenges to the more dominant familial discourse. Series featuring blended families such as *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) or more companionate marriages such as *The Bing Crosby Show* (1964-1965) were still underscored by gender inequality in the home. Even the sitcoms of the 1960's that seemed like parodies of nuclear family life, for example *The Munsters* (1964-1966) and *The Addams Family* (1964-1966), simply manifested nuclear familialism in a different form with unconventional families trying to live the conventional life (Morreale, 2003a). But the 1970s further extended the turbulent disruption of family life as gender, race, sex, and class all collided in an attack on long-held traditionalist values. Sitcoms now featured individuals creating families through their professional colleagues, the so-called "work

families” (e.g., *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, 1970-1977), or tested the strength of the nuclear family under attack from evolving social mores like Norman Lear’s “relevancy” programs such as *All in the Family* (1971-1979) and *Maude* (1972-1978). On the other hand, 1970’s dramas countered the social upheaval of these two decades with a chronological retreat to more bucolic and orderly eras of family life. Nostalgia programs such as *The Waltons* (1972-1981), *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-1983), and *Happy Days* (1974-1984) promoted the importance and security of the home and family as a salve in times of crisis.

Previous scholarly work has tried to address these complex and diverse depictions of “the family” during this time of social upheaval. For example, television scholar Judy Kutulas (2005) argues that a show such as *All in the Family* revealed the troubling underside of the 1950s family. Kutulas writes that the series “served a different function than happy family comedies, mocking rather than modeling, offering up a deliberately imperfect vision of family life to replace the deliberately perfect Cleaver model” (54). Meanwhile, Ella Taylor’s *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (1989a) surveys television programming from the 1960s and 1970s in an effort to utilize the images of family on television to better understand “the changing social psychology of American family life in a period when family issues were being defined as both significant and troubling” (150). In particular, Taylor investigates the shifting boundaries between family and work, and the ways in which television “rais[ed] and then symbolically resolv[ed] the troubling [cultural] issues” of the period (151). She concludes that the relevancy programming of the 1970s was an important shift in television’s previous consensual tone as “the television family became a seething locus of anger and



fear,” and workplace sitcoms offered not only a “redeeming family” but also a critique of corporate alienation (153). Although Taylor ends her book commenting on the 1980’s revitalization of the stable nuclear family, television scholar Jane Feuer (1995) would later argue in her book, *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism*, that the decade’s television programming was far more ideologically complex than Taylor implied.

*After the Baby Boom: Working Mothers and “New” Fathers*

While essentialist motherhood stereotypes defined the idyllic maternal figure of June Cleaver and her cohort, the 1970’s “relevancy” programming was populated by strong, perhaps feminist, matriarchs who were often single, working mothers. Although not the first sitcom to feature a divorced woman, *One Day at a Time* (1975-1984) was one of the most successful (Dow, 1996). The show featured a divorced mother of two navigating the waters of feminism, while seeking her own conceptualization of female liberation. Feminist media scholar Bonnie J. Dow (1996) contends that *One Day at a Time* “premiered at a point when radical feminist groups and visibility had almost disappeared” (64). Dissention within the women’s movement regarding political ideology allowed for further ambiguous portrayals of feminism on television, but this show helped to examine the generational impact of second-wave feminism while at the same time legitimizing a new familial dynamic – one that did not require a family patriarch for stability. In the mid-1980s, *Kate and Allie* (1984-1989) would also express this same sentiment, although it developed more as a reaction to feminism than merely an outgrowth of it (Dow, 1996). In the end, television tried to mask anti-feminist rhetoric by

re-appropriating feminist ideology (i.e., working-motherhood) in order to once more bring conservative familial ideology and values back to prominence.

During the 1980s and 1990s, television delved deeper into the ever-present undercurrent of the politicization of the American family. Anti-feminist rhetoric from the New Right in the 1980s pointedly criticized career-driven women and hailed the importance of a stable familial environment (Taylor, 1989a). Throughout the 1980s, sitcoms featured a variety of successful iterations of the dual-career couple in programs such as *Family Ties* (1982-1989), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), and *Growing Pains* (1985-1992). Here, however, parents were rarely depicted working and the shows idealistically depicted women easily shouldering the demands of both domestic and working lives (Hertz, 1986). Notably, the patriarchs of *The Cosby Show* and *Growing Pains* both worked from home but did not experience any difficulties in separating their personal and professional lives. In fact, working from home came with the added benefit of constant paternal involvement in domestic milestones and disputes, thereby emphasizing the significance of and the family's reliance on the father's role in the home.

Ensemble serial melodramas or prime-time soaps became a dominant form of television during the 1980s, with series featuring powerful matriarchs (e.g., *Falcon Crest*, 1981-1990) or patriarchs (*Dynasty*, 1981-1989) and extended families constantly in conflict (e.g., *Dallas*, 1978-1991). According to television scholar Jane Feuer (1995), *Dynasty*, though embraced and criticized for its camp sensibilities, represented Reagan-era ideals of financial excess and a rejuvenation of the American family after the chaos of the 1970s. Though not as opulent as *Dynasty*, *Dallas*, its spin-off *Knot's Landing* (1979-1993), and *Falcon Crest* similarly offered narratives of intense familial drama and

cutthroat corporate intrigue. Feuer writes that, “the typical conflicts of domestic melodrama came to represent the decade’s central ideology in the way it condenses the corporation and the family – the mainstay institutions of Reaganism – into a single representation,” which she refers to as the “corporate family” (115). Feuer adds that these types of programs helped viewers “*avoid* dealing with the economic and social realities of the times” (12). The way in which these melodramas integrate the corporation and the family, as in dealing with the complexities of running a family business, is correlated to the internal conflicts of the family itself.

Despite the idealized upper-class setting of the domestic melodrama, the family was decidedly flawed as it was subjected to a number of troubling social ills, such as marital infidelity, rape, and alcoholism, brought about by its own excess. In contrast to these domestic melodramas and a “counterpoint to the materialism and self-absorption” they depicted, Stephanie Coontz (2000) notes the beginning of a revival of nostalgic family values on television (94). This is particularly evidenced by the old domestic sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s such as *The Donna Reed Show*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *My Three Sons*, and *Father Knows Best*, that returned to television in re-runs both in daytime programming and the prime-time slots of particular cable networks such as *Nickelodeon*. Still, Feuer reasons that serial melodramas continued to be popular because they interrogated the conservative politics of the day while still reaffirming them through the types of families it portrayed. Overall, programs during the 1980s remained steadfast in documenting the necessity and subsequent cost of failing to restore the family.

*Televsual Familialism and the Family “In-Crisis”*

Although family values rhetoric has been used to cajole and forewarn Americans about the importance of a stable family unit to the continued strength of America since the colonial period, it was during one of the more recent shifts in familial power relations that television was particularly identified as the primary source of the collapse in traditional family values. Political and religious rhetoric of the early 1990s extolled the American populace to redeem our failing nation through a return to “family values.” At that time, President George H.W. Bush urged families to be “a lot more like the Waltons and a lot less like the Simpsons” (as cited in Douglas & Olson, 1995, 236). Media scholars William Douglas and Beth Olson (1995) indicate that the president’s warning reflected “a popular belief that the state of the family in America [had] declined and that such decline [was], in some way, tied to decay in the American television family” (236). This correlation was then furthered by Vice President Dan Quayle’s scathing remarks in 1992 about the *Murphy Brown* storyline that he claimed “glamorized” single parenthood when Murphy consciously opted to be a single mother (Albada, 2000; Fiske, 1996; Rapping, 1994). On May 19, 1992, Quayle delivered a speech in which he railed against Murphy Brown for having a child out of wedlock: “It doesn’t help matters when prime-time television has Murphy Brown...mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it ‘just another lifestyle choice’” (qtd. in Fiske, 1996, 22). Quayle’s remarks sparked a flurry of press, which awkwardly tried to continue this integration of fictional discourse with that of political rhetoric and policies.

Bonnie J. Dow (1996) argues that the *Murphy Brown* story failed to see the larger attack on welfare policies and changing definitions of “family,” instead opting to spur a

debate about Hollywood's liberalism and subsequent breakdown of the nuclear family (154). As Dow notes, "a point that was never raised in the debate... was that, in fact, the overwhelming majority of families on television have always been headed by two parents" (154). Similarly, in their content analysis of four decades of families on television (1950-1990), Thomas Skill and James D. Robinson (1994) found that the nuclear family continued to have a dominating presence prior to the mid-1990s despite political commentary to the contrary. Thus, for scholars like Coontz (2000), this suggested demise of family values was unfairly linked to television.

And yet, a number of television series in the 1990s such as *Married...with Children* (1987-1997), *The Simpsons* (1989-), and *Unhappily Ever After* (1995-1999) satirized the nuclear family dynamic. Although each of these series adopted the breadwinner husband/housewife dyad, they blatantly and devilishly upended the happily-ever-after contentedness that was a staple of the nostalgic domestic sitcoms (Neuhaus, 2010). These families derided the idealized nuclear family through constant bickering, belittling the patriarch with perpetual ridicule, and depicted children unresponsive to parental authority. Working-class families were featured heavily in these series, thereby further disassociating them from the picture-perfect (upper) middle-class household portrayed in *The Cosby Show* or *Growing Pains*. *Roseanne* (1988-1997), which also featured a working-class family, articulated an alternative version of the patriarchal nuclear family by depicting the mother as the dominant figure within the family – one who cultivated a distinctly different take on the housewife as an ironic domestic goddess (Rowe, 1995; Tincknell, 2005). Despite the depiction of these families as flawed and maladjusted, television critic Richard Zoglin (1992) argues that, "the comedy of anger,

insult and outrage was being used not to attack the family *per se*, but rather to challenge ‘TV’s sentimentalized portrayal of it’” (33). Therefore, even though these series routinely parodied the accepted nostalgic version of family life, they did so in an attempt to ease the burden on families to conform to an archetype while still reaffirming the importance of family in a relatable way (Brooks, 2005; Feasey, 2008; Jones, 1992).

With the rise of the post-network era bringing about more competition from cable, the portrayals of families on network television have grown even more diverse and complex. So-called “chosen” families became prevalent on television in the mid-to-late 1980s and 1990s, as single men and women fashioned strong family ties out of friends rather than biological relations. In his book *Urban Tribes* (2003), sociologist Ethan Watters describes how in lieu of forming traditional families through marriage and parenthood, groups of friends were creating family-like communities with those whom they worked or lived. These friends and co-workers provided the support of an extended family, often behaving in the same ritualistic fashion as loving family members. *Friends* (1994-2004) is the most emblematic of an urban tribe, but series such as *Golden Girls* (1985-1992), *Designing Women* (1986-1993), *Living Single* (1993-1998), and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) are also good examples of television’s attempt to legitimate alternative familial forms, particularly amongst women. On the whole, as Feuer (1995) writes, the “chosen” family provided an alternative “to the Reagan era’s glorification of the traditional nuclear family” (76). Evocative of declining marital and birth rates, urban tribes redefined friendship and family and reiterated “family” as a social construction – though one inherently conceptualized from a familialist ideology and supplementary to nuclear family bonds.

Generally, the familial discourse presented on television suggests a new era of representation that has not only been marked by greater partnerships within the marriage, particularly in domestic sitcoms (e.g., *Grounded for Life*, 2001-2005; *Still Standing*, 2002-2006), but also clings to the mythical and nostalgic domestic values of the patriarchal nuclear family (e.g., *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, 1996-2007; *According to Jim*, 2001-2009; *American Dreams*, 2002-2005). However, also becoming more common are television series featuring harried parents still adjusting to “parenthood” (e.g., *Yes, Dear*, 2000-2006; *8 Simple Rules for Dating my Teenage Daughter*, 2002-2005), uniquely dysfunctional though extremely loyal families (e.g., *That ’70s Show*, 1998-2006; *Malcolm in the Middle*, 2000-2006; *Arrested Development*, 2003-2006; *The War at Home*, 2005-2007), and blended families endeavoring to include each individual member without exception (e.g., *Once and Again*, 1999-2002; *All of Us*, 2003-2007; *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, 2006-2010). In an interesting reversal, minority families on television – particularly African American and Latino families, which in the past had not conformed to the nuclear family norm – now present some of the most rigid adherence to familialist values on television (see *The Parent’Hood*, 1995-1999; *The Hughleys*, 1998-2002; *My Wife and Kids*, 2001-2005; *The Bernie Mac Show*, 2001-2006; or *George Lopez*, 2002-2007). Culturally, as noted earlier, African American families have exhibited adaptive kin structures and more egalitarian gender roles than White, middle-class families; and yet on television they were commonly stereotyped as matriarchal, working-class, and overly irresponsible. More recent iterations significantly defy these stereotypes in favor of the patriarchal nuclear family norm – an assimilated performance of the minority family lifestyle popularized in *The Cosby Show*. By 2010, single

parenthood, divorced families, and multiple generations or extended family living in the same household were quite commonplace for White families and oftentimes proffered a renewed vigilance of the power and symbolic importance of the family in our society.

### **The Scholarship on Television and “The Family”**

The preceding sections have offered a historical base with which to contextualize both the evolution of the family and its portrayal on television. As this dissertation is grounded in critical television scholarship, I next present a short overview of the evolution of television studies and then discuss previous scholarship that has examined television’s depiction of “the family” and its preservation of familialist ideology in order to place this dissertation within the literature. Critical television scholarship aims to address the relationship between television narratives and culture (Newcomb, 1974). As critical television scholars Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz (2012) note, “critical analysis pries under the surface for deeper meanings and connects these meanings to broader social analysis and commentary” (46). Critical television scholarship has shown that television is more than just an ideological apparatus, but a diverse set of cultural and social practices (Allen, 2004). Thus, television programming can be reflexive about and therefore critical of assumptions and values assigned to the mythologized family (Fiske, 1987; Morley, 2004). While not all of the previous literature may contextualize the analysis of particular series with accurate socio-cultural history, as this dissertation aims to do, what will become evident are these scholars’ continued attempts to question the existence of a hegemonic family norm and the familialist discourse that prescribes how we should talk and think about the family.



### *A Television Studies Approach*

The television set has become more ensconced within the home than any other media form, and its capacity to deal with social complexities, though often subtle, has been extensively deconstructed by academics and lay audiences alike. In fact, “Shifts in relations of familial power and in social and cultural attitudes around class and gender have, in some respects, been more complexly dealt with by TV, perhaps because of its status as a domestic medium” (Tincknell, 2005, 147). But academically interpreting the meanings and ideology television promotes through its texts has long been a complicated process. As Gray and Lotz (2012) note, even though television itself has been available since the late-1940s, the development of approaches to study television are much more recent and difficult to distinguish. Television studies has an intellectual history rooted in both the social sciences and humanities. Social scientists in disciplines such as sociology and psychology empirically gauge the *effect* that television programming elicits from and in its audiences. Though in the early stages of media effects scholarship the media were believed to have a powerful and negative persuasive effect on their audience, subsequent research has shown a far more complicated relationship between the media and their audience.

We should not regard television as undifferentiated for all viewers or a transparent window on reality (Allen, 2004; Fiske & Hartley, 1978; Hall, 1980). Early social experiments with television use gave way to a paradigm shift in the early 1970s whereby scholarship began to focus on qualitatively and critically exploring narrative complexities and the different ways viewers interpreted these narratives (Allen, 2004). Although it is important to examine the manifest images that television provides, it is the latent content

that ultimately reflects an underlying worldview and dominant message system. Unlike social scientists, humanists seek to deconstruct the inherent meaning or ideology encoded in television texts. Moving beyond the quantitative research of media effects, which often imply a negative ramification, television studies shows that deriving meaning and intentionality from television is, overall, a complicated process.

Television studies was also influenced by cultural studies approaches that examined the relationships of power and identity within the ideology that was encoded in television texts, and were subsequently decoded by audiences. Cultural studies helped move television studies beyond “the social scientific reduction of audience behavior to quantifiable effects” and the “humanistic determinism that the text answered all relevant questions” without recognizing its context of production or reception (Gray & Lotz, 2012, 15-16). The success of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in bringing popular culture to the forefront of academic study in the 1960s and 1970s helped locate television within a larger social and political context. Culture – particularly popular culture – turned into a commodified industry used to create an uncritical consensus and conformance particularly within the lower classes. According to Raymond Williams (1958/1989), a culture “is common meanings, the product of a whole people, and offered individual meanings, the product of a man’s whole committed personal and social experience” (96). Culture and power became wholly intertwined whereby the system of cultural production – operated by the government and social elite – could coerce and construct a dominant ideology that was perceived as the cultural norm. However, this cultural hegemony (as conceived by Gramsci) was in constant struggle with resistance from “the masses.” Eventually, these revised evaluations of

culture led to the new cultural studies approach that emphasized the importance of how individuals make meaning from media texts.

As the study of leisure cultural activities became legitimated, cultural studies could evaluate the question of “how individuals make meaning of media fare with no power to create it, but not [be] ‘duped’ [by it] either” (Douglas, 2005). In other words, as the media grew more pervasive in society, particularly with regards to television, it became important to understand how individuals came to engage and enjoy media texts in distinct ways. Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1980) emphasized the importance of the production of the cultural artifact and its subsequent “decoding” by the individual. In his oft-quoted work “Encoding/Decoding” (1980), Hall explained that cultural texts were encoded with the dominant or preferred ideology, which is later decoded by the viewer. However, viewers do not necessarily decode the preferred meanings from the text. Instead, as Hall discussed, viewers may utilize three types of reading strategies: dominant, negotiated and oppositional. In other words, viewers can accept the dominant ideology, accept certain particulars of the dominant message while rejecting others, or apply their own oppositional meanings to the text.

Hall’s encoding/decoding model has since become a basic framework for cultural studies research that looks both at media consumption and the media audience. Cultural studies also combines a number of different philosophies ranging from political economy to history, all stemming from a desire to understand how cultural phenomena – especially popular culture artifacts – influence the operation of power through ideological discourses and the practice of everyday life. Moreover, cultural studies scholars criticize the assumption of a passive media consumer; recognizing that media texts are polysemic

and viewers' interpretations of a text are informed by their own personal dispositions, therefore producing an "active viewer." With its ubiquitous placement within the home and lay popularity, television has become an important site of examination in cultural studies. In particular, cultural studies views the practice of watching television as built on a confluence of economic production demands, individual viewing motivations, and larger ideological and political contexts (Morley, 1986; 1992). Thus, television discourses evolve based on the social practices and common experiences of a particular historical moment (Hall, 1980). Importantly, the revelation of an inherent power dynamic within the process of constructing cultural hegemony demonstrates that the audience is not actively complicit in maintaining the dominant ideology (Gray, 1995; Wood, 2004).

### *Critical Television Scholarship*

The inauspicious beginnings of television studies was linked to the difficulty many scholars had in convincing the academic community that television held more significance than it had previously been assigned. Television scholar Horace Newcomb notes that television "was rarely considered a prominent, significant, or special contributor to culture and society" (Newcomb, 2007, 1), and was often criticized for its attempts to corrupt children and moral values while contributing to America's obsession with consumerism (Allen, 2004). Despite its detractors, television "presents us with a continuous stream of images *almost all* of which are deeply familiar in structure and form. It uses codes which are closely related to those by which we perceive reality itself" (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, 4). Though not altogether different from cultural studies, a television scholar seeks to understand "how programs work, how they create meaning," and the relationship between television texts and "the society that produces and consumes

them” (Gray & Lotz, 2012, 13). British television scholar Charlotte Brunson (1998) noted that television studies came together around three areas of interest: “defining and analyzing the nature of the texts of television, analyzing the social worlds constructed in television, and investigating the audiences for various forms of television programming” (as cited in Allen, 2004, 8). Typically, critical television scholarship will examine a particular series or genre and is “interested in exploring the complexities of the fictional worlds created by television rather than comparing those worlds with the ‘real’ world outside television” (Allen, 2004, 5).

Some early television scholarship centered on industrial narratives that helped explain program and scheduling decisions such as Todd Gitlin’s *Inside Prime Time* (1983), while others analyzed the narrative structure and ideology of genres, such as the soap opera (Brunson, 1981; Hobson, 1982) and news programming (Brunson & Morley, 1978), or particular television production houses such as Feuer, Kerr and Vahamagi’s (1985) edited volume on MTM Enterprises. Subsequent critical television scholarship from Lynn Spigel (*Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, 1992a), William Boddy (*Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics*, 1993), and Julie D’Acci (*Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey*, 1994) would further integrate textual analysis “with the examination of the industrial and cultural contexts” that led to the production of these texts (Gray & Lotz, 2012, 20). This dissertation takes this kind of television scholarship as its theoretical influence, which as Gray and Lotz (2012) note, suggests that not only is television “a repository for meanings and a site where cultural values are articulated,” but it also portrays inherent power dynamics in its depictions that capitalize on obscuring

ideological differences – particularly those pertaining to individual subjectivities such as gender, race, or class (22). Gray and Lotz (2012) also acknowledge, television scholarship “takes great effort to specify the context of the phenomenon of study in terms of socio-cultural, techno-industrial, and historical conditions” (25). Hence, in the following chapters, I consciously couch the textual analysis of the television series surveyed in this dissertation within the industrial and socio-cultural conditions that produced them.

### *Television, Family, and Familialism*

As media scholar Sonia Livingstone (2009) writes, “the quintessential image of the television audience is of the family viewing at home” (151). Much of the formative television scholarship on “the family” concentrated on the particular heyday (1954-1963) of television and the television family such as Lynn Spigel’s *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (1992a), Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann’s *Private Screenings* (1992), and Nina C. Leibman’s *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (1995). Others, such as Ella Taylor’s *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (1989a) and Jane Feuer’s *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (1995), have offered scholarship that addresses the influence of familialist television programming across and within decades. Since Feuer’s book, no other work has been produced that engages with a specific decade of television; though Sarah Harwood’s *Family Fictions: Representations of the Family in 1980s Hollywood Cinema* (1997) does further engage with the ways in which media (here, film) circulate particular cultural meanings and familialist ideology as a result of how they develop and represent the family.

Instead, other scholars may offer a chronology of families on television (Brooks, 2005), give insight on family relations and structure in particular genre studies (Dalton & Linder, 2005; Jones, 1992; Morreale, 2003a), or broadly examine how the family has been conceptualized and mediated over time through television (Chambers, 2001; Farrell, 1999; Tincknell, 2005). Additional research has contested the congruence between television families and real families – especially in the *nuclear* model – by either grounding the study in the socio-cultural history of the family across decades (Douglas, 2003), using statistical analysis to compare and contrast content analysis with census data (Skill & Robinson, 1994), or comparing television series from different decades (Cantor, 1990; Frazer & Frazer, 1993; Press, 2009). What underscores all of this previous literature is an attempt to further understand how and why *family* has been ideological defined in similar ways in various time periods despite the fact that this articulation routinely does not correspond to real families and the lives they live. Hence, this past scholarship provides a good foundation for examining the ways in which contemporary television (1995-2010) represents “the family” and how these depictions may destabilize yet also reaffirm an enduring familialist ideology.

In *Television Families: Is Something Wrong in Suburbia?* (2003), William Douglas recommends that critical television scholarship centered on the medium’s portrayal of family life and family relations should both select particular texts that offer unique insights by way of specific families and should inform such research on fictional families with its tangled relationship with real families (173). Thus, not only have I chosen to examine particular categories or sub-genres of programming that have become popular or risen in notoriety in the last fifteen years, but I also contextualize them within

socio-cultural shifts in family lifestyles. Although the social construction of “family” remains misleadingly connected to a specific version of family – the nuclear family ideal – the mechanism by which this idyllic model is produced has changed. Contemporary television and public discourses of the family have transformed the patterns of kinship organization, but they have yet to alter the performance of family – which remains indubitably tied to an inherent familialist ideology. Because “family” can encompass a variety of meanings, I want to specify again that the series under investigation here center on the parent-child relationship – the marital relationship is not always a given – and the multifaceted experience of family life that is often influenced by gender, race, and class. This is not a chronology of television families for the last fifteen years or a thorough analysis of particular genres. Instead, I offer a pattern of discourse that delineates certain “types” of families, the ways in which they perform “family,” and ultimately how this performance reaffirms a particular familial ideology.



## CHAPTER THREE

### RESOLVING FLAWED FATHERHOOD THROUGH DOMESTIC MASCULINITY

In 1989, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's *The Second Shift* re-examined the "double burden" phenomenon working-mothers faced when encumbered by both waged work outside of the home and the bulk of the unpaid labor within it. By the 2000s, it was no longer just working-mothers that were afflicted by the "second shift," as *Time* magazine reported that working-fathers were experiencing the same difficulty in balancing work and domestic responsibilities (Orecklin, Steptoe, & Sturmon, 2004). These so-called "superdads" were cautiously re-adjusting to domesticity in the wake of their fading majority in the workforce, while, at the same time, attempting to redefine fatherhood and the father's role in the family (Rosin, 2010). At the end of the decade, *Newsweek's* Andrew Romano and Tony Dokoupil (2010) were calling for "a reimagining of what men should be expected to do in the two realms, home and work, that have always determined their worth." But were men to cling to the patriarchal masculinity that dominated gritty reality TV shows such as *Ax Men* and *Deadliest Catch* and macho dramas such as *24* and *Sons of Anarchy*, or embrace a more unifying and egalitarian feminist manhood centered on "cooperative family partnerships" – what sociologist Michael S. Kimmel (2011) termed "democratic masculinity" (296-297)? How were men supposed to *perform* fatherhood in a day and age when popular culture not only ridiculed men's endeavors to reclaim their authority within the home in family sitcoms such as

*Home Improvement* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*, but also removed them entirely from the family in cinematic dramedies that glamorized single motherhood such as *The Switch* (2010), *The Back-Up Plan* (2010), and *The Kids are Alright* (2010)? Despite a generational turnaround to enact more progressive co-parenting responsibilities, women are still the dominant domestic entity. In fact, “the number of fatherless kids in America has nearly tripled since 1960, and the percentage of men who call themselves stay-at-home dads has stalled below three percent” (Romano & Dokoupil, 2010). Terse criticism from political conservatives and religious ideologues regarding men’s lack of power within the home has exacerbated a growing anxiety over modern-day fatherhood, particularly its significance to family structure, child rearing, and masculinity.

Political and cultural figures have identified troubling statistics on fatherlessness in America – which some claim to be a leading contributor to the “decline in family values” within the “ongoing discourse of ‘family crisis’” (Chambers, 2001, 1).<sup>5</sup> Anxiety over fatherlessness in America was a product of startling increases in divorce and single parent household statistics since 1960. The U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993) found that the divorce rate nearly tripled between 1960 and 1980, leaving many children to grow up primarily with their single mothers. According to psychologist Wade F. Horn (1998), less than ten million children lived in father-absent families in 1960, whereas by the late 1990s that number was over twenty-four million. Much of this “crisis” rhetoric plagued African American fatherhood, which had long been associated with father absence and marginalized within the rise of matriarchal African American families (Connor & White,

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<sup>5</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2003), “Children in father-absent homes are five times more likely to be poor.” The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that “fatherless children are at a dramatically greater risk of drug and alcohol abuse,” are twice as likely to drop out of school (1993), are more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems, and more likely to be in trouble with the law (1988).

2006).<sup>6</sup> But by the early 1990s, concern about fatherhood expanded significantly when re-establishing the importance of fatherhood to all families became a whole new social movement. This “fatherhood movement” was galvanized by a growing literature addressing fatherhood and several emerging non-profit and religious organizations and social initiatives that sought to enrich and strengthen the commitment of men to fatherhood (e.g., the National Center for Fathering, 1990; the Promise Keepers, 1990; the National Fatherhood Initiative, 1994; and the National Center for Fathers and Families, 1994) (Gavanas, 2004; Horn, 1999). At the same time, however, the public turmoil surrounding a “crisis” in fatherhood and the consequences of father absence was rarely reflected on television, which, even well into the early 1990s, still emphasized the depiction of authoritarian and moderately sentimental patriarchs of intact families evidenced in series such as *Family Ties* (1982-89), *The Cosby Show* (1984-92), *Growing Pains* (1985-92), and *Family Matters* (1989-98). Conversely, recent depictions of the twenty-first century father have become far more committed to capturing diverse conditions of fatherhood; exploring the day-to-day challenges that today’s fathers face amidst economic and political turbulence, single parenthood, and masculine domesticity.

As a social construction, fatherhood remains inherently tied to current cultural conceptualizations of masculinity and domestic gender roles. Since the postwar era, profound socio-cultural factors such as feminism, economic prosperity and hardship, and

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<sup>6</sup> Crisis rhetoric has plagued the African American family most notably from the release of the Moynihan Report in 1965 well into the late-1980s culminating in the 1986 CBS documentary *The Vanishing Family – Crisis in Black America* (Willie & Reddick, 2010). Both political discussions and media reports excoriate the matriarchal Black society as being “deviant” from the White middle-class norm and its subordination to familialist ideology (Corry, 1986; Zinn, 1989). This kind of comparison is inherently problematic because it uses race and gender ideologies to justify social inequality (Collins, 1989). Although the two-parent family, of any race, does not guarantee or eliminate poor economic circumstances, fatherlessness has predominantly been associated with the African American family and made responsible for the growth of the Black underclass (Zinn, 1989).

shifting political ideology, have all challenged conceptions of masculinity, which, over time, has influenced the depictions of fathers on television. Early television showed fatherhood vacillating between the bumbling fathers of the ethnic, working class sitcoms (e.g., *The Trouble with Father*, 1950-55; *The Life of Riley*, 1953-58) and the authoritative patriarchs of the suburban family comedies (e.g., *Father Knows Best*, 1954-60). But as the nuclear family struggled to remain the center of the family dynamic, in both reality and on the small screen, fatherhood was challenged by female domestic independence and a drive for more egalitarian familial roles (LaRossa et al., 2001). For the past two decades, television has struggled to authentically reconstruct fatherhood for the twenty-first century amidst the pathologizing of the family by conservative ideologues regarding its values and structure. Lingering distress over the (oft under-analyzed) increase in fatherlessness in America is now coupled with the contentious idealism surrounding the development and valuation of the “new father” archetype, whereby fathers are more nurturing towards children and are active participants in childrearing and domestic tasks. The “new father” remains a complex by-product of hegemonic masculinity mixed with both characteristics traditionally afforded to mothers and feminist values.

The evolving performance of modern-day fatherhood may be attributed to any number of feminist critiques ranging from post-feminism and the shifting roles of women and motherhood (Hamad, 2009; Reed, 2003) to postmodernism and new kinds of familial structure (Chambers, 2001; Hanke, 1998; Stacey, 1996). However, I argue it is most likely the result of two decades of re-evaluating the patriarch’s authority within the home and the idealistic traits required of “good” dads. As psychologist Michael Lamb (2000) notes, “fatherhood has always been a multifaceted concept, although over time the

dominant or defining motif has shifted in turn from moral guidance to breadwinning to sex-role modeling, marital support, and finally nurturance” (23). Masculinity is more than just a set of biological traits, but “a collection of dynamic cultural codes and meanings” (Osgerby, 2001, 8). Thus, fatherhood’s intrinsic connection to masculine tropes suggests that it too fluctuates over time, eventually coalescing into a hegemonic fatherhood: a set of “norms that men are expected to follow when they become fathers...the attitudes and sentiments that people have toward fathers...and the routine activities of men when they are trying to act ‘fatherly’” (LaRossa, 1997, 11).

This chapter surveys television programming with an emphasis on the father, specifically “guy-coms” and “missing mother” series, two contemporary television phenomena that explore problems inherent in the domestication of men within the family and what historian Margaret Marsh (1988) refers to as “masculine domesticity,” or the incorporation of more traditionally feminine or maternal values and day-to-day household duties as quintessential to masculinity and fatherhood. Both television premises illustrate that not only are men being asked to re-examine their place within the family, but also to re-learn their role as the domestic entity responsible for raising children. The “guy-com,” as defined by television scholar Timothy Havens (2007), features a male lead within a familial setting raising non-adult children. The narrative typically “revolves around reconciling the man’s personality with the demands of family and marriage” (Havens, 2007). Popular domestic guy-coms such as *Home Improvement* (1991-1999), *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005), *My Wife & Kids* (2001-2005), *According to Jim* (2001-2009), and *Gary Unmarried* (2008-2010) feature a father frequently made to look incompetent and the butt of the joke (Scharrer, 2001b), with his juvenile antics disrupting

“domestic harmony” (Havens, 2007). However, as argued by media scholar Robert Hanke (1998), the perpetual self-mocking of fatherhood in these shows inevitably reasserts what sociologist R. W. Connell (1987) defines as hegemonic masculinity, the pattern of practices or expectations that fashion a culturally idealized form of masculinity, and conservative nuclear family values.<sup>7</sup>

Other series centered on the family since 1990 – usually more dramatic in tone – have attempted to explicitly delve into and question traditional masculine tropes surrounding fatherhood, displacing the authoritarian patriarch with the more complex, involved, and oftentimes emotionally damaged, “new father.” As I will discuss later, the “new father” model – in which fathers are more nurturing towards children and active participants in child-rearing and domestic tasks – is not, in itself, a recent alternative to more conventional standards of “the father as authoritarian moral” or “the father as distant breadwinner” (Pleck, 1987). Social historian Joseph Pleck (1987) argued that the “New Father” paradigm has been gathering distinction since the late 1960s, but this is only the latest iteration of a continually shifting discourse of more supportive fathering within the entirety of what sociologist Ralph LaRossa (1988) termed the “culture of fatherhood” – “the shared norms, values, and beliefs surrounding men’s parenting” (451). The televisual complement to the “culture of fatherhood,” particularly since the 1970s, has vacillated between the distant but authoritative father figure and the fully involved compassionate caregiver. Although television still tends to reify the iconic fatherhood of

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that hegemonic masculinity has been employed in diverse cultural contexts and remains a contested concept. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note, there are multiple masculinities and a *hegemonic* masculinity comes “into existence in specific circumstances,” but its characteristics are likely to change over time (832). While confusion remains over who actually embodies or can enact hegemonic masculinity (Whitehead, 1998), here, it refers to a domineering family breadwinner that exhibits a number of “macho” sensibilities and who adheres to strict patterns of gender role differentiation.

the 1950s, contemporary depictions of fatherhood try to reconcile what typically develops into professional duties at odds with personal familial sacrifice or ways to breakdown and then recapitulate hegemonic notions of patriarchy.

Of particular note in this new discourse of complicated fatherhood, has been the rise of fathers raising their children without mothers. Single parents, whether through death or divorce, these fathers struggle to merge stereotypical notions of hegemonic masculinity with the more maternal traits (e.g., compassion, selflessness, emotionality, etc.) needed to adequately provide a home and care to children. These “missing mother” series, such as *Full House* (1987-95), *Everwood* (2002-2006), *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007), *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010), and *Lie to Me* (2009-2011), are punctuated by the oftentimes stressed domestic relationship between the father and his child(ren); and the paternal lack of familiarity with the physical and psychological needs of his child(ren) is frequently underscored by the patriarch’s professional, that is, career excellence and “macho” persona. The latter half of this chapter surveys the “missing mother” television series, examining the problems inherent in the domestication of men within the family, or masculine domesticity, when fathers try to negotiate and subsume the maternal experience in the domestic space. Fathers, as portrayed on television in the past two decades, are not without faults and repeatedly fail to emulate the idealized fathers of yesteryear. Consequently, these television shows seek to upend conservative notions of fatherhood – the distant breadwinner – by portraying a heightened necessity for masculine sensitivity and accentuating the rewarding relationship between father and child.

Contemporary father-centered television identifies aspects of fatherhood in need of improvement and sanctions the patriarch's return to and behavioral transformation within the domestic sphere by directing attention away from simplistic arguments affirming that fathers cannot be mothers.<sup>8</sup> Although the defining criteria in selecting the shows examined here was the focus on fatherhood, their significance is attributed to the ways in which they co-opt and critically engage with hegemonic masculinity. These series emphasize the challenges men faces in light of their domestication, but in the end, they offer a conservative rendering of the paternal figure and his flaws.

### **The “Culture of Fatherhood”**

As discussed in chapter two, although the post-World War II patriarch has long been held as the iconic figure of paterfamilias in the discourse of American fatherhood, the distant breadwinner archetype is merely a recurring construction within the “culture of fatherhood.” An assortment of conceptualizations of fatherhood exist throughout time, and the father-as-breadwinner exists in multiple forms since the Industrial Revolution (1820s-1870s) with the “dedomestication of fathers,” or “separate spheres” gender ideology, dominating familial structure (Dienhart, 1998, 22). Historians have often organized the “culture of fatherhood” into progressive and somewhat permeable phases. Historian E. Anthony Rotundo (1993) categorized fatherhood into two phases: Patriarchal fatherhood (1620-1800) and Modern fatherhood (1800 to present).<sup>9</sup> The two periods are separated by both economic considerations – particularly the evolution from agrarian subsistence families to more urban, industrialized families and the rise of the middle class

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<sup>8</sup> Media studies scholar Hannah Hamad (2009) categorizes this phenomenon as the “paternalization of U.S. television drama,” or the “thematic prominence of fatherhood” on television.

<sup>9</sup> Rotundo (1993) acknowledges that recent changes to the fatherhood paradigm suggest that a third period of fatherhood is emerging – Participant fatherhood.



– and paternal affiliation within the family, that is, from strict moral authoritarian to affectionate breadwinner. Even though the father remained the dominant authority figure within the domestic space, his overall “degree of involvement” with the internal dynamics of the family has continually evolved (Rotundo, 1985, 13).

#### *Pleck's Four Phases of Fatherhood*

Similarly, Pleck (1987) denotes four phases of American fatherhood over the last two centuries based on economic conditions and familial values. Extending through the Colonial period and into the early nineteenth century, the father as “authoritarian moral and religious pedagogue” was defined by men’s “responsibility for moral oversight and moral teaching” (Lamb, 2000, 26). During this era, “fatherhood had deep ties to Christianity and its patriarchal tenets,” and fathers dutifully instilled these values in their children as “they were religiously bound to be authority figures in the home” (LaRossa, 1997, 25). At the same time, fathers, according to social worker Brid Featherstone (2009), “were also actively engaged in nurturing and educating their children, overseeing wet-nursing, clothing and doctoring” (41). However, the move towards more urban employment brought about by the Industrial Revolution, eventually diminished the paternal role in the home and shifted his role to the “father as distant breadwinner” in the late eighteenth century and throughout the mid-twentieth century (Pleck, 1987; Lamb 2000). With the bulk of familial subsistence now assumed by the father, “breadwinning became the most important and defining characteristic of fatherhood – *the* criterion by which ‘good fathers’ were appraised” (Lamb, 2000, 27). Though they were still the familial authority figure, fathers were now absent from the home for long periods; hence, with the father’s primary objective no longer child rearing, he became more permissive of

children and their needs and interests (Lamb, 2000; LaRossa, 1997; Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). The “distant breadwinner” soon gave way to a more “involved fatherhood” at the turn of the twentieth century (Featherstone, 2009).

The more “involved” father was often considered the “fun” parent during the early twentieth century, particularly the 1920s (Gavanas, 2004; LaRossa, 1997). In order to compensate for their domestic absence driven by economic necessity, fatherhood became more “playful” during the time that men were able to spend with their children. This new domestic masculinity, as sociologist Ralph LaRossa (1997) argued, “emphasized the importance of being a ‘daddy;’ of being a chum, a companion, a playmate, nonautocratic and willing to get down on his child’s level” (39). This “new” fatherhood – one early precursor to Pleck’s (1987) fourth phase of fatherhood – became tied to leisure, play, and companionship rather than moral leadership” (Gavanas, 2004, 8). For LaRossa (1997), however, the *father as pal* paradigm simultaneously legitimized and diminished fathers’ importance to families because it overcompensated for a growing incompetence in governing and socializing children. The playful dad marginalized fathers, “in that it created a place for fathers that did not overlap with the place of women. Essentially, it framed fathers as children’s pals, and by doing so, also framed fathers as trivial and less important” (LaRossa, 1997, 18).

Depression-era economic turmoil and World War II continued to reveal the latent inadequacy and impotence of fathers within the domestic space (Kimmel, 2006; Lamb, 2000). According to family policy advisor Adrienne Burgess (1997), “fatherly breadwinning...supplied men with the exclusive status on which masculine identity has traditionally relied,” which “served to recompense fathers, as with home and workplace

increasingly separated, they lost their grip on family life” (16). LaRossa (1997) noted that in spite of the debilitating effect that the Depression had on masculinity and fatherhood, “the period also sparked intensified efforts to sanctify men’s relationships with children” (2). Hence, the desire to re-establish the dominance of the family patriarch led to Pleck’s (1987) third phase of fatherhood – the “father as sex role model” which lasted into the late 1960s when the “New” father (re)emerged.<sup>10</sup> Even though breadwinning remained the definitive mark of validation for fathers, it became just as important to model proper masculine sex-role traits to children, particularly sons (Lamb, 2000). This required a shift to masculine domesticity, whereby “men became convinced that in order to have their sons grow up to be ‘manly,’ they should involve themselves more substantially in their children’s upbringing” (Kimmel, 2006, 106). For historian Margaret Marsh (1988), the restoration of the father’s role in child rearing “was actually a form of resistance, a reaction against women’s putative control over domestic life” (181).<sup>11</sup> LaRossa (1997) concurs that this version of fatherhood emphasized “an active [father] whose job it was to counterbalance the presumably emotionally laden and potentially destructive influence of women” (39).

Due in large part to the economic prosperity and suburbanization of the American family in the postwar era, masculine domesticity became elemental in re-establishing the patriarch’s place within the family (LaRossa, 1997; Marsh, 1988). Masculine domesticity did not require “an equal sharing of all household duties,” but it was “a model of behavior in which fathers agreed to take on increased responsibility for some of the day-

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 1 for Joseph Pleck’s (1987) four stages of fatherhood.

<sup>11</sup> Masculine domesticity was not a new concept in the postwar era; it had previously underscored the birth of modern-day nuclear familialism within middle-class families who came to prominence during the Progressive Era (1890s-1920s).

to-day tasks of bringing up children” (Marsh, 1988, 166). Most importantly, fathers would “take a significantly greater interest in the details of running the household and caring for the children than” previous generations of fathers (Marsh, 1988, 166). In the decade that followed the end of World War II, masculine domesticity helped stave off a growing “male panic” generated in large part from the bureaucratic corporate culture that subsumed the White, middle-class economy of the 1950s (Ehrenreich, 1983). The “gray flannel” man, defenseless against the unnatural monotony of bureaucracy, reasserted his masculinity through his duties as head-of-household and role model to his children. To that end, masculine domesticity not only provided an escape from corporate submission, but also affirmed what would become the foundation of nuclear family ideology. Fathers, once again, anchored their masculine identities to their success as fathers, and, according to sociologist Michael S. Kimmel (2006), “fathers were indispensable to the adequate development of their sons, to the provision for the family, and [eventually to] the health of the nation” (149).

Both the father-as-breadwinner and father-as-sex role model phases of the “culture of fatherhood” reinforced a long established gender hierarchy within familial relations, and soon adherence to patriarchal authority and nuclear family structure became a demarcation of the middle-class ethos (Harwood, 1997). Moreover, each dominant construction of fatherhood attempted to reaffirm the inherent power of the patriarch within the domestic space, incorporating caregiving practices as a part of, rather than a challenge to, hegemonic masculinity (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Doucet, 2006). According to sociologist Andrea Doucet (2006), “fathers are both determined to distance themselves from the feminine but are also, in practice, radically revising masculine

care and ultimately our understanding of masculinities” (237). The conflation of masculine stoicism and feminine affection is pragmatically useful in order to reaffirm a patriarchal domesticity. However, as LaRossa (1988) argued, the “culture of fatherhood” changes “in response to the shifts in the conduct of motherhood” (452). Thus, women’s greater participation in the workforce in the 1960s and 1970s, along with the commencement of second-wave feminism, spurred further changes within the domestic space. The budding acknowledgement of inequality between the sexes at the time – both politically and culturally – only added to the growing discourse of anxiety in the conceptualization of masculinity. This so-called “crisis in masculinity” continues to affect the tenuous relationship of men to the domestic space as they struggle to find their place among the emergent “real or imagined ‘feminization’ developing within the workplace, public spheres, and/or domestic relationships” (Gilbert, 2005, 3). With women venturing out of the domestic sphere, fathers had to negotiate a more involved, or “maternal,” approach to parenting: “revealing emotion, demonstrating their love and affection openly and participating in embodied caring activities with young children” (Lupton & Barclay, 1997, 19). Consequently, a new discourse of fatherhood began to take shape – Pleck’s (1987) emerging fourth phase of the “New Father.” Pioneered during the late 1960s and heavily influenced by previous notions of a more involved paternal figure, the “New Father” was just as “nurturing and interested in young children” as he was “engaged in paid work” (Lupton & Barclay, 1997, 14).

### *Revitalizing Fatherhood*

As with previous incarnations of the “new” father, the nurturing father ideal was in constant contention with the more naturalized masculine conception of the remote and

dispassionate patriarch.<sup>12</sup> Now, men had to readjust to “new ideals of fatherhood,” by which “a father [was] expected to be caring, sensitive, and emotionally available to his children, rather than being a mere ‘breadwinner’” (Singleton & Maher, 2004). While women sought to balance work and career, men had to become more than “compliant [domestic] helpers” but competent and active participants in parenting (Singleton & Maher, 2004). However, the new discourse of participative fatherhood remained underscored by a masculine anxiety tied to the “socio-economic upheaval and shifting patterns of gender relations” of the late twentieth century (Osgerby, 2001, 195). Attempts to reinvent masculine domesticity in the late 1960s – particularly within the middle class – were thus ridiculed and framed as “maternal fatherhood” (Gavanas, 2004). The fallout of this turmoil within the “culture of fatherhood,” resulted in two contradictory directions of fatherhood up until the early 1990s: “good” dads versus “bad” dads (Furstenberg, 1988). “Good” dads willingly became more involved with day-to-day childcare, and displays of masculine domesticity helped to “reinscribe significant aspects of patriarchal privilege with the domestic space” (Vavrus, 2002, 352). Representations of the participative father or stay-at-home dad (i.e., “Mr. Mom”) in film and television – such as *Mr. Mom* (1983) – were particularly valuable in challenging hegemonic norms in domestic gender roles while, at the same time, rebuilding confidence in the patriarch as head-of-household.

On the other hand, “bad” dads were men who found it difficult to return to “domestic life after more than a century of fathers having moved in the opposite direction” – hence, the rise in fatherlessness since the 1960s (Popenoe, 1999, 19).

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<sup>12</sup> According to social anthropologist Anna Gavanas (2004), “although marketed as ‘new,’ the defining characteristics and dilemmas of responsible fatherhood promotion can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century” (6).

Sociologist David Popenoe (1999) noted that fatherlessness became prevalent as troubled fathers “essentially abandoned their children via divorce and out-of-wedlock births, leaving the care of children solely up to women in single-parent families, which dramatically increased from nine percent in 1960 to 27 percent [in the mid-1990s]” (19). Concern regarding the new “deadbeat dad” once again highlighted “the implicit equation of responsible fatherhood with successful provisioning or bread-winning” (Lamb, 2000, 25).

By the 1990s, political and religious conservatives proselytized about the disturbing link between fatherlessness, along with single motherhood, the crisis in masculinity, and declining marriage rates, with the general breakdown of “the family.” Consequently a new social movement began to take shape: The Fatherhood Responsibility Movement. Distressed by the marginalization of fathers in families and increased father absence, conservatives took up the mantle of improving fatherhood and reaffirming its crucial place in the household in much of the family values rhetoric (Gavanas, 2004). As noted earlier, mediated representations of fatherhood and fatherlessness became particularly relevant to this emerging movement after Vice President Dan Quayle’s 1994 speech castigating *Murphy Brown* for promoting the marginalization of fathers (Horn, 2002). In the end, this crisis in the “culture of fatherhood” exacerbated the suggestion of a larger belief that the family was under siege (Chambers, 2001, 4).

According to media scholar Deborah Chambers (2001), “Fatherhood [was] being singled out as the crucial part of the family under threat. Its absence delegitimiz[e]d the family” (4). The threatened dissolution of the family spurred a number of interest groups

in support of fathers, all of which sought to redefine masculine domesticity and advocated reestablishing specific “manly” areas of parenting (Gavanas, 2004). For social anthropologist Anna Gavanas (2004), men in the movement were simultaneously trying to masculinize domesticity and domesticate masculinity (6). Men sought to revitalize the strength of the paternal figure within the family by remaking the image of *paterfamilias* as one more adept at and sensitive to the responsibilities of childcare. Three basic assumptions comprised the core of the movement: “1) responsible and committed fatherhood ought to be a norm of masculinity; 2) fathers are different from mothers in important ways;<sup>13</sup> and 3) the father-child bond is important to the healthy development of children” (Horn, 1999, 8). Organizations like the National Fatherhood Initiative, the National Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization, and the Promise Keepers, helped to “inspire men to be better husbands and fathers” and advanced the idea that “fathers matter to the well-being of children and that society experiments with father absence at its peril” (Horn, 1999, 8).

Galvanized by the rhetoric of the impending implosion of the family, a new kind of masculine domesticity began to emerge in the late 1990s – classified, once more, as the “New Father” (Gavanas, 2004).<sup>14</sup> Again, fatherhood became refocused on more involved men taking up their place within the domestic space and the day-to-day duties of child rearing. Ironically, this twenty-first century fatherhood suggests, “that the intimate

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<sup>13</sup> Referring here to socio-psychological differences in demeanor and emotional reactions, child rearing practices, and gender role socialization.

<sup>14</sup> Although Pleck (1987) classifies fatherhood after 1965 as “New Fatherhood,” the rhetoric itself became more colloquial in the late 1990s. Still, “New” fatherhood is a problematic label as “its commonsense meaning of ‘recent,’ refers to anything that is going on in the present” (Dermott, 2008, 23). Hence, the use of the term “new” intimates that the social characteristics of fatherhood require “continual re-evaluation and is composed of a mixed bag of behaviors... behaviors which do not necessarily present a comprehensible whole” (Dermott, 2008, 23). Moreover, as sociologist Esther Dermott (2008) contends, “new” also indicates a dichotomy with the old (or “traditional”) father, which, itself, is only a collection of hegemonic masculine ideals during a specific period of time.



care of young children should be at the heart of men's claim to fatherhood" (Burgess, 1997, 23). In the decade prior to the Fatherhood Responsibility Movement, fathers were "generally seen as 'nice to have around' and as a source of economic support, but [were] not understood as contributing much that [was] particularly unique or irreplaceable to the well-being of their children" (Horn, 2000, 40). This "new" father, or "new man," exhibited an "increased emotional sensitivity," which represented a "degree of feminization" of the traditional masculine ideal, and acknowledged "the validity of nurturing" (Tincknell, 2005, 56).

Though it remains unclear today whether or not we are in the midst of a sea change in the "culture of fatherhood," it is obvious, as Burgess (1997) notes, "that the 'nature' of fathering is not fixed and inevitable, but characterized by flexibility and adaptation" (101). As a social construction, fatherhood is "regularly redesigned to accommodate or promote social change" (Burgess, 1997, 219). Moreover, this evolution of fatherhood has consistently been represented in various media over the years, from political newspaper comics to family sitcoms. Here the discussion turns specifically to the manner in which television has embodied the "culture of fatherhood" from the 1950s to the present. Of note is the transition that television depictions have undergone from the authoritarian patriarch to the sensitive and involved dad, paying particular attention to the way masculine domesticity has adapted to or been appropriated by ongoing debate concerning notions of what constitutes a "good" or ideal father. Since the 1990s, the "family-in-decline" discourse has sparked a growing interest in the portrayal of the family on television, giving special consideration to the examination of fatherhood and its presumed affect on familial relationships, family values, and the negotiation of masculine

domesticity and stereotypical masculinity. On television the twenty-first century father inhabits a more complicated reflection of masculinity than the patriarchs of postwar era television (Gavanas, 2004). Furthermore, the increase in television programs centered on the “dilemmas of fatherhood and in the significance of family relationships for men suggests that fathering [has] become widely recognized as a central component in contemporary discourses of masculinity” (Tincknell, 2005, 65). The televised struggles of fatherhood, presented either through humorous incompetence or dramatic determination, continue the century-long debate as to the characteristics of masculine domesticity and the esteem to which it should be held in contemporary households (Tincknell, 2005). To that end, the following section traces the portrayals of fatherhood from the bumbling dads of the early working-class sitcoms and the nurturing patriarchs of the suburban comedies to the eccentricities of the versatile “New Father” who remains a complex menagerie of cultural ideals and conventions of masculine domesticity.

### **The Evolution of Patriarchy Will Be Televised**

Televsual representations of the family patriarch have promoted particular ideals as appropriately masculine, including traits that typically express aggressiveness and strength and condemn those that are deemed classically feminine (Hanke, 1992; Scharrer, 2001a; Vavrus, 2002). Early television consciously depicted fatherhood in opposition to motherhood (Hanke, 1992), though not always in a position of dominance. During the late 1940s and early 1950s ethnic and working-class comedies, such as *The Goldbergs* (1949-1952) and *I Remember Mama* (1949-1956), emphasized the wise and patient mother who often solved the problems of her children as compared to her ineffectual or bumbling husband (Brooks, 2005; Leibman, 1995). However, by the mid-1950s the

suburban domestic comedies started to enact a role reversal in maternal dominance and would further bring the middle-class nuclear family ethos to prominence (May, 1999).

Whereas the ethnic situation comedy focused on the strength of the mother to protect the familial status quo, domestic comedies and melodramas emphasized a “paternal-filial affection to the near or total exclusion of the mother figure” (Leibman, 1995, 27). For media scholar Bill Osgerby (2001), “the domesticated male was [now] enshrined in new, family oriented pastimes and practices” and the father-as-disciplinarian was “pretty well replaced by the father who’s pal and participator” (68). Historian David Halberstam (1993) wrote that television dads’ like Ozzie Nelson, Robert Anderson, and Ward Cleaver only trouble came from the occasional floundering in domestic duties around the house, but were otherwise the picture of hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, according to television scholar Mary Beth Haralovich (1992), shows such as *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) were praised for their reversal of the “weak-willed, predicament-inclined” American father and “the mother as iron-fisted ruler of the nest” prevalent in the early ethnic comedies (115). Instead, these suburban sitcoms realigned conservative familial gender roles, depicting distinct spaces for women and men within the home.

Though in theory the postwar family sitcoms adhered to “separate spheres” ideology, in practice, these programs rarely showed the father at work (Leibman, 1995). Consequently, fathers were constantly available and presided over the inner-workings of their families all while enforcing patriarchal ideology and middle-class values (Leibman, 1995). Most of the time this domestication of masculinity appeared to be an easy transition, but humor was used as a method of relief when tensions arose from the

patriarch asserting his authority within the female-dominated domestic space. Still, the postwar family patriarch on television encompassed a more meaningful and insightful masculinity, one that emphasized men who were “nurturing, caring, and devoted to their children. They could always find the time to listen to their children’s problems, to help with homework, or to ferry them around their suburban neighborhoods – partly because their jobs were so unimportant in the overall depiction of their lives” (Kimmel, 2006, 163). Although much of the depiction of fathers on television in the 1950s and early 1960s was what columnist Bernice Kanner (2002) referred to as “fictive propaganda,”<sup>15</sup> overall these sitcoms reinforced “the absolute centrality of the father to the functioning of the family” (Reed, 2003).

#### *A Time for Paternal Adjustment*

The social and cultural turbulence of the 1970’s was reflected on television through a number of workplace sitcoms (e.g., *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, 1970-1977), and “relevancy” comedies (e.g., *All in the Family*, 1971-1979; *Maude*, 1972-1978) that tested the strength of the nuclear family so prominent in the previous decade. Men were once again tasked as the authority figure, but this time without the veneration that had been bestowed upon their earlier counterparts (Kimmel, 2006). As sociologist Michael S. Kimmel (2006) notes, “the domestic patriarch of the 1950s and early 60s had virtually disappeared, replaced by the working-class blowhard...or bossy ignoramus...[as] middle-class masculinity had become the butt of humor” (191). Like in early working-class sitcoms such as *The Trouble with Father* (1950-1955), *The Life of Riley* (1953-1958), and

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<sup>15</sup> Kanner (2002) argues that postwar television sitcoms were less than authentic representations of familial experience during the era, particularly concerning the availability and involvement of men in the domestic space. Moreover, television did not take into account the growing social liberation of women both within the domestic space and later in the workforce.

*The Great Gildersleeve* (1955-1956), fatherhood was sidelined by either the dominance of the matriarch or his own ineptitude and unwillingness to socially adjust with the times. Although content analysis reveals that during the 1960s non-nuclear families on television were twice as likely to be depicted as headed by a father than a mother when depicting a single-parent family (Skill & Robinson, 1994), by the 1970s, “mother-daughter relationships predominated in American sitcoms” as seen in *One Day at a Time* (1975-1984) (Walters, 1992, 227). According to sociologist Ella Taylor (1989b), on television the “majority of series with domestic settings now featured troubled, fractured or ‘reconstituted’ families” (19-20). These series “echoed an anxiety about the erosion of domestic life that began to punctuate the rhetoric of politicians, policymakers, social scientists and therapists in the early ’70s” (Taylor, 1989b, 20). Domestic life was no longer the routinized ideal of the postwar era, but a complex interplay of gender relations and masculine anxiety (Taylor, 1989b). However, at the same time, television tried to counteract this anxiety with nostalgic family series such as *The Waltons* (1972-1981), *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-1983), and *Happy Days* (1974-1984), as a reminder of a simpler, more pastoral era of “family.” These series not only tried to re-establish the role of the father as authoritarian breadwinner, but also infused him with the more emotional qualities of the emerging “new father.”

By the 1980s, television series continued to blend the “sensitive New Age guy” with the domestic patriarch of its golden years (Kimmel, 2006). Whereas early televisual depictions of fatherhood in ethnic, working-class sitcoms could be characterized as the diminution of fatherhood – fathers were seen as incompetent at parenthood – late 1980s and 1990s programming used more egalitarian approaches to familial behavior (LaRossa

et al., 2001). The “new father” archetype represented a man who participated fully in the responsibilities of childcare, thus challenging many of the notions of traditional masculinity. This reliance on a more participative father can be seen in late 1980s dramas such as *thirtysomething* (1987-91), which showed fathers particularly interested in day-to-day child rearing (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Morman & Floyd, 2002). Sitcoms in the 1980s were less concerned about establishing the patriarch as head of household than they were emphasizing his masculine domesticity. Series such as *Family Ties* (1982-1989), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), and *Growing Pains* (1985-92) all featured dual-career couples with an equal investment in child rearing and domestic duties. Another emerging – or returning – phenomenon was the increase in single-father series such as *Silver Spoons* (1982-1986), *Who’s the Boss* (1984-92), *My Two Dads* (1987-90), and *Full House* (1987-95). The single-dad series centered on the “difficulties in being a single father but also the nurturing qualities a man could exhibit if he were to find himself in such a situation” (Lupton & Barclay, 1997, 64). Although it is entertaining to witness the “spectacle of a grown man taking on the duties of caring for a child,” which “is amusing in its incongruity,” consequently, “fatherhood is portrayed as potentially rewarding but also problematic” (Lupton & Barclay, 1997, 69, 66). Hence, masculine domesticity is once again appropriated as a defining characteristic of good fatherhood.

At the same time, however, prime time soap operas (e.g., *Dallas*, 1978-91; *Dynasty*, 1981-89; *Falcon Crest*, 1981-90) were staunchly dismissive of masculine domesticity. In her book *Hard Bodies*, Susan Jeffords (1994) describes how male anxiety brought about by numerous social, political, and economic changes from the late 1960s to the early 1980s led to a nostalgic return to the stoic patriarchs of the 1950s. Due in large

part to what was deemed a masculine backlash during the 1970s, film and television began to produce in vast quantities hard-bodied heroes (film) and ambitious familial patriarchs (TV). The conservative agenda perpetuated by the Reagan administration reveled in masculine archetypes and articulated a restoration of resolutely stereotypical familial roles and values (Jeffords, 1994, 13). However, in the midst of more political upheaval in the early 1990s, television began to re-produce themes of “dual or ambivalent masculinities” (Jeffords, 1994, 95). Here, traditional masculine traits are downplayed in favor of representations of more expressive family men. Thus, this shift back to a domestic masculinity assisted the “renewed emphasis on men’s involvement in child-rearing” (Morman & Floyd, 2002, p. 399).

### *The Mock-Macho Father*

Despite changes in the “culture of fatherhood” to accommodate more familial participation and paternal responsibilities, fathers are still expected to act as the provider for the family, thereby reinforcing patriarchal ideology. For example, televisual representations of the stay-at-home dad during the late 1990s often challenged the more stereotypical portrayals of fatherhood. However, this “Mr. Mom” construction used a number of gender strategies to “reinscribe traditional aspects of manliness on fathers” (Vavrus, 2002, 358). Therefore, while deflecting attention away from more feminine-coded domestic activities, sitcom fathers were valorized for adapting to domesticity in their own “manly” way. In the end, despite a concerted push toward the depiction of a more current, highly evolved and participative father figure, mediated portrayals of fatherhood still show a heavy reliance on the domineering family breadwinner archetype—particularly in white, middle-class family sitcoms and dramas.

Within the last two decades, television has opted to portray elements of the “new father,” but has only done so by co-opting them within the dominant hegemonic discourse. For example, a number of television sitcoms such as *Married... With Children* (1987-1997), *Coach* (1990-97), *Home Improvement* (1991-99), and *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005), parodied elements of hegemonic masculinity while reaffirming traditional patriarchal ideology (Hanke, 1998, Scharrer, 2001b). Media scholars Robert Hanke (1998) and Erica Scharrer (2001b) both labeled these series the “mock-macho” sitcom, whereby fathers were portrayed as clueless and oblivious about their true lack of power within the household. With boundaries between essentialist male and female spheres becoming more permeable after second wave feminism, the “mock-macho” sitcom expresses a deep-seated masculine anxiety, particularly as more sitcom fathers have been made to look incompetent and the butt of the joke (Scharrer, 2001b). According to Hanke (1998), parody “is deployed to address white, middle class, middle-aged men’s anxieties about a feminized ideal for manhood they may not want to live up to, as well as changes in work and family life that continue to dissolve separate gender spheres” (76).

While men making fun of their own stereotypical attributes seems to invoke resistance towards patriarchal ideology, Hanke (1998) argues, “Playing off masculine stereotypes and playing upon the classification of men as ‘sexist’ is one of the discursive strategies through which these series reiterate and recuperate hegemonic masculinity” (77). In the mock-macho sitcom, men are reflexive about their maladaptive strategies for dealing with domestic responsibilities and deny any ability or desire to change their attitudes and behavior; yet, simultaneously, men want to preserve their place within the



home (Hanke, 1998). For example, the sitcom *Home Improvement* shows participative father Tim Taylor (Tim Allen) constantly trying to reassert his male authority in both the home and at work. However, his efforts often fail and Tim comes off as a buffoon. But he is still able to secure his place in the home by valorizing the “joys of domestic manhood” and mocking “a more sensitive norm for masculinity” (Hanke, 1998, 79-80). Even though the “mock-macho” sitcom makes a mockery of stereotypical masculine tropes and machismo attitudes, “these comic narratives simultaneously present men as objects of laughter and as subjects moving between ‘old’ and ‘new’” fatherhood” (Hanke, 1998, 76). Thus, the “mock-macho” sitcom “constructs a place in the home where the ‘new man’ can be installed without contradicting the ‘old man’” (Hanke, 1998, 84).

### *Cyclical Paternalism*

Despite the rise in television series focusing on fatherhood since the 1990s, this saturation of patriarchal imagery does not accurately reflect paternal behavior (Burgess, 1997, 2). As previously discussed, the “culture of fatherhood” has a “cyclical nature of shifts in cultural prescriptions for fathers,” with the most recent being “a shift away from the authoritarian, emotionally detached father...toward the involved, nurturant father” (Morman & Floyd, 2002, 395). Much like the cultural mythology of motherhood whereby media imagery perpetuates a romantic, idealized vision of maternal behavior, paternal images in the new millennium rehabilitate the centrality of fatherhood to “the family,” particularly in conservative family values rhetoric. The continued opposition between the bumbling or absent father and the dad who is both loving and competent speaks to the complex relationship between fatherhood and masculine domesticity.

Next, the chapter offers an analysis of recent “guy-coms,” examining how these series engage with the “new father” archetype to both rehabilitate fatherhood and reconcile its complex relationship with “fatherlessness” and hegemonic masculinity. The chapter then concludes with an investigation of the “missing mother” trend on television. While the “missing mother” thematic is not a new phenomenon, it does call into question how these programs relate to the supposed “crisis in masculinity,” feminist backlash, and the construction of masculine domesticity. Here, The WB’s *Everwood* was specifically chosen as a case study because the absent mother is both central to the series’ narrative and the impetus for the patriarch’s attempt to revitalize his strained relationship with his children. In the end, by co-opting masculine domesticity the depictions of twenty-first century fatherhood artfully blend the male struggle to assert his authority within the domestic space and establish a more sensitive masculinity as beneficial to fatherhood.

### **Paternal Domestic Crisis in “Guy-Coms”**

The genre most fully engaged in articulating the discourse of fatherhood and masculine domesticity is what Timothy Havens (2007) referred to as the “guy-com.” Havens suggests that the popularity of the “guy-com” grew out of the phenomenal success of CBS’s *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005) and its nuclear family dynamic. However, elements of the guy-com are recognizable in a number of sitcoms since the 1960s, including *My Three Sons* (1960-1972), *Family Affair* (1966-1971), *Silver Spoons* (1982-1986), and *My Two Dads* (1987-1990) that do not necessarily feature a nuclear family. The “guy-com” adopts many of the characteristics of the “mock-macho” sitcom whereby it plays off of stereotypes of hegemonic, “macho” masculinity and frequently makes the paternal figure look incompetent. However, this particular style of

sitcom also showcases fathers displaying acts of juvenile masculinity, which are inevitably ridiculed and co-opted in order to reassert hegemonic masculinity. As Havens notes, recent sitcoms are centered on the experiences of the male lead who “work[s] in occupations that demand physical rather than intellectual acumen,” and is typically “self-centered, irresponsible, and casually sexist, prone to disrupting domestic harmony with [his] stubbornness.” As “guy-coms” are predominantly set within the home, the tension between hegemonic masculinity and masculine domesticity is often resolved through a short-lived reconciliation on the part of the patriarch in which he expresses conscious awareness of his immaturity, thereby endearing him to both his domestic relations and the audience.

Unlike the patriarchs of early domestic sitcoms, the guy-coms humorously depict fathers in constant domestic crisis typically stemming from his inability to reconcile his perception and performance of hegemonic masculinity “with the [contemporary] demands of family and marriage” (Havens, 2007). Domestic guy-coms such as *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *My Wife & Kids* (2001-2005), *According to Jim* (2001-2009), *Still Standing* (2002-2006), *George Lopez* (2002-2007), *Two and a Half Men* (2003-), and *Gary Unmarried* (2008-2010), all feature men with a boyish bravado and willful attitude that serves them well in a male-coded workplace – for example, a sport writer, manager of an airplane parts factory, trucking company owner, and commercial painter – but only leads to their potential failure in the home, particularly compared to their female counterparts. Popular culture commentator Jennifer Reed (2003) traces the generic trajectory of the guy-com – what she labeled the new domestic sitcom – and how it has responded to cultural shifts in domestic gender roles. Reed (2003) argues that these

beleaguered husbands “besieged by domestic life” are a symptom of a masculine panic and “resentment over advances in feminist politics.” Hence, guy-coms are focused on the troubling domestication of men and the resulting attempts to reassert a gender hierarchy within the domestic space where the patriarch’s significance had previously been diminished. Moreover, the “excessive immaturity” that Havens (2007) discusses, “offers male viewers a position of dominant specularly, where they can identify with the lead character’s attitudes, while distancing themselves from his more egregious character defects.”

The “guy-com” follows a fairly consistent narrative structure with the father presented with a domestic situation that he ultimately fumbles because it runs counter to his self-proclaimed “manly” ideals. When his schemes to perform a workaround fail because he refuses to compromise, the patriarch suffers numerous put-downs from his wife and friends who try to help him see the error of his ways. However, after the patriarch admits to a semi-reformed schema, in the end, it is apparent that his macho – and, more often than not, sexist – attitude and behavior is, in fact, acceptable and even warranted when he is able to resolve the situation on his own. The ridicule men endure in the guy-com for their reliance on hegemonic masculine tropes and macho posturing is eventually deflected in favor of reasserting the patriarch as a domesticated entity. For example, Bill Miller (Mark Addy) on *Still Standing* is often flippant about parenthood, preferring to concede the child rearing to his wife while he enjoys a beer on the couch. Bill’s efforts to connect with his kids often go awry and his wisdom questioned, often causing a role reversal between father and children. He balks at his son’s intelligence and general nerdy predilection for what he deems as non-masculine activities such as

cheerleading, reading *Vogue*, and baton twirling. And yet, despite Bill's tactless comments regarding his wife and children, his fidelity to his family and their happiness supersedes the lazy and incompetent fatherhood he performs. Thus, in acknowledging and making male stereotypes comical, the guy-com uses this discursive strategy to "reiterate and recuperate hegemonic masculinity" (Hanke, 1998, 77).

In reaffirming male dominance in the domestic setting, the guy-com utilizes the incongruent paradigms of hegemonic masculinity – namely, a constructed ideal of the stoic, sometimes misogynist, domineering breadwinner – and masculine domesticity to further complicate patriarchy, whereby men can embody the "new father" model without suppressing his macho-man aspirations (Walsh, Fürsich, & Jefferson, 2008). Instead of challenging the distant breadwinning paterfamilias in favor of the more emotional, participative "new father," these boorish and incompetent guy-com patriarchs incorporate masculine domesticity into a new masculine ideal (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Doucet, 2006). The fathers in guy-coms are not "Mr. Mom," have not mastered most domestic caregiving duties, and still maintain the prototypical division of gender roles in the household (Doucet, 2006; Plantin, Sven-Axel, & Kearney, 2003) Yet, at the same time that the guy-com depicts fathers struggling to preserve a sense of power in a maternal-oriented domestic space, it also humorously reconfigures domesticity to make it more conducive to stereotypical expressions of manhood. As the following analysis shows, it does this by centering the narrative on two contrasting masculinities (the inept dad vs. the hypermasculine father) and utilizing blatant sexism to discursively contain female control within the domestic space.

### *The Inept Dad vs. The Hypermasculine Father*

Although the guy-com does offer instances of “new fatherhood” whereby men are more participative in child rearing and particular household duties, these are, more often than not, strategic attempts to feature “the struggles of fatherhood as a form of humorous incompetence” (Tincknell, 2005, 68). Thus, the guy-com does not necessarily mock fatherhood, per se, but replaces the benevolent patriarchs so often presented in domestic sitcoms of the 1950’s and 1960’s (e.g., *Father Knows Best*) with a new kind of “family man” (Chaudhry, 2006). In lieu of the benevolent patriarch, the guy-com father integrates the inept dad and the hypermasculine father in order to reassert conventional notions of patriarchy and masculinity, while also compensating for a turn towards masculine domesticity within the “culture of fatherhood.” Hypermasculinity is an exaggerated construction of what it means to be “manly” (Scharrer, 2001a). According to Erica Scharrer (2005), “hypermasculine males exhibit extreme and exaggerated forms of masculinity, virility, and physicality, as well as a tendency toward disrespect for women and the trivializing of romantic and sexual relationships” (354). In the guy-com, men “do outlandish, sexist, incompetent, and stupid things that are based on their traditional ideals of masculinity,” but are eventually rewarded because despite jokes made at their expense, “they never have to change” (Walsh, Fürsich, & Jefferson, 2008, 131). Consequently, the mocking of these fathers’ attempts to prove their manhood within the domestic space inherently reinforces traditional gender roles to the benefit of the family (Walsh, Fürsich, & Jefferson, 2008).

Unlike the ridicule that turns fathers into objects of derision, which is a mainstay of the animated sitcom *The Simpsons*, humor in the guy-com is used to criticize male

chauvinism in order to reveal the sensitive guy underneath the macho posturing (Nathanson & Young, 2001). For example, in *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Ray Barone struggles to assert his paternal authority but is constantly beset by his overworked, underappreciated wife; intrusive, manipulative mother; and domineering, sarcastic father. Ray overcompensates for his domestic impotence by repeatedly performing stereotypical male tropes – here, the lazy, stubborn oaf or macho, sex-deprived husband; however, his family often mercilessly mocks his displays of masculinity. In “The Checkbook” (2/2/1998), Ray boasts that he can easily take over the family finances from his wife Debra, but after six weeks he has bungled the checkbook so badly that he has bounced numerous checks and the electric company is about to shut off the power. Instead of admitting his failure, Ray creates a fake checkbook to impress Debra. The illusion only creates further problems for Ray when he is forced to seek out a loan from his brother to cover household expenses – though he implies it’s because Debra has a shopping problem – in order to keep up the ruse. A series of misunderstandings eventually force Ray to unwillingly admit his incompetence to Debra. Though a good provider and father, Ray Barone is not the stoic and authoritative father of yesteryear – represented in the series by his own father, but Frank Barone, too, is nothing like the benevolent patriarchs of past sitcoms. Even though Ray performs a different kind of masculinity than his father, neither he nor his father “neatly fits within traditional notions of masculinity” (Hatfield, 2010, 531). In the end, the guy-com’s mocking of the “new father” archetype *and* the hypermasculine male, works to alleviate the uncertainty men/fathers continue to experience in the home.

It is not simply that the guy-com highlights the incompetence of fathers, but the way in which it utilizes the humorous ineptitude of these dads to rehabilitate fatherhood more generally. The fear that participative fatherhood implies a more non-hegemonic masculinity is effectively played against the desire to overemphasize a problematic hypermasculinity. For example, the nebbish and neurotic Alan Harper (Jon Cryer) on *Two and a Half Men* (CBS) is frequently ridiculed for participating in domestic labor and trying to emotionally connect with his teenage son, Jake (Angus T. Jones). Divorced and “a human catalogue of insecurities,” Alan is a stark contrast to his successful playboy brother, Charlie (Charlie Sheen), who leads a hedonistic life full of booze and bimbos – a consummate “man’s man” (Shales, 2003). Nearly destitute after his divorce, Alan moves into Charlie’s Malibu beach house with Jake in tow on designated weekends. Comedic circumstances arise when Alan and Charlie challenge each other’s masculine dominance, thereby interrogating their respective shortcomings (McEachern, 1994). Series such as *Home Improvement*, *According to Jim*, and *Gary Unmarried* also contrast a macho male with an unhappy, non-hegemonic counterpart, which reinforces conventional masculinity, while, at the same time, calls attention to the problematic domestication of men.

Hailed as “*The Odd Couple* with a kid” by co-star Charlie Sheen,<sup>16</sup> *Two and a Half Men* examines fatherhood and the construction of masculinity, peppered with sexual innuendo and constant macho ridicule. Charlie Harper epitomizes the hypermasculine male, and his juvenile antics and sexist behavior does not exemplify conventional “fatherly” behavior. Still, Charlie is often rewarded for his display of extreme hypermasculine behavior, particularly when he is called upon to offer insight on Alan’s

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in an interview with *Variety*’s Jon Weisman (2007).



relationship with his ex-wife and son, Jake's struggle through adolescence, and Alan's naïve efforts to recuperate his male power after he loses all of the markers of masculinity (e.g., his home, wealth, and sexual prowess). Over the course of the series' nine seasons Alan attempts to perform hegemonic masculinity, which only leads to many women taking advantage of his selfless naiveté. Alan earns frequent mocking guffaws from Charlie when his emotional insecurities and more feminine traits land him in awkward situations like dodging his controlling ex-wife whom he owes alimony when he feels obligated to financially support his much younger girlfriend (who plies him with sex) ("The Spit-Covered Cobbler"). While Charlie easily manages multiple conquests and lies his way out of sticky situations, Alan fails to be the master of his own life. According to Kimmel (1994), "the hegemonic definition of manhood is a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power" (125). Thus, Alan's failure to embrace conventional masculinity – which on the series is attributed to his excitable and emotional personality and engagement in "new father" tropes – results in his lack of dominance within Charlie's home, which prioritizes a "childlike fantasy of manhood" (Chaudhry, 2006). By all accounts, Alan has "devolved" into a "less respected position" in the domestic space (Linder, 2005, 70), while Charlie "reinscribes patriarchal constellations" that empower men in light of attempts to domesticate them (Walsh, Fürsich, & Jefferson, 2008, 125).

Similarly, on *According to Jim* (ABC), Jim (Jim Belushi) tries "to keep a firm hold on his manhood" in spite of his domestication by constantly reaffirming his manliness (Gelman, 2006). During the series' eight-year run, Jim's wife Cheryl (Courtney Thorne-Smith) constantly reprimands him for refusing to compromise his male desires and his infantile attempts to resolve domestic child rearing challenges and

housework duties. By invoking his masculinity at every turn, Jim essentially absolves himself of his failings within the traditionally matricentric domestic space in which his wife is far more adept. The mocking within this particular guy-com “reinforces Jim and Cheryl’s traditional gender roles,” as Jim never truly submits to his domestication, relentlessly challenging his wife’s domestic authority (Walsh, Fürsich, & Jefferson, 2008, 130). In multiple instances, Jim fails to complete tasks Cheryl assigns him, particularly watching over their children (“The Bad Word,” “Cheryl’s Day Off,” “Slumber Party,” “Cheryl Goes to Florida”) or attending to his health (“Cheryl’s Old Flame,” “Under Pressure,” “About a Girl”). Jim is also faced with occasions where he must choose between spending time with his family or indulging in more “manly” activities such as going bowling instead of attending Thanksgiving dinner (“The Turkey Bowl”) or a surprise party (“No Surprises”); meeting up with blues legend Bo Diddley instead of caring for his sick wife (“Bo Diddley”); bidding for sports memorabilia instead of shopping for a new dryer (“The Helmet”); and watching a boxing match instead of spending a romantic evening with his wife (“The Effort”). Notably, whenever Jim tries to defy Cheryl’s domestic authority, it is Cheryl who usually submits to Jim’s direction and acknowledges her own problematic behavior and choices. For example, in “The Importance of Being Jim” (10/1/2002), Cheryl and Jim argue about Jim’s selfishness and to teach him a lesson Cheryl hides his new digital camera – the object of the couple’s dissention. However, when their son starts to take his first steps, the camera cannot be found and the moment is lost. Thus, Cheryl realizes her actions not only failed to change Jim’s behavior, but they also ruined a momentous occasion for the family. Hence, Jim’s

catalogue of domestic failures, refusal to engage in masculine domesticity, and natural patriarchal ideology, actually facilitates his marital and parental success.

Moreover, the display of hypermasculine traits in the guy-com is reflective of the challenges of modern-day masculinity. As constructions of masculinity continue to shift, men tend to fall back on stereotypical tropes of manliness and mock those that fail to exemplify this discourse. As with previous incarnations of the guy-com, specifically *Home Improvement*, *According to Jim* often suggests a male frustration with women by frequently exposing their ignorance on various “masculine” topics and general incompetence within traditional male domains in order to differentiate men from women (Klumas & Marchant, 1994). For example, in “Cars and Chicks” (10/8/02), Jim questions Cheryl’s ability to buy a new car, claiming she would be distracted with more girly things like mirrors and cup-holders. Cheryl proves Jim’s theory when she ends up buying a lemon. Another episode, “The Flannelsexual” (1/3/07), has Jim refusing to attend a co-ed baby shower because it isn’t “manly.” In subsequent episodes, particularly those that concern his young son, Kyle, Jim is adamant that Kyle display appropriate marks of manliness. In “Dressed to Kill Me” (10/26/04), Jim is desperate that Kyle not dress up as Cinderella for Halloween, and in “The Punch” (1/3/07), Jim tries to alleviate Cheryl’s feminine influence on Kyle by teaching him self-defense. In fact, as the series progressed, Jim becomes so overly aggressive in his disparagement of women and their proper place, that one episode specifically centers on the hallucinatory effects of Jim insulting God for creating women and he is granted permission to try and do better (“Jim Almighty,” 1/1/08).

Overall, the guy-com ridicules fathers who submit to domesticity without consciously attempting to reframe the gendered power dynamics to yield to their male dominance. As an executive producer, Jim Belushi was reportedly “adamant that his character not be feminized and his wife not wear the pants” (Richmond, 2005). *According to Jim* offers the idyllic nuclear family life without depriving the family patriarch of his manhood. Similarly, *Two and a Half Men*’s humor arises from the disparity between the two brothers, each navigating the expectations of masculine domesticity with the stereotyped certainties of masculinity. Both Alan and Charlie are trying to modify their respective non-hegemonic and hypermasculine behavior, though neither is truly successful. This lends itself well to the complexities that still surround “new fatherhood” and the continued prevalence of hegemonic masculinity on television.

#### *Paternalism and Blatant Sexism*

Blatant sexism is another primary feature of the hypermasculine narratives of guy-coms like *Two and a Half Men* and *According to Jim*. The guy-com patronizes aspects of “new fatherhood” by calling out their attachment to the maternal in lieu of the benevolent, breadwinning patriarch of traditional domestic sitcoms. Now, domestic relationships between a father and his family are based on how women feel superior by infantilizing men, and how this subsequently helps men relate better to (and act like) their young children. Although most popular culture texts are subtle when it comes to explorations of class-ism, racism, or sexism, blatant sexism overtly emphasizes “the belief that men are entitled to protect their dominant role because of the inferiority of women” (Johnson, 2007, 171). According to media scholar Ann Johnson (2007), “this chauvinism takes many forms,” including the “constant sexual objectification of women,”

“attacks on powerful or iconic women,” and the “dismissal of women’s demands concerning things like shared parenting and housework responsibilities” (171-172). In the guy-com, women are portrayed as over-bearing and constantly harping on their husbands or sons. Although women are often “physically and intellectually superior to their husbands” or boyfriends, they bear the brunt of the blame for rendering men commitment-phobic, sexist, and neurotic (Walsh, Fürsich, & Jefferson, 2008, 123). Hence, the blatant sexism within the guy-com becomes a mechanism for the narrative to preserve the overall male dominance within the home in light of his domestication.

From the debut of *Two and a Half Men*, Charlie’s playboy lifestyle enhances his relationship with his nephew as he offers advice on girls, dating, and shoring up Jake’s adolescent manhood (see “We Called it Mr. Pinky,” “Just Once with Aunt Sophie”). Unlike Alan, whom his ex-wife Judith calls “the most rigid, inflexible, obsessive, anal-retentive man I’ve ever met,” Charlie is a carefree bachelor whose self-description is: “I make a lot of money for doing very little work. I sleep with beautiful women who don’t ask about my feelings” (“Pilot,” 9/23/03). Despite his best efforts to get Alan to move out of his beach house, Charlie often utilizes his brother and nephew’s presence in his efforts to pick up women and furthering his non-committal agenda (see “Pilot,” “Merry Thanksgiving,” “No Sniffing, No Wowing,” and “That Voodoo That I Do Do”). Attempts to reform Charlie, rarely meet a successful end – monogamous relationships get too serious (“Aunt Myra Doesn’t Pee a Lot,” “Help Daddy Find His Toenail,” “Pinocchio’s Mouth”), engagements fail (“That Pistol-Packin’ Hermaphrodite,” “Aye, Aye, Captain”), and efforts to remain sober don’t last very long (“The Devil’s Lube,” “Sir Lancelot’s Litter Box,” “Three Girls and a Guy Named Bud”). However, despite his sexual bravado

and apathy towards women and life in general, the only thing that Charlie is not apathetic about is his growing acceptance of his brother and nephew's presence in his life (and home). In fact, in "That Pistol-Packin' Hermaphrodite" (5/22/06), Charlie actually chooses his unwelcome houseguests, that is, his family over Mia – the first girl Charlie was willing to marry – when she expects him to kick them out after the wedding. The sexual voracity of Charlie – and even Alan at times – along with numerous instances of the brothers' broad disregard for women, displays of blatant sexism, and masculine bonding help free the Harper men from a female-induced domestication (see "Something Salted and Twisted" or "That Special Tug"). Instead, they willfully fashion a patriarchal household from the amalgamation of the hypermasculine ideal with domesticated, participative fatherhood.

Similarly, *According to Jim* showcases the blatant sexism of the family patriarch to demonstrate paternal power to the detriment of the maternal figure. As noted earlier, *According to Jim* spends multiple episodes exploring Jim's unconcealed penchant for flaunting what he deems as acceptable masculinity. His macho-man attitude, fairly incongruent to the more liberated attitudes of his wife and subordinated masculinity of his best friend, Andy (Larry Joe Campbell), is usually mocked for its uncompromising posturing; yet, instead of the ridicule forcing him to modify his attitude and behavior, it merely prompts him to further challenge the egalitarian values of contemporary companionate domesticity. For example, in "The Errand" (9/23/03), Jim's ridiculed failure to *correctly* do the grocery shopping is far less significant than the rant he makes when he witnesses how husbands are "domesticated" by their wives at the store. In "The Flannelsexual" (1/3/07), Jim takes this same derision of masculine domesticity to the

airwaves, when on a talk show he discusses how men shouldn't let women feminize them. Although Jim does tend to his children, he, more often than not, manipulates his wife or other women into helping him by cleverly reverting to cultural tropes insisting that women make better caretakers of children (e.g., "Cheryl Goes to Florida"). In fact, when offered the chance to recreate women, Jim makes them act more masculine – more like him ("Jim Almighty"). Even when Cheryl convinces him that emotional sensitivity in a man would be a turn-on, she actually finds that Jim's sobbing after a movie is a serious turn-off ("A Crying Shame").

Despite the laughter Charlie or Jim earn from the audience for their macho behavior (or lack of it, in the case of Alan), the blatant sexism that underscores *Two and a Half Men* and *According to Jim* essentially "reinforce[s] male dominance to the point where viewers can find it normal and even humorous (Walsh, Fürsich, & Jefferson, 2008, 126). Ridicule from women about men's sexist attitudes also helps downplay the blatant sexism in these series, thereby rendering sexist comments as facetious. However, at the same time that the audience is laughing at displays of blatant sexism, the narrative overwhelmingly supports traditional patriarchy and, subsequently, conventional – or acceptable – masculine tropes.

In the end, the "alpha male" behavior of the male leads in guy-coms helps not only to secure their manhood, but also fortify their dominant position within a habitually matricentric domestic space. The guy-com navigates the murky ideological paradigms of "new fatherhood" in such a way that masculine domesticity becomes co-opted and eventually inherent to contemporary notions of twenty-first century masculinity. However, it is not simply the father's dominance within the family that portends the

success of the family, but his contribution to the family dynamic as a whole despite his desire to assert his relevance outside the confines of marriage and fatherhood. Therefore, at a time where masculinity and fatherhood can often run counter to each other and portend father failure and fatherlessness, the guy-com offers a new mediated format for returning fathers to the domestic space without forcing a painstaking revision of masculine identity.

### **Paternal Melodrama in “Missing Mother” Television Series**

Like the sitcom, contemporary domestic melodramas have also steadily begun to more overtly examine the domestication of men and the complexities of integrating “new fatherhood” with hegemonic masculine ideology. Importantly, instead of assessing paternal dominance within a nuclear family, a significant number of television series have opted to focus specifically on the trials of the paternal figure and his relationship with his child(ren) without the presence of a mother figure. These “missing mother” series – both sitcoms and dramas – were seemingly a direct result of nearly two decades of political rhetoric regarding the social consequences of fatherlessness and a supposed “crisis” in masculinity. Whereas previous incarnations of the “missing mother” series such as *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), *My Three Sons* (1960-1972), and *The Courtship of Eddie’s Father* (1969-1972) helped redefine the “traditional composition of the family” (Tincknell, 2005, 58), recent versions such as *Full House* (1987-95), *My Two Dads* (1987-1990), *Everwood* (2002-2006), and *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) each attempt to depict the ways in which fathers negotiate and subsume the maternal experience in the domestic space and forge a relationship with his children. Despite the continued general reification of the iconic fatherhood of the benevolent patriarch, the missing mother



television series explores the consequences of merging the stereotypical notions of masculinity with masculine domesticity – that is, constructing fathers who redeem their previous incompetent fatherhood by appropriating conventional maternal traits.

As noted earlier, the depiction of fathers on television has often cycled between domestic prominence (1960s, 1980s) and familial irrelevance (1950s, 1970s), very much coinciding with the acceptance of changing conceptions of femininity and masculinity. Therefore, the “popular media representations of white paternity from the late 1990s onwards,” particularly the missing mother series, is evidence of a concerted (rhetorical) effort for men to reclaim the home that had since grown unreceptive to patriarchal power (Chambers, 2001, 100). Deborah Chambers (2001) argues that the increase in “father films” and father-centered television programming in the late 1990s aspired to recuperate fathers back into the domestic space after a long absence (101). The rise of father-centered series followed several popular films between the late 1970s through the mid-1990s that featured men adapting to new constructions of masculinity and fatherhood such as *Kramer v. Kramer* (1979), *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), and *Jack and Sarah* (1995). These films depicted “the trope of personal redemption through fatherhood” thereby re-establishing “the position of father as patriarch” (Harwood, 1997, 183; 45). According to media scholar Sarah Harwood (1997), “responsibility for the failure of the family appears to have shifted from the mother, the historic vehicle for carrying the guilt of family failure [...] to the father” (69). This “father guilt” corresponded to the burgeoning “new man” archetype, whereby men were beginning to occupy “traditional feminine spaces such as the domestic arena and adopted ‘feminine’ nurturing, affective qualities” (Harwood, 1997, 103). Consequently, the

salvaging of the paternal presence in the domestic space actually generated familial crises, which could only be resolved by appropriating the characteristics of masculine domesticity while still reaffirming hegemonic masculinity.

Although early missing mother series such as *Bonanza* (1959-1973) or *My Three Sons* (1960-1972) rarely explored the emotional toll of the missing maternal figure, some did portray the ways in which men had to rearrange their previous lifestyle and adapt to parenting, such as *Bachelor Father* (1957-1962), *Family Affair* (1966-1971), and *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (1969-1972). The narrative of these latter series typically centered on navigating single-fatherhood while also remaining open to meeting potential female companions (i.e., dating possible mother figures). None of these early missing mother series explored the boundaries and complexities of masculinity to the same extent as more recent incarnations. In many ways, contemporary missing mother series are paternal melodramas – an illustration of the sanctity of the institution of fatherhood while also acknowledging a latent paternal crisis. As with the maternal melodrama before it, the paternal melodrama – here, the missing mother series – lends itself to investigating “working ideological contradictions in the family by exploring those tensions in the family, and between the family and a patriarchal society” (Chambers, 2001, 70). However, instead of merely reinforcing a gender hierarchy within the domestic space, the paternal melodrama reconciles the internal crisis of men actively pursuing domesticity and participative fatherhood.

Television families have typically been prominently characterized as *nuclear* families – or the intact, two-parent household. The nuclear family defines the “successful” or idyllic family, and dominates most series centered on family since the

1950s – nearly 63 percent (Moore, 1992). However, content analysis revealed that these “conventional” families steadily decreased between 1950 and 1990, and that “unconventional families” (e.g., single-parent households) were more likely to be headed by widowed fathers than single mothers (Moore, 1992). Even though there is very little convergence between census data and the portrayal of families on television, the most “glaring difference [is] the continu[ed] dominance of the single-father household on television” (Robinson & Skill, 2001, 143). James D. Robinson and Thomas Skill (2001) note that, “in the first five years of the 1990s, 23.1 percent of television families [were] headed by [a] single dad, whereas the 1995 census indicated that only 3.5 percent of all households were headed by a single father” (153). In fact, television had no less than 17 percent of its families headed by single fathers in every decade” since the 1960s (Robinson & Skill, 2001, 143). In contrast, the U.S. Census Bureau (1995) reported that in the mid-1990s, “mothers are heads of single households by nearly a 7 to 1 margin over fathers” (as cited in Robinson & Skill, 2001, 149). By 2000, real families headed by single fathers accounted for 18 percent of all single-parent families in the U.S. (Brown, 2000).

Evidence of the disparity between actual household dynamics and their respective televisual counterparts has not resulted in further investigation of images of single-father domesticity. Curiously, television studies has rarely acknowledged single fathers, giving preference to the implications inherent in the depictions of single motherhood (Deming, 1992; Dow, 1996; Press, 1991; Rabinovitz, 1999) or the political and cultural symbolism of dysfunctional nuclear families (Crotty, 1995; Douglas & Olson, 1995). Although the portrayal of more unconventional family structures (e.g., single-parent households,

divorced families, reconstituted families) has increased over the years – particularly since the 1970s – the representation of women remains a key staple of ideological research. Moreover, as sociologist Muriel Cantor (1990) argues, “[A]lthough it is not overtly stated, [single father] stories tend to be about role reversals,” whereby the family unit consists of a patriarch and a lower status counterpart (usually an extended family member or caregiver) (281). Thus, fathers or father figures did not have to tackle domestic duties traditionally reserved for mothers, such as housework or cooking, or bungle child rearing opportunities because of gender role boundaries. Single fathers are portrayed as emotionally available and happily domesticated; yet, still conform to conventional masculine tropes. More recently, however, the single fathers presented in the missing mother series are resolutely the primary caregiver, and face the challenges inherent in caring for children as well as assume responsibility for household chores. Furthermore, these single dads cannot easily execute the transition into the maternal role or flawlessly handle the more sentimental aspects of parenting. Sociologist Andrea Doucet (2006) asks whether “fathers as primary caregivers put masculinity on the line, or do they reconfigure that same *line* according to what is defined as masculine or feminine” (38)? Fathers in the missing mother series re-examine their place within the family by re-learning their role as the domestic entity responsible for raising children. In the end, by conceiving of masculine domesticity as an intricate component in constructing and stabilizing the familial unit in light of the mother’s absence, the missing mother series challenges the patriarchal imagery long expressed on television.

*Flawed Fatherhood and Missing Mothers on Everwood*

Debuting in fall 2002 on The WB, *Everwood* captured the experiences of a newly widowed father as he navigates the precarious relationship with his children and sets out to achieve “personal redemption through fatherhood” (Harwood, 1997, 183). Dr. Andy Brown (Treat Williams) is a world-renowned neurosurgeon whose professional success came at the heavy cost of sacrificing time with his family. So absorbed by the intricacies of his work and the subsequent acclaim it brought him, Andy neglects his wife, Julia (Brenda Strong) and children, teenaged Ephram (Gregory Smith) and nine-year-old Delia (Vivien Cardone), until his wife dies suddenly in a car accident. Reeling from his loss, Andy recalls an earlier offhanded conversation with his wife regarding what he should do if she ever died – move away from the bustle of New York City to the quiet hamlet of Everwood, Colorado. Set up in the new town, Andy is forced to confront his failures as a father and as an egotistical physician in order to fully realize his worth as man in his own eyes and in the eyes of the brooding Ephram. Andy’s abrupt personality change is only met with skepticism by Ephram, who masks his grief with open contempt for his long-absent father and devotedly cares for his sister all while struggling through adolescence in a small town. Throughout its four seasons, *Everwood* combined the quirky comedy of the inhabitants of pastoral Everwood with the melodrama of adolescence, but at its heart remained about the tenuous relationship between father and son.

The WB picked up *Everwood* as a “companion” for the already successful 7<sup>th</sup> *Heaven*, a conservative family drama already in its sixth season, and the critically-acclaimed *Gilmore Girls*, also about a single parent in a quirky small town. Unlike the other teen-oriented series on The WB, *Everwood*, 7<sup>th</sup> *Heaven*, and *Gilmore Girls* paid

equal attention to both the teens and their respective parents, often running parallel narratives in one episode. What made *Everwood* different, according to its creator, Greg Berlanti, was its particular focus on the father-child relationship, which he claimed had long been absent on television (Hamad, 2009). He told *Variety*, “I just wanted to write something that was a father-son story because I felt it was under-represented on television” (Levine, 2002). Media scholars Miranda Banks (2004) and Allison McCracken (2005) both indicate that *Everwood* was a part of The WB’s decision to make inroads in the male adolescent market – after success with teen girls – by utilizing the “teen male melodrama” or “boy-centered soap opera” (e.g., *Smallville*, 2001-2011; *One Tree Hill*, 2003-2012; *Jack & Bobby*, 2004-2005; and *Supernatural*, 2005-). Hailed as the *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) for boys and men (Speier, 2002), *Everwood* was “a little bit *Ben Casey*, a little bit *Northern Exposure*, [and] a little bit *Family Affair*” (Daniels & Littleton, 2007, 290). The series not only eloquently depicted the turbulent times of adolescence, but also the agonizing grief of an over-achieving physician trying to reconnect with his children. According to McCracken (2005), as a “boy soap,” *Everwood*’s “combination of seriality and an adolescent focus make for intense storylines which revolve around self discovery, the development of non-familial relationships, sexual exploration, and life lessons.” But it also rebuked classic family melodrama conventions by not overtly operating in favor of patriarchal “structure, guidance and authority” as maternal melodramas had in the past (Banks, 2004, 19). Instead, as Hamad (2009) argues, *Everwood* “showcased paternalized postfeminist masculinity” through its complicated rendering of Andy Brown as both a man and a father. The series

reinvigorated the father-child dynamic, while, at the same time, examined the cultural turn towards “masculine domesticity” and maternal absence within family dramas.

*Exploring the Intimacy of Fatherhood*

Contemporary missing mother series examine the intimacy of fatherhood by exploring the father-child relationship, which often reveals an underlying deficiency on the part of the father to competently tackle the tasks typically reserved for the maternal figure – namely, emotionally-intuitive child rearing and domestic responsibilities. Although the patriarch tries to move into the position of replacement mother, he is, in fact, poorly equipped to take on this role, and quickly discerns that only with the assistance of surrogate parents can he fully rectify his previous history of poor performance as a father. *Everwood* dealt with the politicization of fatherhood and fatherlessness of the 1990s and early 2000s in an abstract manner, depicting the consequences of paternal absence and the frustrating attempts to redeem paternal respect. Thus, the series created an introspective narrative of one father’s paternal crisis and his subsequent rehabilitation through masculine domesticity. Writer Nancy Franklin (2003) interprets the “missing mother” series as a more dramatic look at contemporary families than the “intact-family scenario” because “the children and the remaining parent are forced to come smack up against each other – they can no longer hide in the convenient bustle and hum of everyday family dysfunction.” The absence of the mother creates a scenario in which the patriarch is made vulnerable and acutely aware of his inadequacies (Franklin, 2003).

Andy’s wife (in flashback) and son repeatedly censure his familial absence and the way he subverted the needs of his family in favor of his extraordinary contribution to

the medical field. For every medical miracle he performed, Andy grew farther apart from his family – only to realize, too late, that he was now a virtual outsider in his own family. In flashbacks, Andy’s wife – though frustrated and irritated by his blasé attitude towards his family – is surprisingly steadfast to her husband, often excusing his absences in hopes that Andy’s relationship with his children isn’t irreparably damaged, particularly between father and son (see “Pilot,” “The Great Doctor Brown,” and “The Unveiling”). When Andy is finally forced to confront his relationship (or lack thereof) with Ephram, he finds that the teen holds deep resentments towards him and will consistently remark how much better off the family would be if Andy had been the one to die. Of course, this bitterness is often revealed when Andy is “feeling most vulnerable and inadequate,” leading to a rehashing of all of Andy’s egregious faults – his previous familial absence, his paternal failure, and, now, his desire to replace the idealized mother (Franklin, 2003).

#### *The Paternal Work-Life Balance*

The narrative of *Everwood* is centered on the rebirth of Dr. Andy Brown as a man and father. Although his children’s skeptical reactions deem his behavior to be new and unusual, the audience becomes acquainted with Andy as a quirky, extroverted medical genius who offers the small town of Everwood free medical care from a renovated train station. His presence in Everwood is met with the awe and trepidation that follows a celebrity, until his attitude and behavior become more eccentric and erratic for the hushed gossipers of Everwood. While outwardly a devoted dad and physician, it is revealed very quickly that Andy is desperately trying to reinvent himself and overcome the immeasurable grief of his wife’s death. Andy’s true self is exposed mostly through Ephram’s snide remarks and the employment of narrative flashbacks throughout the



series. Thus, Andy Brown's redemption for paternal failure is made even more complicated by his persistent need to prove himself to his kids, which usually backfires – and inconveniently in a public arena. For example, in “The Great Doctor Brown” (9/23/02), Andy's desire for the family to spend more quality time together – in the form of family dinners – is impeded by his aspiration to distribute free healthcare to all of Everwood, even in the form of the old-fashioned house call. While off caring for a sick family, Andy leaves Ephram and Delia to fend for themselves at a restaurant with no way to get home or even a key to the house. Andy's town rival, Dr. Harold Abbott (Tom Amandes), witnesses the kids' plight and remarks, “Ah, now look at this. What kind of a father leaves his children in a restaurant alone?” To make matters worse, Ephram is injured trying to break into the house and Delia has a disturbing nightmare due to the movie that Andy let her watch (against Ephram's warning). When an exhausted Andy finally returns home, he is met by a seething Ephram who yells at him about his pattern of favoring his work to his family: “You'll always be that guy. It doesn't matter if it's the Dudleys on Forest Lane or some rich lady on Park Avenue, they'll always come first. The only difference is, this time, Mom's not here to cover for you.”

Throughout much of *Everwood's* first season, Ephram, who is bent on forcing his father to admit his failure at every turn, constantly rebukes Andy's prototypical behavior of missing familial events for various medical crises. In the “Pilot” (9/16/02), when Ephram is asked what it's like having a famous father, he replies:

Oh. It's like this: You're eight years old. He misses your birthday party. You wanna cry about it but he's on TV that night for separating the heads of Siamese twins. You're ten. He's not there to see you in the school play. He is, however, in the *New York Times* for restoring the vision of a five-year-old kid. You know that prince you mentioned? I think he was my dad's excuse for missing my elementary

school graduation. You know you want to be mad at him. You wanna hate him. But you can't. He's saving lives.

From celebratory dinners to family vacations, Andy missed out on numerous opportunities to spend time with his family. His most egregious absence is failing to meet his wife in order to travel to one of Ephram's piano recitals the night she was killed. Ephram uses his father's faults as a trump card for both a manipulation tactic when Andy tries to reprimand his discourteous attitude, and as a critical example of Andy's poor excuse as a parent when he offers unwanted "fatherly" advice: "First you try to parent me, then you wanna be my buddy and you're not very good at either" ("Dear God," 10/14/02). In order to rectify his past, Andy will often overcompensate for his previous paternal transgressions by forcing his children to spend time with him, such as hiking to a wildlife reserve ("Dear God") and fly-fishing ("Turf Wars") with Ephram, or a daddy-daughter camping trip with Delia ("Family Dynamics") – all concluding with unplanned and humorous results. In the end, however, Andy's recompense comes not in enacting an idealized version of himself as a father, but in earning the paternal respect of his children.

Andy Brown's flight from neurosurgery, a site in which he excelled and could ultimately control, is a narrative device that follows him throughout his paternal journey in *Everwood*. His medical genius is often cited as an allowance for his more eccentric behavior and a pretense for his meddlesome ways. Andy constantly offers unwelcome, and usually liberal, advice against the conservative stalwarts of the Everwood community on a range of topics such as surrogacy ("Friendly Fire"), sex education ("The Kissing Bridge"), and medical marijuana ("Vegetative State"). However, all of Andy's bombastic bluster is suspended in favor of more traditionalist paternal values when it comes to his children. He disparages his friend and neighbor, Nina (Stephanie Niznik), when she

refuses to avert Delia's attention away from a *Penthouse* magazine she finds in Nina's home ("Episode 20"). In the same episode, Andy questions his resolve (and liberal attitudes) in helping a friend of Ephram's get an abortion. Although he is obviously protective of his children, Andy's extensive medical knowledge is never reconciled with his fear of parenting failure. He easily slips into the objective ego of a brilliant surgeon for others, but this same impartiality is lost in the panic of navigating his children's adolescence. Moreover, the control that Andy relies on for succeeding as a surgeon only seems to stifle his children's growth and further isolate him from becoming the parent he so desperately wants to be. In "Dear God" (10/14/02), Andy admits to Ephram that his attempt to control his familial rehabilitation stems from his paternal ignorance: "That same compulsion that people nurtured in me then, is what's making me...making me screw everything up now. For you, for Delia. These past few months I feel like, the only thing I've done right, is help a few strangers get better." While professionally he is ahead of the field, personally Andy Brown is a paternal failure. He isn't trained for the kind of fatherhood he has been unwillingly thrust into. Surprisingly, *Everwood's* second season flips Andy's weakness to his professional career when the town shuns him after losing a much-beloved patient. In the series' second season finale, "The Day is Done" (5/10/04), Andy reflects on his own growth as a father and doctor, realizing that confronting, and subsequently accepting, his failure was the only way to truly open his eyes to his worth as a father.

### *"Replacing" the Maternal Figure*

In order to rectify his past paternal transgressions and rehabilitate his familial presence, Andy Brown has had to frustratingly accept the demands of masculine

domesticity. The hardened surgeon becomes the bumbling domestic, responsible for the day-to-day upbringing of a pre-teen girl. As difficult as it can be to get through to the surly Ephram, Andy has an even greater struggle ahead with Delia whose want for a maternal figure underscores much of the daddy-daughter relationship. In “Episode 20” (5/5/03), Andy admits how confused and out of his depth he feels about raising a young girl: “And the amount I don’t know about cooking and tying hair ribbons and everything else that happens in a family’s daily life is nothing compared to what I don’t know about helping a girl become a woman.” Though the audience is witness to Andy’s struggle to attain some semblance of competence in “keeping house,” his success seems limited to managing a carry-out order, awkwardly organizing play-dates, and offering life lessons tinged with medical jargon. Andy’s initial attempts to replace his late-wife result in a series of embarrassing fatherly mishaps that are remedied through insight provided by the show’s surrogate mother figures – neighbor and single mother Nina; the brusque, brazenly honest grandmotherly Edna (Debra Mooney); and omniscient flashbacks of Andy’s wife, Julia.

Although his relationship with Delia is the most visible of Andy’s endeavors to replace the maternal figure, *Everwood* never depicts this as a plausible achievement. While *Everwood* humorously showcases the results of the domestication of Andy, such as his inability to cook, plan a sleepover, or pack lunches, the heart of the series centers on his burgeoning emotional connection with his children – what appears as a conscious effort to reincorporate the importance of masculine domesticity into the general familialist narrative of modern-day families. It is not that Andy must rescind his professional success in order to become the rehabilitated father he aspires to be, but that

he must upend his conventional notions of fatherhood and the stoic breadwinner to give precedence to the emotional sensitivity usually provided by the maternal figure. The necessity for masculine sensitivity in contemporary fatherhood, particularly in the single-father household, outweighs the hypermasculine persona enacted through career excellence in complex and demanding fields like medicine. As television critic Kate Aurthur (2004) describes:

The story of *Everwood* is Andy's education as a father: He was cold, absent and barely knew his children until his wife died. Since giving up his life in New York to move to Everwood, Andy has been learning to be a parent, but it isn't clear he's learned to be a good one. (AL8)

Andy's failure at fatherhood is not just a consequence of his earlier absence from the domestic space, but a deficient emotional connection with his family. Although family policy advisor Adrienne Burgess (1997) suggests that contemporary fatherhood patterns imply "that fathers can behave like mothers and still retain their gender identity," in actuality it is only a particular style of behavior (i.e., nurturing emotionality) that is to be emulated. In fact, over the course of *Everwood*'s four seasons, it is revealed that all of the surrogate mothers on the series are, in reality, flawed maternal figures who themselves struggle with an *ideal* motherhood – as noted below. Ultimately, despite Andy's vigorous attempts to transform himself as a parent, his continued dysfunction as a father is a consequence of his reliance on an idealized perspective of motherhood *and* fatherhood.

With Andy thrust into fatherhood – underscored by the physical absence of the maternal figure – he is forced to discover that familial perfection is highly overrated and improbable. But what does this mean in terms of fatherhood and enacting a modified version of masculine domesticity? Even though Andy struggles through much of the first season of *Everwood* in the shadow of his idealized wife, her flaws – along with those of

the other featured women on *Everwood* – eventually reassert Andy’s paternal authority and the significance of his relationship to his children. Once again, the maternal domestic authority is subverted and displaced in favor of re-establishing the importance of the patriarch within the domestic space. For example, Nina is depicted early on as Andy’s confidant who counsels him on parenting. Yet, despite her practicality and sage parenting advice to Andy *and* his children, her son, Sam, struggles with the absence of his father, leading him to act out socially and emotionally (“Vegetative State”). Another surrogate mother who bonds with Delia is Edna. Although she helps build Delia’s independence and acts as a sounding board for Andy, she too is a failed mother figure. It is revealed that Edna’s chilly relationship with her son (Dr. Abbott) is the result of prolonged absences from her young family while she pursued a life outside of Everwood as an Army nurse (“My Brother’s Keeper”). Consequently, Dr. Abbott grew closer to his father – the beloved town doctor – and struggles to live up to his legacy after his death, much to the displeasure of his mother.

Perhaps the most striking example of flawed motherhood is the revelation that Andy’s wife, Julia, committed adultery. In “The Unveiling” (2/24/03), before traveling back to New York for the unveiling of his mother’s tombstone, Ephram relives a particularly difficult time in the Brown’s marriage, leading him to believe that Andy cheated on his wife. After an intense argument, Ephram divulges his suspicions to Andy, who haltingly admits the truth to Ephram – it was actually his mother who had the affair. The revelation that his mother was not the person he believed her to be ultimately changes the hostile dynamic between father and son: “You know, I’ve been angry at you. I’ve been hating you for a long time now. And I was wrong. You never deserved to be

treated that way. Sorry.” His mother’s betrayal sends Ephram reeling, but Andy desperately tries to restore her credibility:

I failed you as a father for 15 years. I was never there for you or your mother. That’s why sometimes you feel like throwing me off a cliff and that’s why your mother did what she did. And I don’t blame either of you for it. You know, in the end it was me who ended up begging her for forgiveness. I told her that things would be different. That I would change. But I wouldn’t have. I might have been better for a while but then...

In the end, Ephram seems resolved to examining his family life with a new perspective, and in the episodes that follow, begins to see how similar he is to his father. He is more contemplative of Andy’s past and his decision to give up neurosurgery: “It’d be okay with me if you wanted to go back to that life, doing surgery all the time. I know we’d never see you but I get it now. I wouldn’t be angry with you. You’d be helping people, doing what you’re supposed to do” (“Home,” 5/19/03). Although the dynamic between Ephram and Andy remains strained, the loss of the idealized mother solidifies the emotional bond between father and son, and the relationship becomes less about rectifying the past and more about recuperating the father’s future place in the domestic space.

### *Competing Fathers Finding Common Ground*

In light of the rising concerns of fatherlessness in America and what Greg Berlanti (creator of *Everwood*) perceived as the “dearth of depictions of father-child relationships onscreen” (Hamad, 2009), *Everwood* clearly endeavors to engage with a variety of father figures. The series suggests that it is not merely about Andy Brown’s struggle to adapt to the complexities of fatherhood, but also to portray the general challenges inherent in fathers acclimating to re-entering the domestic space. With Andy

floundering at nearly every new “parenting” experience, his uncertainty is contrasted with other father figures on the series who seem to have a handle on “fathering.” But, in actuality, like the perceived idealized mothers on the show, these men are also revealed as increasingly flawed. Yet, Andy views each of these men – the uptight and respectable Dr. Harold Abbott, the laid-back and wise Irv Harper (John Beasley), and Ephram and Delia’s grandfather, the confident and beloved Dr. Jacob Hoffman (Mark Rydell) – as far superior and competent fathers to whom he must, but cannot, compete. This supposed competition, particularly between Dr. Abbott and Andy, eventually translates into a common struggle to merge stereotypical notions of masculinity with more emotive traits such as compassion, selflessness, and emotionality.

### *The Friendly Rivalry*

From the start, Dr. Andy Brown and Dr. Harold Abbott were engaged in a friendly competition, stemming from Andy opening up a rival (and *free*) clinic across the street from Harold’s long-standing family practice. They fought over parking spaces, patient care, and strategies for parenting their romantically-involved teenagers. Harold’s pompous attitude spurred several attempts at comeuppance at Andy’s expense, but Andy naively assumed that the antagonism between the two men was merely a demonstration of male friendship. More importantly, Andy used Harold as a role model and sounding board when trying to deal with Ephram’s sullen adolescence and attempts to manipulate his father. In “The Kissing Bridge” (10/7/02), Harold instructs Andy on how to handle his son skipping school:

**Harold:** Listen. I know you wanna be your son’s friend, but he doesn’t need a friend right now, he needs a parent.

**Andy:** How do you know what he wants?



**Harold:** He's fifteen, he's testing you. You are failing the test.

**Andy:** What am I supposed to do?

**Harold:** He cut class, you punish him. Take away his phone privileges, don't allow him to...pierce anything for the next six months but do something. Be his father.

The relationship remains unbalanced (in Harold's favor) for much of the first season, until Harold discovers the perfect relationship he has imagined with his children is much more fragile than he believed. Hence, the medical rivalry between Andy and Harold grows into a commiseration of two fathers over their parenting mishaps:

**Andy:** You were right about Ephram. I've got all the parenting techniques of a ficus.

**Harold:** I was trying to teach Bright how to ride a bike for the first time. I got so fed up with him I made him cry.

**Andy:** Yeah, but that was just one incident.

**Harold:** Are you kidding? Oh no. I made Bright cry all over again when I tried to teach him how to swim. And shave. Drive a car.

**Andy:** You think there's any limit to the number of times you can tell a kid you're sorry before he starts to realize you'll never get it right? ("Everwood Confidential," 2/17/03)

Surprisingly, Harold admits he had long admired Andy's talent for medicine, so much so that it made him feel inferior and resulted in his joining his father's small-town practice ("The Doctor is In"). Andy's incompetence as a father allowed Harold to achieve some small satisfaction that his idol was human. As these two men continue to meddle in each other's lives, their idiosyncratic friendship molds into a mutual support system as Andy's struggles become an opportunity for Harold to adopt a more compassionate manner in his own parenting style.

### *The Sage Absentee Father*

*Everwood* positions the elderly, African American Irv Harper as the astute and omniscient narrator of the series. A nomad, Irv's short stay in Everwood was extended

indefinitely when he met and quickly married the newly widowed Edna – causing quite the scandal amongst the townspeople. The marriage received equal condemnation for its swiftness and the fact that it (seemingly) was *Everwood*'s first inter-racial marriage. Unlike Andy Brown, Irv is a serene individual, taking in the offerings of Everwood with wondrous amazement; he even writes a bestselling book about “his” experiences in Everwood.<sup>17</sup> He is the polar opposite of Edna's brashness, Harold Abbott's neurotic stoicism, and Andy's paternal desperation. In both his role as a narrator and a supporting character, Irv assesses the actions of *Everwood*'s eccentric characters, provides expository information, and generally offers perceptive advice to the emotionally troubled he comes across. For example, Irv counsels Delia on her father's grief (“Pilot”), he tries to bridge the resentment between Andy and Ephram (“Fear Itself”), and he cautions Edna to make amends with her family before it is too late (“My Brother's Keeper”). Because he tends to stay in the shadows, Irv's back story is only offered in quick snippets, but it's clear that he is a discerning man with plenty of life experience to draw on.

It is only on rare occasion that Andy and Irv interact one-on-one, but it is obvious how much Andy respects Irv and his contributions to the town. However, in “Fear Itself” (5/12/03), Andy learns that Irv's sage advice regarding the strained relationship between father and son stems from Irv's own abandonment of his daughter. In the episode, Andy offers to travel with Irv (who recently had a heart attack) to his remote cabin. As a punishment, Andy forces a brooding Ephram to tag along. Irv takes the seething resentment between father and son in stride, noting to Andy: “I don't know if

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<sup>17</sup> In “Ghosts” (3/27/06), after the publication of Irv's novel, *A Mountain Town*, it is revealed that the story is actually centered on Andy's experience in Everwood.

this is the best place for a study hall, but, hey, it's like anything, you do the best you can. He'll appreciate it eventually." As Andy commiserates about Ephram, Irv reveals that he has a daughter who he doesn't talk with often since he divorced her mother. Later, when Andy finds out that Irv let Ephram take a boat out on the lake against his wishes, he is offended by Irv's pretense of parenting expertise. The tension mounts when Ephram doesn't return – he ends up knocked unconscious – and the two men have a row about their respective parenting skills. At the episode's conclusion, Irv actually saves Ephram and the two fathers resolve their differences, as Irv tells Andy: "It's easier to be a hero with other people's children." Even though Irv remained the shrewd counselor for the duration of *Everwood*, he, much like Andy before him, is forced to confront his own familial absence when he encounters his grown daughter, Cassie, in "Truth" (5/1/06). Through a series of mistaken assumptions, Cassie finally learns that her father willfully abandoned her and was an irresponsible father. It is only just prior to his death in the series that Irv re-establishes a paternal connection to Cassie, creating another instance of paternal rehabilitation on *Everwood*.

### *"Turf Wars"*

The two-part episode ("Turf Wars," 11/11/02; "Is There a Doctor in the House," 11/18/02) featuring Ephram and Delia's maternal grandparents, encapsulates Andy Brown's struggle with reconciling his past paternal transgressions and desperate desire to rehabilitate his position as patriarch by competing with other, more favorable, father figures. Dr. Jacob and Ruth Hoffman make a surprise visit to Everwood to "check-in" with their grandchildren after Andy's failure to keep in contact. Although the kids are extremely happy to see their grandparents, Andy can feel a battle brewing, stoked by

snide comments regarding his home and parenting techniques. For example, the Hoffmans have already established themselves in the home unbeknownst to Andy because the doors were unlocked (“must be safe here”); and when Andy asks Jacob, another world-class physician, to look at patients with him, he replies “Nope, I charge” – a dig at Andy’s bizarre decision to offer free healthcare. Throughout “Turf Wars” the grandparents undermine Andy’s authority, and despite his best efforts to rise above the tension, things come to a head when Andy learns that the Hoffmans have manipulated Ephram into deciding to return to New York to live with them. With his resolve broken, Andy despondently tries to take back control of his family, only to be immobilized by the constant castigations made towards his failure as a father.

At the heart of these two episodes is Andy’s consternation towards himself as a father and what becomes an overt competition between Andy and Jacob. As Andy notes to Edna:

You don’t know my father in-law. Not only is he one of New York’s premiere transplant surgeons, he’s also the best dad who ever lived. He somehow managed to perform over 150 liver transplants a year, and never miss a single birthday party. Oh, and did I mention? My children worship him. (“Turf Wars”)

Later, as Jacob and Ephram’s relationship is rekindled, the relationship between father and son becomes further estranged leading to a colossal public quarrel during a birthday party (“Is There a Doctor in the House”). When Ephram and Jacob announce that Ephram will be returning to New York, Andy is adamant that, as his father, he must make the final decision – much to Ephram’s chagrin. But Jacob is quick to bitterly point out Andy’s poor parenting experience:

**Jacob:** You don't know what the hell you're doing, do you?...He has no friends. He has no life. And you’re just gonna sit back and watch ‘cause you don’t wanna force him? What the hell kind of parenting is that?

**Andy:** Look, I didn't ask for your criticism, Jacob, and I happen to be doing the best I can.

**Jacob:** It's not good enough.

**Andy:** Well, that's a hell of an assumption after 24 hours.

**Jacob:** Hey, don't play offender with me. You never took an interest with that boy and it's finally catching up with you. Thank God, my daughter's not alive to...

**Andy:** [interrupting] No, she's not alive. And it hasn't been particularly easy in her absence. So I'd appreciate just a little bit of understanding from you. Particularly since you are a guest in *my* house.

**Jacob:** You know you're right. This hasn't been easy on any of us. But I'll be damned if I'm gonna let you undo everything my daughter did for those children. ("Turf Wars")

The fight over Ephram's "well-being" is continued until Jacob's final dig sends Andy reeling and unable to figure out what is truly best for his son:

**Jacob:** He's spent more time with me in the last 15 years than he has with you. You think a couple of months in the mountains makes up for missing most of his life? It doesn't. You and I are surgeons, Andy, right? We know how it's done. You locate the problem, you go in, you excise it. You move on. What you don't do is ignore it and pretend that it'll go away. ("Turf Wars")

Andy realizes that he can't compete with Jacob and heavily weighs how to best serve the emotional needs of his son. As he tells Nina, "I want what's right for Ephram. And I'm beginning to think that I'm not it" ("Is There a Doctor in the House?").

As the episode progresses, it is apparent that the rivalry stems not from a fight over Ephram's best interests, but the grief of two passionate fathers. Ephram becomes the stopgap for Julia's absence for both men. After a crisis causes the three generations of men to work together, Jacob ultimately admits that Andy has become the rehabilitated father he desired. Consequently, Ephram heeds Andy's desperate loving entreaty to remain in Everwood. In the end, Andy's selflessness and emotionality are rewarded and, once again, he finds a common ground with a father figure of whom he held in high esteem.

### *Domestic Masculinity and Single Fatherhood*

Over the course of the four seasons of *Everwood*, Andy Brown battled his own fear of failed paternalism and challenged the conservative tropes of domestic masculinity. Andy transitioned from the remote breadwinner to a thoroughly involved fatherhood, but his real success came from his acceptance of his imperfections. According to family relations scholar Anna Dienhart (1998), the discourse of modern fatherhood suggests that flawed fatherhood is a more authentic model for contemporary fathers:

[C]hildren will benefit from models of men as fathers who do not always have to be in control; do not always have the final solution to every problem; can be in error and learn from others; know comfort in expressions of love, anger, joy, fear, and sadness; and recognize that the expression of a range of feelings does not detract from masculinity. (Dienhart, 1998, 8)

Thus, Andy Brown's repeated attempts to put forth an idealized version of fatherhood are not only met with unimpressed rankle from his children, but also mirror the flawed perpetuation of the uncomplicated domestication of men. Andy never becomes the *ideal* father, but he does aptly employ "tough love mixed with sensitivity" to navigate the complexities of single parenthood, resulting in a newfound perspective on paternal behavior and need (Speier, 2002).

*Everwood* puts a particular emphasis on the father-son dynamic as a metaphor for the growing disillusionment with the traditional tropes of conservative paternalism. Instead, as creator Greg Berlanti notes, "Here are two men who are very different, but who very much need each other" (Frutkin, 2002). *Everwood* questions the previous dimensions of fatherhood that did not incorporate compassion, selflessness, and emotionality – all traits traditionally regarded as maternal qualities. While Andy initially tries to replace the maternal figure, it is apparent that the strength of his paternal authority

is a favorable consequence to her absence. In the realization that single parenthood has saddled Andy with not only the day-to-day child rearing elements of parenting, but also the emotional responsibility of preparing children for adulthood, Andy accepts a more pragmatic view of domestication. Therefore, masculine domesticity in *Everwood* is not Andy's triumph of cooking an edible meal or successfully organizing a pre-teen sleepover. Instead, it is the general conversion of Andy's previous familial absence into an affectionate and happily involved paternal entity in the domestic space. By calling Andy's parenting abilities into question at every turn, *Everwood* offers a stronger and more complex vision of twenty-first century fatherhood.

### **Fatherhood for a New Era**

According to media scholar Bill Osgerby (2001), in 1954, *Life* magazine "announced the arrival of 'the new American domesticated male,'" with the magazine "averring that 'probably not since the pioneer days...have men been so personally involved in their homes'" (67-68). But the postwar renaissance of the paternal figure was an imagined condition and essentially increased paternal anxiety within the domestic space. While television depicted an idealized version of what fatherhood could be – the emotionally resilient, authoritative breadwinner – in actuality, it was subverted by growing tensions between masculine domesticity and conventional masculine tropes. The cyclical nature of the "culture of fatherhood" affirms that this growing crisis of fatherhood will continue to be revisited time and time again. For Chambers (2001), "contemporary representations of the family are shaped by a perceived crisis in masculinity that is located in, yet recuperated by, a new emphasis on fatherhood" (99). The most recent constructions of masculine domesticity on television have purposefully

cultivated a general re-examination of masculinity and its intersection with fatherhood. Hence, as Hamad (2009) notes, in most television narratives, “nary a character can be found populating their respective diegeses who does not have a paternally inflected back story, or sub-plot centered upon their own situation and identity as a father (or both) built into the series’ arch-narrative at some point.” Although television’s burgeoning focus on men and fatherhood coincides with current cultural affirmations for a renewed interest in fatherhood, it is more importantly an opportunity to question the fetishization of postwar paternal masculine tropes and how they mesh with familialist ideology (Chaudhry, 2006).

Throughout my analysis of the contemporary depictions of fathers on television, I have tried to ascertain the strategies employed to reaffirm the patriarch’s authority in the domestic space after decades of marginalization from the home. “New Fatherhood” seeks to reconstruct the conventional and idealized paternal paradigm in favor of a more nurturing and active participation in child rearing and domestic tasks. But how are we to reconcile the ingrained tropes of paternalism with the aspirations for a more inclusive and egalitarian fatherhood? In the “guy-com,” a rewarding fatherhood is based on a compromise between non-hegemonic and hegemonic masculine conventions. Neither perspective is seen to triumph without the other, and yet, these series uncomfortably attempt to subvert female authority in order to restore men’s supposed proper place as head of the household. By using the domestic crisis of fatherhood for humorous results, the guy-com not only reasserts paternal authority, but also makes hypermasculinity acceptable in certain situations – most notably, as a coping device for the challenges of masculine domesticity. Thus, as sociologists Kimberly R. Walsh, Elfriede Fürsich, and Bonnie S. Jefferson (2008) argue, men can personify the “new father” archetype without



repressing their latent macho-man aspirations. On the other hand, the “missing mother” series acutely objects to the notion of an idealized paternal figure. Instead, it empowers and embraces men through his parenting failures, thereby acknowledging our culture’s faulty penchant for ignoring the difficulties of familial evolution. Through the exploration of the intimacy of paternal relationships and the underlying assumption of fatherhood domestic deficiency, these series position masculine domesticity as an opportunity to revitalize the significance of men to the family dynamic and thereby reaffirm familialist ideology even within non-nuclear families.

In the end, the renewed focus on fathers’ relationships with their children and the promotion of participative fatherhood as the ideal continues to affect the reinvention of fatherhood on television. The paternal anxieties stemming from the transition within the “culture of fatherhood” actually highlight a presumed inadequacy of twenty-first century fatherhood. However, the focus on interpretations and depictions of masculine domesticity becomes the means to affirm or disavow a particular version of masculinity. While the imagined television reality may not be an exact replica of actual family life, there are plausible positive consequences for the current re-imagining of fatherhood. Fathers on television express more egalitarian views of domestic responsibility, are more expressive towards their children, and, in some cases, are more likely to be the principal provider of care for their children (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). This new paradigm for contemporary fatherhood on television has the potential to encourage a change in real paternal attitudes and behavior. It also constitutes a rehabilitated image of previous paternal dysfunction on television and sustains the political and cultural rhetoric of the importance of fatherhood to familial stability and familialism.

Even though the “mythologies” of fatherhood may appear to be evolving, they are still greatly influenced by familialist ideology and the desire to perform the “right” kind of family. The series analyzed here still recognize and aim to preserve the symbolic power of “the family,” despite the fact that each of the families depicted are resolutely “in crisis.” These particular articulations of fatherhood and family address how conservative familial values are reinforced and contextualized within the larger socio-cultural circumstances of twenty-first century fatherhood. In the next chapter, the analysis turns towards familial creation in teen-oriented television programming, particularly teen pregnancy narratives, and the ways in which familialism drives teens’ deep-seated longing for an idealized family. If father-centered series attempt to revitalize the patriarchal familial norm, these teen series employ young parents’ struggles and naiveté to reassert the significance and dominance of the nuclear family.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PATHOLOGIZING THE FAMILY IN TEEN PREGNANCY NARRATIVES

Social commentators and academics alike called it the “*Juno* effect.” Following the financially successful and critically acclaimed debut of the quirky independent dramedy in 2007, the film about a teen’s unplanned pregnancy was suddenly thrust into the center of a media firestorm.<sup>18</sup> While it was not the only film about an unplanned pregnancy that year (both *Knocked Up* and *Waitress* also premiered in 2007), it was the only one to feature the problem in a heart-warming melodrama, though one underscored by the comedic sarcasm of its teen heroine. *Juno* was not without its religious and political critics, as debates regarding where to place the film on the pro-life/pro-choice spectrum ensued. Some saw the success of the film as evidence that adults should be increasingly concerned about teens’ cavalier attitudes toward sex and the media’s problematic glamorization of teen pregnancy. *Juno* inaugurated what appeared to be a teen pregnancy domino effect. In December 2007, Nickelodeon tween idol Jamie Lynn Spears announced in *OK! Magazine* that she was pregnant at 16. The following June, 18 teen girls from Gloucester, Massachusetts – all under the age of 16 – revealed that they were pregnant after making a so-called “pregnancy pact.”<sup>19</sup> The confusion and disbelief

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<sup>18</sup> *Juno* earned an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay and was also nominated for Best Picture, Best Actress (for Ellen Page) and Best Director. It was also the highest-grossing of the five Best Picture nominees with a total worldwide gross of over \$231 million (Stevens, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> The “pregnancy pact” of the Gloucester teens has since been proved to be unfounded and a product of media sensationalism (Males, 2010).

about the girls in Gloucester sparked cries of an “epidemic” of teen pregnancy all connected (if only remotely) with *Juno*, and led many to condemn media images *and* celebrities for making teen pregnancy attractive to teens – particularly after the disclosure of Bristol Palin’s pregnancy during the 2008 presidential election (Anderson, 2008; Jayson, 2008; Luscombe, 2008).<sup>20</sup>

In a day and age in which teen pregnancy has returned to the forefront of conservative ire, it is surprising to see how this social issue has been employed as an entertaining narrative device for film and television. Teen-oriented media, in particular, have seized an opportunity to examine what constitutes a family and the social institutions that have developed to shore up the cultural capital of “the family.” Although teen melodramas, from both film and television, often utilize teen pregnancy as a potential disruptor to the status quo of an already overwhelmed and hormonal group of adolescents, it is, more often than not, an assumed consequence of reckless teenaged behavior exhibited by a supporting character with little to no impact on the featured protagonists. For decades, teen pregnancy – or, at least, the threat of it – was the catalyst to thwarting familial harmony, resulting not in raising the child, but either the adoption or abortion of the baby. And when the latter was actually considered the only option in certain media depictions, a campy fall the down the stairs – as demonstrated time and time again in soapy daytime melodramas – or the timely spontaneous miscarriage would befall the teen heroine, thereby resulting in the restoration of the family unit without the conservative backlash.

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<sup>20</sup> These articles site the work of Jane Brown, Ph.D. and the Teen Media Project, a group that conducted a study looking at the images seen by girls ages 12 to 14. Her findings have shown that heavy sexual media diets are linked to teens having sexual relations at an early age, as well as media texts proving to be powerful sex educators (i.e., a “super” peer) (see Brown et al., 2005; 2006 for more information).

Prior to the 1990s, teen pregnancy was an issue saved for “problem films” and documentaries such as *It Happens* (1972), *I’m 17, I’m Pregnant...And I Don’t Know What to Do* (1973), *And Baby Makes Two* (1978), *Lucy: A Teenage Pregnancy* (1980), and *I Think I’m Having a Baby* (1982). After-school specials on television also examined teen pregnancy with episodes such as “Schoolboy Father” (ABC, 1980), “Teen Father” (ABC, 1986), and “Babies Having Babies” (CBS, 1986), but these hardly, if ever, treated it as more than a symptom of misguided teenage sexual exploration. A mistake, nonetheless, that could easily be rectified by authority figures outside of the family (e.g., a social worker, a teacher, or pastor, etc.), who would pressure teens to marry or, preferably, put the child up for adoption. Since the popularization of teen-oriented programming, beginning with Fox’s *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000) through the heyday of The WB (1998-2006) and the emergence and success of ABC Family, teen pregnancy has become more than the standard issue-of-the-week dramatic device. In fact, television has taken more dramatic license in exploring the complexity surrounding a third option for teenage mothers *and* fathers – keeping the baby or “parenting.”

According to sociologist Joanna Gregson (2009), “While fewer teenagers became pregnant in the 1990s and early 2000s, those who did get pregnant were increasingly likely to carry the child to term and raise it themselves” (1). Consequently, television series within the past few years have examined the real consequences of teen pregnancy, particularly for teen mothers, such as *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-), *16 and Pregnant* (2009-), and its spin-off series *Teen Mom* (2009-). While these shows have been praised for making teen pregnancy more visible and sparking more nuanced conversations between parents and teens (Bates, 2010; Kliff, 2008; Pfeiffer, 2009;

Wetzstein, 2010), they have also been scrutinized for glamorizing teen pregnancy (Benfer, 2010; Doyle, 2010).

Although teen pregnancy is not a new social problem – it was declared an “epidemic” in the late 1960s until the mid-1970s – it has been given greater visibility from politicians, religious figures, and the media since the early 1990s. The Guttmacher Institute – a nonprofit research group – reports that “the rate of teen childbearing in the United States has fallen steeply since the late 1950s, from an all time high of 96 births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19 in 1957” (Boonstra, 2002) to an all time low of 39 in 2009 (Stobbe, 2010). According to *Pediatrics* (1999), teenage birth rates in the United States were highest in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s, teen birth rates decreased sharply until 1986. Social policy scholars Saul D. Hoffman and Rebecca A. Maynard (2008) state that, “Between 1986 and 1991, the teen birth rate rose five years in a row, reversing three decades of steady decline and rising nearly 25 percent in the process” (4). After 1991, teen pregnancies declined once again and by 1996 “the teen birth rate was down 13 percent from its 1991 peak,” though at 54.7 births per 1,000 women was still high compared to the 51 births in 1985 (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008, 4; *Pediatrics*, 1999). Overall, there was a 36 percent drop in the teen pregnancy rate between 1990 and 2002, yet the U.S. has the highest teen pregnancy and birth rates – double that of any other industrialized nation (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008).

While the drop in teen pregnancy seemed to imply the apparent effectiveness of increased contraception education, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared that after declining steadily from 1991-2005, birth rates for 15- to 19-year olds increased significantly between 2005 and 2006 in 26 states. The number of births for this

age group rose 3 percent from 40.5 live births per 1,000 females to 42 births in 2006 — the largest increase in a single year since 1989-1990.<sup>21</sup> Taken as a whole, teen pregnancy rates have progressively declined since the 1960s despite the few periods of rising levels. However, even though data has pointed to a steady decline in teen birth rates since 2008 (Phillips, 2010), reports of an “epidemic” of teen pregnancy have continued to draw sensational headlines (Gregson, 2009; Luker, 1996). Commenting on the susceptibility of the American populace to media-induced panics, sociologist Constance Nathanson (1991) observed “Newspaper headlines, television screens, and magazine covers that bombard us with evidence of how frequently these norms [of sex before marriage and childbearing before adulthood] are violated” have given this problem “remarkable staying-power” (qtd. in Gregson, 2009, 1).

The social panic that accompanies teen pregnancy and its depictions is often underscored by a reversion to traditionalist views of marriage and parenthood and the potential for teenage parenthood – not pregnancy – to disrupt a carefully constructed, hegemonic image of “family.” According to Gregson (2009), “Teenage pregnancy and parenting have been construed as social problems because of the negative consequences we have come to associate with early childbearing,” mainly the “costs to teenage mothers, costs to the children of teenage mothers, and costs to the greater society” (2). For decades much of the gritty details of teen pregnancy and its end results were glossed over on television, particularly any discussion of contraception, the emotional impact of giving a child up for adoption, or the lasting effects of raising a child at a young age (Kliff, 2008). Moreover, the portrayals of teen pregnancy on television failed to convey

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<sup>21</sup> Martin, J.A., Hamilton, B.E., Sutton, P.D., Ventura, S.J., Menacker, F., Kirmeyer, S., and Mathews, T.J. (2009). Births: Final data for 2006. *National Vital Statistics Reports 2009*, 57(7).

some of the more troubling statistics regarding pregnancy among teens, particularly those concerning factors of race, class, and age; instead, opting to overwhelmingly depict teen mothers who were White, upwardly mobile, and unexpectedly pregnant by their teen boyfriends. In reality, statistics show that the most at-risk teens are Hispanic and African American girls (Hoffman, 2008) largely socially marginalized, poor, and impregnated by men over 20 years of age (Males, 2010; Villarosa, 1997). These racial and class disparities contributed to “a coded political narrative” spurring “efforts to prevent the epidemic from menacing middle-class (white) girls” (Males, 2010, 47). The continued presence of White, middle- or upper-middle class teen mothers in fictional television series may be the result of both the infrequency of minority portrayals more generally on television, and an endeavor to make the problem of teen pregnancy more visible.<sup>22</sup> But it undoubtedly represents an attempt to reaffirm and respond to the culturally politicized “crisis” in the (White) American family.

What is no doubt surprising about the recent rise in series centered on unplanned teen pregnancy and the ensuing consequences of a teen mother’s decision to “parent” her child, is the way in which these series re-imagine the idea of “family,” yet remain a mechanism for reconstituting the significance of the hegemonic nuclear family and its adherence to familialist ideology. On television, “family” is, and has nearly always been, correlated to the relationship between parent and child. But what happens when this relationship begins from the highly contested space of teen parenthood? For much of television history, teens’ inevitable adolescent mistakes that resulted from trying to attain maturity and independence were easily resolved within the family unit, emphasizing the

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<sup>22</sup> The NAACP’s 2008 report “Out of Focus, Out of Sync” found that minorities remain grossly underrepresented in every television genre except for reality programming (Braxton, 2009; Wright, 2008).



importance of the family as a collaborative and critical network of support through adolescence. More recently, however, the family exists on multiple levels with teens moving beyond their biological families to form so-called “surrogate families” constructed from both platonic and romantic connections they hold with peers. According to sociologist Naomi Rosh White (2002), a teen’s sense of self is invariably linked to “the social, emotional, and physical dimensions” they valorize when generating a domestic environment that they can sentimentalize as “home” (214). What happens when a teen’s conception of home – of family – is resolutely attached to the raising of their own child? Although it may seem on television that teens are ambivalent towards more conventional notions of family structure and values, in creating their own “families” they tend to reinforce familialist ideology and the hegemonic family by attempting to re-create a (modified) nuclear family. This chapter examines how contemporary television series that center on or feature a teen pregnancy engage with broader aspects of familial ideology than merely the consequences of teens’ sexual behaviors. Instead of focusing on teen pregnancy as an endpoint – will she or won’t she keep the baby – now, these depictions of teen pregnancy and the families that result highlight a new tradition of television families negotiating how to *be* a family. In other words, the pregnancy and the decision to parent, along with its financial and emotional costs, is a way of “documenting [the] ordinary struggles of young parenthood” (Benfer, 2010). These series transcend the righteous indignation and statistics in favor of narratives that explore how the creation of a family – along with the requisite values and social mores – remains a constant through adverse circumstances.

Writer Amy Benfer (2010) concludes that the popularity of MTV's *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* – both popular reality TV series that follow the stories of pregnant teenage girls in high school and the hardships they endure during pregnancy and raising their children, respectively – is driven by an obsession “with perfectionism in parenting.”<sup>23</sup> Even considering the more liberalized notions of sex and contraceptive use, the shifting companionate tenets of marriage, and the changing qualities of parenthood, the teens in these and other television series still express a highly stylized and conservative perception of “family,” which is particularly significant when they are clearly unable to reproduce the hegemonic nuclear family for themselves. Moreover, this familialism runs counter to the adolescent desire to exert individualism and independence outside of the familial space. No longer hidden away in shame, the visibility of teen pregnancy on television and the complications inherent in the decision of teens to parent or even place the child up for adoption offers a mediated glimpse of how teens construct and characterize what family means.

### **The Birth of “Teen” Television**

Although pregnant teens have been featured – mostly in supporting roles – in a variety of television genres ranging from family comedies (e.g., *Roseanne*) to dramatic procedurals (e.g., *Law and Order: SVU*; *Private Practice*), teen-oriented programming has shown the most extensive engagement with the complications that surround teen pregnancy and the complexities inherent in the decision to become a teen parent.

Television scholar Mary Celeste Kearney (2004) argues, “Teenagers had more prime-

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<sup>23</sup> *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* have been hugely successful for MTV, with *Teen Mom* “consistently number one in its time slot for the coveted 12-34 demographic” (Klein, 2010) and gave the network “its best summer ratings in three years” (Goldberg, 2010). *Teen Mom 2* delivered the strongest debut for the franchise with 3.6 million viewers (Talarico, 2011).

time representation between 1990 and 2000 than during the previous two decades combined,” likely resulting from “booms in both the American economy and the teen population” along with niche industrial trends and conglomeration (2279-80). After the proportion of the U.S. population under the age of 18 dropped from 36 percent in 1960 to 28 percent in 1980 (Osgerby, 2008), media scholar Valerie Wee (2008) reports that a “turnaround in teen population began in the mid-1990s” (46). The so-called Generation Y (or *echo-boom*) formed the largest teen market since their baby-boomer parents who had originated teen culture in the 1950s and 1960s (Wee, 2008). Moreover, the continued prolongation of adolescence through trends in education (e.g., graduate and professional schools) and the postponement of traditional rituals of adulthood, such as marriage and raising children, have only broadened the demographic range drawn to these types of programs (Kearney, 2004, 2281). In other words, “Teen TV” does not simply cater to the 12- to 19-year-old “chronological” teen viewer; instead, its programming constructs a youthful cultural sensibility within the entire industry coveted 12- to 34-year-old demographic (Kearney, 2007).<sup>24</sup> These programs – and sometimes entire networks like The WB or ABC Family – assemble what television scholar Jim Collins (2000) refers to as a “coalition audience,” whereby series have “interlocking appeals” to attract several different demographic segments (342). On the whole, teen-oriented series focus on a recurring set of themes broadly appealing to the experience of adolescents, often centering on “anxieties about love, sex, alienation, rebellion, impending adulthood, concerns over family relations and issues surrounding one’s place in the world” (Feasey, 2008, 47). But, importantly, by the early 2000s, “teen” series on The WB network, such

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<sup>24</sup> See Davis and Dickinson (2004), Moseley (2002), and Ross and Stein (2008) for further discussions on “Teen TV.”

as *Roswell* (1999-2002), *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), *Reba* (2001-2007), *Everwood* (2002-2006), and *One Tree Hill* (2003-2012) began to prominently feature stories centered on unplanned teen pregnancy.

### *Creating and Catering to the Teen Demographic*

The introduction of television in the 1950s coincided with the rise of the teenager and a commodity market devoted to teens as a new economic force. Taking its cues from the already established industries of radio and film, television catered to teens' interest in coming-of-age narratives and teenage rebellion – though like its cinematic counterpart, it rarely ventured outside a conservative and adult-approved vision of teen subcultures. This was mostly due to the fact that television programming was geared towards broad, heterogeneous audiences and not strictly defined for a teen-aged demographic. Since teens and adults were watching the same television shows, teen stories of this era had to appeal to youth and their elders (Kearney, 2004; Nichols & Good, 2004). Moreover, teens on television were highly caricatured as individuals hell-bent on rebelling against parental rules and avoiding responsibility (Aubrun & Grady, 2000). Psychologists Sharon L. Nichols and Thomas Good (2004) acknowledge that adults have held “pejorative perceptions” of teens since 1900. Hence, it is unsurprising that in a content analysis of prime-time, weekend, and daytime television programming between 1969 and 1985, media scholar Nancy Signorielli (1987) found “that youth were underrepresented in such programs and presented pejoratively when they did appear” (Nichols & Good, 2004, 8). However, in this post-network age, cable fragmentation and declining viewership have necessitated an increase in niche programming strategies, resulting in the more

specialized content offerings to teens and the creation of specific cable networks devoted to teen (i.e., young adult) viewers.

Despite the highly stereotypical depiction of teens on television, a textual shift began in the early 1960s, whereby television series became far more engaged with the adolescent experience outside the familial space. Several school comedies were introduced that, diverging from family programs, “placed teens in non-domestic contexts, and thus called attention to the different social activities, spaces, and relationships that separated teens from adults” (Kearney, 2004, 2277). In her extensive historical analysis of American teen programming, Kearney (2004) notes that the first show to focus exclusively on the teen experience was the sitcom *The Many Loves of Dobbie Gillis* (CBS, 1959-63). *Dobbie Gillis*, according to Kearney, was the “first prime-time series to consistently privilege teenage characters, activities, and spaces over those [typically] associated with family shows” (2277). *Dobbie Gillis* was an early predecessor to and solidified many of the conventions of recent teen-oriented programming including: the foregrounding of teen characters over adults, the privileging of schools over family homes as settings for action, and a focus on various stereotypical coming-of-age issues, especially dating, earning spending money, and negotiating intergenerational conflict” (Kearney, 2004, 2277).

Another notable adjustment that took place in the 1960s was the attempt to capitalize on teenagers as a niche demographic, particularly for the burgeoning ABC network. In order to compete with the more established CBS and NBC, ABC specifically created programming targeted to younger viewers, which would subsequently also appeal

to advertisers looking to cash in on the teen market (Osgerby, 2008).<sup>25</sup> Consequently, this so-called “experiment” by ABC in niche marketing was prescient, as later broadcast (and cable) network competitive practices would also boldly target young adults to establish ratings power. However, as the decade went on, television experienced a general decline in attention paid to teenagers, as both networks and advertisers noticed that teens were no longer watching television (Kearney, 2004). Combined with the decline in the teenage population, networks were forced to reassess programming interests, opting to create more mature fare that would appeal not only to teens, but also young adults outside the chronological teen years, thereby expanding the desired demographic to 12- to 34-year-olds.

Although the 1970s saw the development of a number of socially provocative, “relevant” television series, these same series were not specifically oriented towards teen viewers who were still hailed within the confines of the family viewing experience. Innocuous encounters with juvenile delinquency became popular in “teen” school sitcoms. As television scholar Gerard Jones (1992) notes, “a new synthesis of sitcom elements” was forged when shows such as *Welcome Back, Kotter* (ABC, 1975-79) “blended farcical situations with juvenile life lessons” but “with the racy 1970s elements of ethnic stereotypes and sexual humor” (225). Dramatic interpretations of high school tribulations also featured racially diverse casts and chose to foreground contemporary teen problems (Kearney, 2004). For example, *Room 222* (ABC, 1969-74) featured a racially integrated high school in Los Angeles and examined topical issues ranging from drug use to race relations. The 1970s was also the first decade to demonstrate a sincere

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<sup>25</sup> ABC, known as the youthful television network, also scheduled shows appealing to young families with children as seen with its early partnership with Disney (Kearney, 2004, 2278).

recognition of racial diversity (Kearney, 2004; Osgerby, 2008). More attention was paid to African American issues, and sitcoms such as *What's Happening* (ABC, 1976-79) and later seasons of *Good Times* (CBS, 1974-79) featured all-black casts while focusing on the teen experience. By the end of the 1970s there was a gradual upswing in teen-specific shows, but much of the social critique and more controversial issues were relegated to the background in favor of wholesome nostalgia family series such as *The Waltons* (CBS, 1972-81), *Little House on the Prairie* (NBC, 1974-83), and *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974-84) (Kearney, 2004).

The 1980s and early 1990s continued to preserve an emphasis on the wholesome nuclear family dynamic, though teens were regularly the center of attention. Highly sanitized topical issues such as bullying, alcohol and drug abuse, learning disorders, and intimacy, were quickly handled within the family, ultimately maintaining the integrity of the nuclear family and importance of familialist ideology as expressed in shows such as *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982-89), *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992) *Growing Pains* (ABC, 1985-92) and nearly all of ABC's T.G.I.F. comedies (e.g., *Full House*, *Family Matters*, *Step By Step*, *Boy Meets World*, etc.). Importantly, television during the 1980s presented narratives that were more "deliberately and decisively about the lives, loves, trials and tribulations" of young protagonists (Feasey, 2008, 46). However, unlike broadcast television, the growing cable market and mounting audience fragmentation propelled a revitalization of programming that specifically hailed a teen demographic, most notably characterized by the debut of Music Television (MTV) in 1981. MTV merged television with film and music to symbolically pervade teen life, creating a new space for teens to reflect on and connect to emerging taste cultures. In the 1980s, MTV became the primary

instrument for creating cultural currency in the teen market (Shary, 2005). The debut and subsequent success of *The Real World* in 1992, initiated a string of innovative reality programming that sought to examine issues of contemporary young-adulthood seemingly relevant to its audience.

### *Reviving and Revolutionizing Teen Content*

The success of MTV demonstrated how profitable the youth demographic could be as a niche market; it also highlighted broadcast networks' unwillingness (thus far) to reorganize programming strategies to cater more specifically to teens than a general family-friendly audience. But this would soon change as new technologies, industrial conglomeration, and audience fragmentation in the mid-1980s through the mid-2000s eventually fundamentally transformed television from its mass audience roots to a narrowcast medium (Lotz, 2007). This gradual revolution in television tolerated the emergence of three new broadcast networks – Fox in 1986 and The WB and UPN in 1995 – and greater appreciation for programming with youth appeal. Although teens had a continued presence in family-oriented sitcoms and dramas as well as teen-oriented sitcoms, all of which engaged in prototypical coming-of-age tropes and the occasional topical issue, Kearney (2004) describes the appearance and popularity of the teen-centered dramatic serial or melodrama as “one of the most significant programming phenomena” of the 1990s (2280). The phenomenon largely began with the debut of Fox's *Beverly Hills, 90210* in 1990. When Fox attempted to position itself as a true competitor to the Big Three (i.e., CBS, NBC, and ABC) in the mid-1980s, it capitalized on overlooked niche segments outside the traditional demographic including African Americans, young urban males, and teenagers – particularly those of Generation X



(Owen, 1997). Fox turned to prolific television producer Aaron Spelling to create a series that could gain a significant female audience (Hilmes, 2007).<sup>26</sup> Spelling already had an established record for conceiving hit shows aimed at a “hip,” youthful adult audience, but the premiere of *90210* has largely been recognized as the first (successful) teen melodrama in prime-time and attributed with launching a new revival of the teen market.<sup>27</sup>

The series followed an ensemble of high school teens living in upscale Beverly Hills, California and chronicled the friendships and romantic relationships of the close-knit teens while it also addressed numerous topical issues. Media scholar E. Graham McKinley (1997) argues that to adults and TV critics, “The show seemed a largely empty portrayal of an ensemble of wealthy, unsupervised young characters with improbable cheekbones;” however, the series became the cornerstone to the upstart Fox’s key strategy to target a young audience (1). Fox network historian Daniel Kimmel (2004) notes that during the first season of *90210* an estimated 40 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds that were watching television, were tuned to *90210*. The network’s gambit to “take young people seriously” ended in what was described by *The New York Times* as “perhaps the most popular show on television among youth in the 1990s” (Weintraub, 1991).

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<sup>26</sup> Fox did air the teen drama *21 Jump Street* (1987-91) prior to *90210*, but it was developed as a procedural crime drama that took place in a high school location, and therefore easily resolved topical adolescent issues by the end of each episode.

<sup>27</sup> *Degrassi Junior High* (CBC, 1987-89; and later *Degrassi High*, 1989-92), a teen drama that liberally and realistically tackled “teen” issues like drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and homosexuality aired prior to *Beverly Hills, 90210*. However, despite its cult status, the Canadian show was syndicated to PBS and thus did not have the visibility or commercial potential of the Fox series.

*We Are “Family” in Beverly Hills*

When *90210* began, the series typically found the Minnesotan transplant Walsh twins, Brandon and Brenda, navigating a different teen issue every week in basically self-contained episodes. However, as each subsequent season progressed, though still heavily issue-oriented, *90210* became increasingly character-driven and dealt more with the intimate relationships between the characters – especially familial and surrogate familial relations. The series was constructed from the teen perspective; one that combined trendy fashion and slang with topical social problems and conservative family values, thereby highlighting the family while at the same time marginalizing parents (Banks, 2004). It was one of the first shows to specifically address teens about “the family,” particularly in a way that emphasized the importance of the nuclear family amid adolescent struggles. Parents Jim and Cindy Walsh provided a nurturing safe haven and wisdom to all of the Beverly Hills teens as parental surrogates, and their common sense solutions to adolescent troubles was fundamentally ensconced in conservative subtext (McKinley, 1997). The Walshes were the only nuclear family that existed on *90210*, which consequently allowed the series to reinforce the political (and moral) correctness of nuclear familialism by calling attention to the dysfunction of families unlike their own. As the nuclear *outsider*, an exception within what seemed to be a sea of broken families, the strong ties within the Walsh family implied “that only a two-parent family can adequately meet teenagers’ craving for stability” (Simonetti, 1994, 41).

The support of the nuclear family dynamic was made even more apparent when the series portrayed one of its characters dealing with teen pregnancy. In her first year of college, the career-driven, class valedictorian Andrea Zuckerman finds out that she is

pregnant. The narrative offered an in-depth examination of the consequences of teen pregnancy with Andrea carefully considering all of her options – including an abortion. Andrea shoulders most of the blame and guilt over the situation, particularly since her romantic liaison was out of character, and opts to have the abortion to return her life to “normal” (“The Labors of Love”). She argues with the baby’s father Jesse, a law student, who is adamant that *they* should keep the baby. Eventually, Andrea reverses her decision and marries Jesse in order raise the child together, much to the satisfaction of her friends but to the disappointment of her parents. Andrea’s troubled relationship with her parents forces her to rely on her friends for support, and solidifies the significance of both her “surrogate” family and her newly created one.

The story arc continues throughout much of the fourth and fifth seasons of *90210*, as the series depicts the pregnancy, Andrea’s premature delivery, her daughter’s health scare, and the enormous difficulty Andrea has balancing school, work, and raising her child. Andrea, in particular, bears most of the responsibility of raising her daughter as her husband tends to his law career. While *90210* attempts to offer a more genuine portrayal of teen pregnancy, in the end, much of the complications that arise for Andrea are effortlessly resolved within a single episode and clearly reiterate the importance of the nuclear family she is trying to build. For example, after Andrea and her husband both confess to having extra-marital affairs they break-up and reconnect within the span of one episode, essentially erasing the family’s previous adversity and later rewarding them for maintaining the nuclear family (“Double Jeopardy,” 3/29/95). Although the narrative does portray numerous hardships for Andrea, it glosses over the more nuanced aspects of teen parenthood such as financial hardship, withdrawal from school, and loss of close

friendships – which are typically experienced by teen mothers in real life – in favor of accentuating the conventional familial arrangement above all else.

### **Pathologizing the Family in Teen Television**

*Beverly Hills, 90210* radically changed the way television acknowledged teenagers and offered a presumed realistic authentication of their concerns by showcasing the teen perspective. While Fox had other successful series aimed at young adults, television critic Anne Becker (2005) asserts that the launch of The WB network in 1995 was “the most concerted effort to date to corral teenage viewers” (16). Its goal was to position itself as *the* prime destination for teens “by showcasing inventive youth-targeted fare” (Becker, 2005, 16). Like the Fox network before it,<sup>28</sup> The WB took advantage of industrial deregulation and audience fragmentation, hoping to build a new network by capitalizing on an underserved niche market – one that would also garner an advertising premium (Hilmes, 2007).<sup>29</sup> Susanne Daniels, former president of entertainment at The WB, remarked that when initially looking for programming for The WB, “we were aiming for teens and young adults ages 12 to 24, the audience the other networks seemed to be ignoring, even Fox [by then]” (Daniels & Littleton, 2007, 53). But The WB endeavored to move beyond more caricatured teen content, desiring to portray the teen experience “as realistically as possible and with empowerment,” said former WB CEO Jordan Levin (qtd. in Becker, 2005, 17). The teen programming featured on The WB (e.g., *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson’s Creek*, *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*) defied the stereotype of teenagers as “inarticulate, frustrated, if not rage-fuelled, not-quite-yet-adult[s]” (Hills,

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<sup>28</sup> Notably, most of the executives at The WB were former Fox network employees who had helped make Fox a contender as the fourth broadcast network.

<sup>29</sup> Although the teen demographic became the backbone of The WB network, just as the Fox network had done previously, the network started out catering to African Americans, urban males, *and* teens.

2004, 58). On the whole, much of The WB's programming fare took its cues from *90210* and its teen cinema predecessors, but it also expanded its "teen" demographic to encompass 18- to 34-year-olds who felt a kind of nostalgia for the adolescent period (Becker, 2005; Birchall, 2004).

Like *90210* and other successful Fox teen dramas such as *Party of Five* and *The O.C.*, The WB aired series that critically engaged with the conceptualization and pathology of "the family." Many of its series, such as *Sister, Sister*, *Dawson's Creek*, and *Everwood*, tried to break down the mythos of the nuclear family only to reassert its importance to adolescent development. Additionally, the family drama *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* not only presented a contemporary take on the nostalgic family dramas of the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., *Eight is Enough* and *The Waltons*), but it also dealt with a number of contemporary social issues that had emotional resonance for teen characters such as pre-marital sex, alcoholism, and racism. Overall, the series approached each "problem" conservatively and presented a final moral lesson at the end of each episode. On the other hand, The WB also featured a number of series, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, and *Supernatural*, that highlighted the formation of recombinant "surrogate" families (either through friends or siblings), but these programs were less reaffirming the nuclear family than the symbolic mysticism and empowerment of familial ties over the egocentric needs of the individual. In fact, only within the familial group could the characters of these shows find strength and overcome adversity – which typically came in the form of an evil villain.

Television critic Jason Chow (2004) observed, "There [were] two key premises of all the [WB] shows: They're all set in small towns and they're all centered on non-

traditional families.” In offering different types of families with diverse familial connections, the teen series on The WB (as well as UPN and later The CW) sought to speak to teens’ desire for independence even amidst muddled romantic situations and biological family troubles. Notably, these series upended the conventional parent/child relationship by foregoing the oversimplified and clichéd teenage rebellion antics in favor of depicting teens as generally more knowledgeable and worldly than their anxious, trouble-prone parents. Instead of merely existing within an already established familial unit, these teens actively pursued and created their own families with more conventional and companionate familial attributes that they did not experience with their parents. For example, on *Dawson’s Creek*, Jen (Michelle Williams) converts the rebelliousness she exhibited under her parents’ supervision to the increasingly conservative advice she offers to her friends – her new family – after her parents exiled her to Capeside. Moreover, she manages to recreate the close-knit family she desired with her grandmother and gay best friend, Jack (Kerr Smith). One of the series’ greatest accomplishments was its attempts to refute conservative interpretations of romantic and marital “happily-ever-after” in favor of more unconventional styles of family. *Dawson’s Creek* created “a world not only where a ‘different kind of family’ can exist, but where it can be accepted” (Bindig, 2008, 107). However, it ultimately failed to challenge the hegemonic family norm as most of the characters continued to value the stability the nuclear family could provide. Thus, the seemingly liberal and uncensored portrayal of teen life in programming specifically directed at teens belies an undercurrent of conservative values and familialist ideology (McKinley, 1997). Yet, it is also clear that since the height of its popularity in the late 1990s, the teen series has woven together

more complex and conscientious depictions of teens' attitudes towards romance, familial and romantic relationships, and yes, sex and its consequences. The teen pregnancy narrative, in particular, highlights the confusing integration of teens' liberal sensibilities towards sex with their more conservative desire to form an ideal family unit.

Many of the series that have centered on teen pregnancy since 2000, have tried to pathologize or reinterpret "the family" and the nuclear trope (i.e., married parents with children, bound by a nurturing and companionate relationship or marital and gender equity) that has been tagged as intrinsic to its stability. Fictional series like *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), *Reba* (2001-2007), and *One Tree Hill* (2003-2012) on The WB, and now *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-) on ABC Family, move beyond the more paradigmatic ideal family versus the "dysfunctional" or "alternative" family in favor of featuring narratives that examine the ways in which non-nuclear and blended families can also employ familialist principles in navigating how to create happy families. Media scholar Deborah Chambers (2000) labels these portrayals as hybridized families: relations that are "still ideologically familialist, but trans-nuclear, in the sense that [they are] committed to the transformation of all social relationships into familial ones by embracing alternatives to the ideal and thereby celebrating and recuperating 'the family' in all its complex contemporary versions" (200). Now it is *de rigueur* for teens to find familial companionship both within and outside of their biological family. Chambers notes that, "these kinds of 'unconventional' images of family" seem to "bear a stronger relationship to lived experiences of familialism than the mythical nuclear version and its dysfunctional fall-out" (207). Hence, the teen pregnancy narrative has become much more than simply a moral lesson aimed at curbing risky behavior by hormonal teens that,

over time, have developed more liberal attitudes towards sex. Instead, these depictions allow for a deeper examination of how families become a family, what features of family structure and values are still heavily idealized (even by teens), and why more attention has been given to teen parenthood and its affect on familial relationships.

Teen pregnancy, as portrayed on television, remains a reminder of turbulent teen sexual mores and complicated familial situations, but it may also illustrate how society clings to more traditional ideas of familial attributes specifically regarding marriage and parenthood. What follows is an examination of two narrative patterns that are typically employed in the teen pregnancy discourse – particularly those depicted in series aimed at younger audiences – that offer a different perspective from the sensationalistic headlines that permeate the news today. First, teen pregnancy narratives, usually those presented in teen series, depict how teens struggle with and reflect on ideas of romantic love and marriage as they try to both improve and subsequently create their family life within the contested space of teen parenthood. Moreover, the teen pregnancy often reveals an underlying emotional crisis with the teen’s family of origin and the subsequent birth provides an impetus to re-examine and question previously accepted familial dynamics and values. The reactions and expectations of the ensuing unplanned pregnancy traditionally remain quite ensconced in romanticized notions of “family.” Second, today’s teen pregnancy narratives overwhelmingly prefer to examine the difficulties that result from choosing to become a teen parent and the effect this choice has on teens as they struggle to liberate themselves from the bonds of adolescence. These adolescents who are suddenly thrust into adulthood not only have to readjust their future plans and grapple with the burden of raising children, but they also have to contend with their own idealized



notions of parenthood. In the end, the highly gendered consequences of teen pregnancy and parenthood, as teen pregnancy usually has a more significant impact for teen moms than teen dads on television, frame a complicated vision of twenty-first century family life and the continued employment of hegemonic notions of “the family.”

### **Love and Marriage and the Baby Carriage**

Television series aimed at young adults have been particularly adept at capturing and playing with teen sensibilities, allowing adolescents to “experiment with new feelings” without patronizing them (Pasquier, 1996, 356). Together, the sophisticated use of language, frequent pop culture and intertextual references, and melodramatic tone all yield a vision of youth that encompasses frank discussion of adolescent tropes and attends to teens’ growing desire for individualism and maturity (Davis & Dickinson, 2004). More often than not, such independence is enacted in the course of an adolescent’s first dramatic encounter with romance. While the teen romance can employ trite stereotypes (e.g., the promiscuous “player,” the virginal girl-next-door, the femme fatale), it is also infused with a more advanced conceptualization of “love” beyond the traditional generalities of idealized “soul mates” or the sexual hedonism most often depicted in teen cinema (e.g., *Animal House*, *Porky’s*, *American Pie*). On television, the discovery of love – and, eventually, heartache – presents a persistent impediment for teens on their path to the wisdom of adulthood (typically by way of marriage). Moreover, in these series, romance is more than simply the tumultuous and innocuous plights of first love and subsequent relationships; it is also a complex quest to incorporate or resolve a teen’s familial past in order to eventually construct a family of one’s own.

*Playing House: The Complexities of Creating a Family*

Though the sensational headlines might suggest otherwise, teens on television today display an unusual amount of pragmatism towards sex. Though still shown at times with moralistic ideals and behavioral consequences, sex no longer automatically begets pregnancy and marriage nor is it imbued with malevolent turpitude as it once was in teen “problem” films (e.g., *Splendor in the Grass*, *Endless Love*, etc.). Instead, sex is more of a diversionary pursuit, or a “rite of passage,” along one’s path to adulthood and eventual marital bond. Since the 1970s, films geared towards teens have shown them racing to lose their virginity in order to lose the last vestiges of adolescence (e.g., *Animal House*, *Clueless*, *American Pie*), and only on the rare occasion do they face any unwanted complications like a pregnancy (e.g., *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *For Keeps*). On the other hand, television, which is restrained by broadcast standards and has to have an ongoing narrative, is far more articulate than graphic about sex itself and more dramatically inclined to illustrate its consequences and relation to adolescent encounters with romance. Yet, the rise of teen pregnancy narratives in the 2000s suggests that greater attention is now being paid to the negative consequences of a teen’s decision to have sex and the romantic notions that pervade sexual relationships despite teens’ earlier admitted ambivalence towards sex.

Many of the recent television series such as ABC Family’s *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* and MTV’s *16 and Pregnant* that center on teen pregnancy, have been heralded for exploring the consequences of teen sex *and* representing “a variety of teen values and attitudes towards sex” (Pfeiffer, 2009). In these series, sex quickly transitions from a “rite of passage” to an act of familial conception – the beginning of a

new biological family. Over the course of the ensuing pregnancy teens will often reflect on the initial decision to have sex and the meanings they assigned to their sexual relationship. Notably, many of these teen moms confess that conception occurred during the loss of their virginity – most of whom (knowingly) failed to practice safe sex, such as Amy on *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, Quinn on *Glee*, and many of the moms featured on *16 and Pregnant*. For these girls, sex was an ill-conceived stepping-stone in pursuit of a romantic relationship or a rash act of teenage rebellion – one compounded by their naiveté. Even though sex is assumed to portend the progression to adulthood for teens, it more frequently exacerbates an underlying immaturity in young adults – especially for those who experience an unplanned pregnancy. Instead, maturity arrives through the attempts made by teens – more so teen moms – to construct a newfound family under difficult circumstances. In other words, the loss of virginal innocence is eclipsed by the rise of the mother figure and her importance to the creation of “the family.” Surprisingly, endeavors to solidify this new family are underscored by traditionalist rationales that govern the “nuclear” family, specifically a marital bond between the mother and father. Even though the shotgun wedding is no longer an assumed result of unplanned pregnancies, the teen moms portrayed on television often imagine that their teen pregnancy will result in a blissful teen marriage – at least at first.

The reality TV series *16 and Pregnant*, in which each episode follows a pregnant teen in her second or third trimester up until a few weeks after giving birth, is particularly prone to portraying teen mothers who desire to marry the fathers of their babies, much to the chagrin of their parents. However, with over 84 percent of teenage childbearing being nonmarital, this outcome is highly unlikely (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2007). The

ways in which pregnant teens on these shows come to fashion their understanding and foundation for love, romance, and even marriage, are very much influenced by observing their parents' own experiences. Many of the teens featured on *16 and Pregnant* are from broken homes, typically raised by single mothers struggling to provide financially for the household – some, as statistics indicate, were teen mothers themselves. Reeling from difficult home lives and a near-constant sense of parental emotional neglect, these teen girls seek stability from their relationships with their respective boyfriends. Although some of the girls depicted on the series comment that her partner is “the one,” more often than not, these boys provide a different kind of intimacy – one that gives less credence to the perfect “soul mate” and places a higher value on a companionate relationship. What holds this confluent relationship together, as noted by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992), is “the acceptance on the part of each partner, ‘until further notice,’ that each gains sufficient benefit from the relation to make its continuance worthwhile” (63). Romance, and by extension the family, is flawed; therefore teens are more satisfied when they can derive their own conceptualization of companionship away from the dysfunctional familial relationships to which many have become accustomed. Hence, these girls assume that raising their child with a partner will not only stabilize their own lives after an unplanned pregnancy, but will also precipitate a better life for their child.

Incidentally, of the 25 teen mothers featured on first two seasons of *16 and Pregnant* only seven have married the father of their child and these marriages are usually highly volatile and overburden with conflict.<sup>30</sup> While some of the other girls from the series express plans to marry or are even engaged, more than half break up with the

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<sup>30</sup> Ebony, Brooke, Emily, Markai, Aubrey, and Christinna all married within their respective *16 and Pregnant* episode, while Leah married in *Teen Mom 2*

baby's father and resolve to continue on as single mothers by the end of the episode. The desire to form a stable "nuclear" family – to be "a real family" as many of the girls articulate – underscores the struggle to maintain even the toxic relationships depicted on the series. The teens on *16 and Pregnant* are less inclined to affirm the clichés of teen romance, such as predestination or "soul mate" love, opposites attract, or love-at-first-sight. Instead, like their fictional counterparts, they try to express a mature reflexivity by "talking through [their] hopes and fears in and for a relationship" with their friends and partners (Hills, 2004, 57). Unfortunately, the teen mother's perseverance in trying to create a family for her child and rectify her own volatile upbringing is usually shaken by the realities of disingenuous and immature boyfriends, exhaustive child rearing labor, and the unnerving supervision and demands of her parents. Even though the series documents how nearly all of the teen mothers unsuccessfully realize their familial aspirations (amongst others, including educational and career goals), the construction of a "family" continues to be a heavily romanticized goal.

Similarly, teens in fictional series that feature a teen pregnancy often conflate sex with romance, and their growing sense of teenage alienation from their families manifests itself in the desire to create their own family. Teen series indulge in the chaotic emotionalism of hormonal adolescence, but also "perform the ideological function of a safety value, exposing and working [through] ideological contradictions [within] the family" and more generally among peers and society (Chambers, 2001, 70). Series such as *Gilmore Girls*, *Reba*, *One Tree Hill*, *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, and the new version of *90210*, each uses a teen pregnancy to trigger the re-examination of troubling family dynamics or demanding parents that have, in many ways, emotionally

damaged or stunted the maturity of teens. Whether as a form of adolescent rebellion or an attempt to overcome a lack of emotional commitment from their parents, the teenagers in these series turn to romantic (or sexual) relationships to reconstruct the familial bond they are missing. For example, the unique relationship between single-mother and teen daughter on *Gilmore Girls* stems from Lorelai Gilmore's tumultuous relationship with her own parents. In flashback, Lorelai remembers fantasizing about how her impending adulthood will finally liberate her from her pretentious parents and their overbearing life of affluence. Adulthood comes sooner than she realized when she finds herself pregnant and determinedly leaves home at seventeen. Similarly troubled by a familial past, *One Tree Hill* features the evolving relationship between two half-brothers, Nathan and Lucas Scott, who try to overcome the past betrayals and murder conviction of their father and navigate high school romances. Nathan, who is emotionally unsettled by his manipulative and murderous father, struggles with his commitment to become a better and more honorable man for his teen wife and their unborn baby on *One Tree Hill*. And on *90210*, which – once more – depicts a group of teens dealing with high school melodramas in the country's wealthiest zip code, Adrianna suffers as the family breadwinner with a dwindling acting career and an intensifying drug habit. After rehab and cautiously dealing with her stage mom, Adrianna is sidetracked once more when she discovers she's pregnant. Each of these characters imagined that adulthood would bring stability to a turbulent adolescence; however, it is a teen pregnancy that finally motivates a lasting change within these young adults. Most importantly, the teen pregnancy offers them a mechanism to enact the type of family – a companionate “nuclear” family – that they were deprived.

As television scholar Rebecca Feasey (2008) argues, despite teen-oriented television's penchant for showcasing sex-obsessed adolescents bucking parental authority and taking part in risky activities, this portrayal remains tempered by a strong emphasis on contemporary family values, which subsequently work to "tame, contain and mold teen life in line with the dominant interests of adult society" (47). Although it may seem as though television is at the forefront of changing attitudes towards symbolic notions of the family and the Western idealization of a particular set of conservative values, in actuality, familialist ideology remains quite constant. For example, on *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, the two unplanned pregnancies featured in the series were both met with a desire to legitimate the family through marriage – though not necessarily with the baby's father. In "The Secret Wedding of the American Teenager" (1/5/09), pregnant teen Amy hopes to both solidify her newfound love for boyfriend Ben – who is *not* her baby's father – and legitimate her pregnancy by secretly marrying. She envisions life with Ben's affluent family as key to helping her with the transition to motherhood and offering her son a better life than she can provide alone. Moreover, Ben is a more suitable father figure for her son than the baby's father, Ricky, who refuses to give up his rakish and rebellious behavior. The marriage is never legalized and Amy fails to form her reconstituted family. Instead, Amy's teen pregnancy spurs her divorced parents' reconciliation, thereby reinstating the traditional nuclear family that had been in danger of dissolving. Later in the series when 17-year-old Adrian becomes pregnant by a one-night-stand with Ben, their respective fathers are fairly adamant that the two teens – who are neither "in love" or accepting the realities of their situation – pursue a committed relationship in order to legitimate the pregnancy and secure the baby's future. Adrian and

Ben, both raised by single parents, are eager to offer their daughter the domestic stability of married parenthood. Again, while a teen pregnancy may be the impetus for teens to create their own (biological) families, this reconstituted family is heavily informed by the troubled dynamics of the teen's family of origin, and validated and stabilized by the presumption that the pregnancy will result in some form of marriage.<sup>31</sup>

The reconstituted family through teen marriage is also depicted in the sitcom *Reba*. In *Reba*, Cheyenne's teen pregnancy begins just as her parents are dissolving their marriage. In the pilot episode, Cheyenne and her boyfriend, football star Van, decide to marry straight away and imagine a happily ever after for themselves. Cheyenne and Van, likely reacting to her parents' divorce and his parents' refusal to provide emotional and financial support, resolve to embrace their quirky, immature relationship and avoid the conventional tropes of adult marriage and child rearing (e.g., the modest wedding dress, domesticity, and the pursuit of a stable income). But this romanticized image of modern marriage almost immediately comes into conflict with the realities of their situation. For example, Cheyenne and Van need signed permission slips to miss school for their honeymoon. Also, Cheyenne can no longer be on the drill team, thereby diminishing her high school popularity. Not only do the two teens worry over their adolescence slipping away, but the impending wedding is also threatened when Van informs Cheyenne that he will spend their wedding night at the football game. The marriage can only take place when Cheyenne comes to terms with her parents' divorce, and later decides to wear her mother's traditional wedding gown symbolizing her renewed adherence to the

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<sup>31</sup> In the fourth season of *The Secret Life of an American Teenager*, which aired after this writing, a matured and more responsible Ricky cautiously entered a relationship with Amy, surprising many of their friends. Still looking to create her own family, Amy persuades Ricky to move in together and eventually they get engaged. At the same time, Ben and Adrian's baby is stillborn. Without the baby to keep them together, they divorce.



conservative tenets of marriage and commitment to reconstituting the nuclear family her parents had ended. Although *Reba* plays for laughs much of the difficulties surrounding Cheyenne's subsequent marriage and child rearing labor, the underlying message remains that the legitimization of the teen pregnancy and marriage comes through a strong adherence to the nuclear family dyad.

But what of those teen mothers who are shown opting out of the marriage track? Feminist media scholar Kathleen Rowe Karlyn (2011) writes that the “fantasies of eternal romantic love, if not outgrown, leave young women unprepared for the realities of adult relationships” (98). For so long the rituals of womanhood, and more specifically motherhood, have revolved around the “routines of family and domestic life,” but teen moms on television are still navigating the end of their adolescence – most unsuccessfully (Karlyn, 2011, 98). Thus, like the hard-learned lessons observed in the teen pregnancy reality series, some of the teen moms depicted in fictional series are far more inclined to romanticize a break from the family of origin or troubled adolescence than a romantic relationship (i.e., marriage). In *Gilmore Girls*, once Lorelai's teen pregnancy is revealed her superficial parents move quickly to minimize the damage to the family's reputation, which means a prompt marriage between Lorelai and her boyfriend, Christopher. However, Lorelai views the presumption that she will marry the father of her child as another attempt to oppress her free spirit and keep her from breaking free of the Gilmore affluence. Even though Lorelai loves Christopher, “the emotional and financial security of a happy marriage” will likely be destroyed by the mundane existence her parents have set into motion (Karlyn, 2011, 98). Hence, she liberates both Christopher and herself by refusing the marriage and later the affluent accoutrement of

her parents by running away from home. Unlike many of the other series which examine teen pregnancy, *Gilmore Girls* does not reconstitute the “broken” nuclear family of origin with the revitalization of a newly formed (biological) nuclear family. Instead, the teen pregnancy presents an opportunity for Lorelai to reform her familial past and reconstruct a new, more companionate family by raising her own daughter in a different fashion. Still, the series makes clear that Lorelai’s single motherhood comes at a cost as she relies emotionally on the quirky members of her small town and sometimes, grudgingly, on the financial support of her estranged parents. This reliance on parents, whether unwillingly as in the case of Lorelai or compulsory as with most of the teens in other narratives, will be further explored in the next section.

In pathologizing family dynamics, teen pregnancy narratives often problematize the hegemonic nuclear family and its inherent conservative ideology. Both reality series *16 and Pregnant* and fictional series *Gilmore Girls*, *Reba*, and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, feature a nuclear family “in crisis;” one that is severely flawed and at or on the brink of dissolution. Each of these series successfully breaks down the mythical nuclear family and uses the teen pregnancy to motivate an intense introspection into the construction of how teens’ view what makes the “right” kind of family. The teen pregnancy upends the family of origin, which not only reveals flaws in the familial façade created by the families present in these series, but also provides an emotional impetus for teens to create a new family based on the familialist tropes – such as family dinners, familial comfort, marital equity, and parent-child intimacy – that they were deprived of by their own broken families. The continued devaluation of the “wrong” kind of family in teen-oriented media signifies how imperative the family is to a healthy

adolescence, particularly as it stimulates a higher quality of life and satiates the unyielding desire for companionship and stability during the chaotic experiences of adolescence. When teens cannot find the stability within their own homes, they form surrogate families for calm and comfort, eventually reinforcing and re-enacting the conservative family values many had accused them of rebelling against.

### **Teenage Parenthood and Imagining the “Right” Kind of Family**

The desire to reconstitute the previously “lost” nuclear family by “replacing the family of origin” with a new biological family is not without its own difficulty (Karlyn, 2011, 115). Though not specifically addressing the teen pregnancy narrative, Karlyn (2011) makes an important observation about teen media noting that the teen girl protagonist is nearly always unprepared for “the sober realities of adulthood,” particularly those that are played out within the family dynamic. Teens who experience pregnancy are thrust out of adolescence and are often ill-equipped to deal with intense child rearing labor, ostracization from friends and community, and even a potential marriage. Within the teen pregnancy narrative, teen mothers and fathers are shown with heavily romanticized expectations of their future including high school and subsequent college graduations, a lucrative and fulfilling career, and a happy family. Although it does not happen immediately, a teen pregnancy throws a wrench in these plans and teens flounder to get back on track – many never experiencing the achievements they desired. Instead, the formation of a functioning family and fully embracing parenthood takes precedence over future aspirations, particularly educational and career goals for teen mothers. Thus, teen pregnancy narratives continually illustrate the discrepancy between the psychological nuclear familialism a teen parent desires and her aspiration to exert a

physical separation and independence from the family. More often than not, familialist desires prevail in order to be a successful parent, thereby reaffirming an underlying conservative norm within these series. The following section discusses the discourse that surrounds teenage parenthood, including the highly gendered way in which teen parenthood is presented and the shifting dynamics between teens and their parents in light of the pregnancy, which is compounded by a teen's idealized conceptualization of teenage parenthood. In the end, teen mothers, in particular, confront numerous individual and social obstacles as they struggle to become decent and capable mothers in spite of their immaturity.

### *The Consequences of Conception*

Sexual relations continue to have different connotations for teen girls and boys despite the fact that discussions and depictions of sex in teen media are more commonplace. While girls tend to imbue sex with emotional significance – the formation of a now *committed* relationship – boys are less likely to reflect on a sexual relationship with such gravitas. As writer Caitlin Flanagan (2008) observes, “female desire can bring with it a form of punishment no man can begin to imagine, and so it is one appetite women and girls must always regard with caution.” She was writing in response to the movie *Juno* and its portrayal of a teen girl faced with the consequences of approaching the loss of her virginity so casually. Flanagan argues that *Juno* is a “fairy tale” because by the end of the film Juno emerges from her teen pregnancy “unscathed by it and completely her old self again,” thus the film never truly engages with the “unfair toll” that teen pregnancy can “exact on a girl.” Unlike *Juno*, the television series examined here are far more inclined to offer portrayals of teen pregnancy that cast teen parents as

disenfranchised – though not equally – and highlight the ways in which teens must eventually let go of their carefree adolescence.

While the loss of virginity is considered by teens to be a step in solidifying the end of their innocent adolescence, teen girls can be ostracized for their sexual behavior, which is exacerbated if the sexual encounter results in a pregnancy. In most instances on television, girls are reluctant to inform their parents about the pregnancy and prefer to hide it for as long as possible. On *Gilmore Girls*, *Reba*, *Veronica Mars*, *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, and *Glee*, pregnant teens attempted to keep the truth from controlling, religiously conservative, and imperceptive parents in fear of parental disappointment, and worse, complete familial estrangement. Aside from a few trusted friends, the pregnant girls in these shows were all ostracized in school and within the community, many asked to leave their respective school or churches. On *Reba*, Cheyenne is asked to attend an alternative school for pregnant mothers and when she refuses she is suspended (“The Honeymoon’s Over or Now What?”). *Glee* depicted the rebuke Quinn experienced from her peers when she is unceremoniously removed as cheerleading captain because of her pregnancy (“Mash-Up”). Quinn’s diminishing popularity is further compounded when her religious parents disown her, leading her to give her child up for adoption (“Ballad”). On *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, shy Amy not only becomes a permanent figure in her school’s rumor mill, but is also accosted by different factions of students imposing their opinions on her options as a pregnant teen (i.e., abortion, adoption, or parenting) (“Love for Sale”). When Amy opts to forego enrolling in an alternative school for pregnant teens – what she and her fellow students call “slut school” – she is overtly ostracized by many of the students and their parents (“Back to

School Special”). And over the course of its first two seasons, *16 and Pregnant* highlighted the loneliness of numerous pregnant teens unable to attend (or finish) high school and the loss of support from close friends after the birth of their child. The decision to “parent” for these teen girls – one not taken lightly – exacerbates the loss of innocence and pushes them to seek refuge and reassurance (sometimes unsuccessfully) back within the familial space.

Troubling as it may be, the isolation, guilt, and confusion that proceed an unplanned teen pregnancy depicted on television is nearly always borne solely by teen girls, as teen fathers are rarely given the same amount of attention and often portrayed as villainous, “churlish scamps, [and] irresponsible hit-and-run artists out to prove their sexual prowess without a thought for the consequences” (Stengel, 2005). Because they do not physically bear the pregnancy like their partners, teen fathers do not share the same sense of responsibility or burden and are able to avoid many of the difficulties teen moms experience. Yet, like their real-life female counterparts, teen fathers “usually have lower incomes, less education and more children” than adult men (Stengel, 2005). Most of the teen fathers depicted in *16 and Pregnant*, and subsequently *Teen Mom*, quickly lose interest in the mothers of their children and fail to acknowledge their emotional and financial responsibilities to the child. Here, teen fathers are far more concerned with their own immature pleasures (e.g., playing video games, drinking with buddies, dating other women) than providing a stable home environment for their unborn children – whether that means searching for a job or continuing their education. Although on occasion a teen father is shown as domesticated and committed to child rearing, it is more commonplace for him to begrudgingly offer child support without requesting to be a permanent fixture

in his child's life. Teen fathers in fictional series, on the other hand, tend to be more involved with the pregnancy, willingly offering both emotional and financial support though not necessarily consigned to a committed relationship with the teen mother. Teen fathers on series like *Reba*, *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, and *Glee* seek out gainful employment, pre-natal advice, and a suitable domestic environment – all of which they equate to being a “good” and respectable father. Notably, unlike in *Gilmore Girls* or ABC's *Ugly Betty*, paternal involvement becomes a willing obligation to contribute to the rearing of the child, thereby reinforcing traditional familial norms and highlighting the importance of the paternal figure to the construction of the family.

The gendered dynamics highlighted in the teen pregnancy narrative simulate the continued division in parental responsibilities and labor that have long plagued the construction of the family. As the maternal figure, teenage girls are often expected to submit to the enduring matricentric notions of personal sacrifice, expertise in domestic labor, and unconditional love for their child. Fatherhood, on the other hand, remains a deeply problematic mixture of traditional masculine sensibilities and befuddled domesticity, and when combined with the infantile pleasures of adolescence it is not surprising that teen fathers are rarely depicted as graciously accepting their role as the paternal figure. While the teen pregnancy narrative “drive[s] home the message about the dire consequences of teen sex,” it also showcases a commitment to responsible parenting by depicting the difficulties that teen parents endure in the “aftermath of unplanned pregnancies” (Klein, 2010). The ostracization of teen mothers by friends and family and the gross infantilization of teen fathers work precisely to counteract the images of alternative families – those perpetually “in crisis” or the *wrong* kind of family – by

reinforcing the stability and respectability of the hegemonic nuclear family and its inherent values.

*Bad Mothers and Failing Fathers*

The teenage pregnancy discourse, underscored by its commitment to strengthening the hegemonic nuclear family, is also heavily influenced by class concerns. Financial stability remains a top priority for the teen parents in these series and weighs heavily on the teen's decision to "parent." As teenagers, most have not held steady work, if at all, do not fully understand what it is to budget their money for household expenses, and presume that their parents can be counted on for financial support and daycare. When parents finally disabuse teens of this false sense of security, they at long last begin to comprehend the level of maturity parenthood will entail. Many falter when the realization hits that they can no longer cling to the naiveté of adolescence and the carefree existence of adolescent pursuits, even those as monotonous as going to school and doing homework. Class ultimately plays a role in how easily teen parents make the transition to responsible parenting, though this change is not necessarily timely or correlated to a specific social class. Generally, teens from middle- or upper-middle class homes have been depicted as affably supported by compassionate parents concerned for the welfare of both their child and grandchild. The same holds true for many of the working-class families represented in these series, though financial security is much more precarious. But traditionally, at some point the parents pull back on their initial level of assistance and expect teens to support their children through their own agency. Although this is a turning point for teens, some willingly accept their newfound responsibility while others do not gracefully embrace this push towards greater independence. The teen mothers and



fathers that do not acknowledge their growing agency in parenting fall into repetitive patterns of bad parenting long critiqued within political class rhetoric – the so-called welfare mother and deadbeat dad.

Series such as *Reba* or *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* tend to highlight the necessity for familial support during a teen pregnancy and subsequent child rearing labor.<sup>32</sup> *Reba* focuses on the Texan, middle-class Hart family, which is transitioning from a nuclear to a divorced, blended family just as they learn of teenage Cheyenne's pregnancy. Reba Hart's husband, Brock, has divorced her after twenty years of marriage to marry the younger Barbra Jean – who is also pregnant – thereby leaving Reba to raise their three children while Brock and his new family live across the street. Driven by Southern Christian sensibilities, Reba begrudgingly accepts Cheyenne and Van's shotgun nuptials and willingly allows the married teens to live with her and raise their child. Tensions quickly rise when the teens take Reba's assistance for granted by assuming that she will continue to do all of the financial and domestic labor for the household ("Tea & Antipathy"). Cheyenne and Van consider Reba's entreaties to share the burden of domestic labor as merely overbearing parental rules rather than responsible and mature parenting. Instead of accepting Reba's significant level of support, they foolishly attempt to move out without the proper finances or mature competence ("Tea & Antipathy," "The Vasectomy"). *Reba*, in its entirety, is a series of familial lessons about parenting that eventually begin to affect the ways in which Cheyenne and Van conceptualize parenting and its inherent values and responsibilities. By the time that Cheyenne becomes pregnant

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<sup>32</sup> Notably, *Gilmore Girls* features a teen willfully accepting her responsibilities as a maternal figure by pursuing independence from her upper-class family. In lieu of financial support from her parents, Lorelai left home and sought out employment as a maid at a small-town inn. This decision had a significant impact on the close relationship with her daughter and estrangement with her parents, as she remains fiercely independent and quite involved in the community that helped raise her daughter.

again in the series' last season, now almost a college graduate and financially secure, she and Van have fully acquiesced to a more mature style of parenting – one derived from fiscal, emotional, and domestic stability.

Similarly, *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* tries to enact these same affirmations but makes the parental support conditional on the teens' readiness to accept their core accountability as the child's parent. Although Amy and Adrian's parents empathetically express their approval of the decision to "parent" in lieu of adoption or abortion, both teens are expected to be the primary caregiver and offer some means of financial support in addition to what they receive from their parents. In fact, once Amy finally comprehends her maternal role she nearly resolves to raise her son as a single mother, but her parents and friends convince her that responsible parenting means accepting support and the importance of a paternal figure to her child ("I Got You Babe"). The teens in these series are at the outset unprepared for the realities of parenthood and thoroughly reliant on the support of their parents, but their social class plays an important part in offering them the time to transition from naïve teenager to mature parent.

The discourse in the reality series *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* is, in some ways, radically different. Although it is important to recognize that the series are consciously attempting to equalize the occurrence of teen pregnancy amongst social classes and races, the teens who come from upper-middle class homes tend to have a better support network in place than the other teen mothers and fathers portrayed in the series. This is not to say that teen "parenting" is more feasible in upper-middle class households. In fact, many of these teen mothers seem grossly naïve in regards to

responsible parenting and quickly entrust their parents with much of the child rearing labor. Conversely, teen parents from working class homes are more inclined to accept and negotiate the necessary duties of parenting with their adolescent aspirations.

However, the working-class narrative is also quick to portray and criticize teen mothers and fathers who fall into stereotypical patterns of bad parenting – namely, through the construction of the deadbeat dad or absent fatherhood as discussed below.

After the success of MTV's *Teen Mom*, the four teen mothers featured in the series (Farrah, Catelynn, Maci, and Amber) began to grace the cover of numerous tabloid magazines. The particularly shocking coverage of Amber Portwood lent credence not to the glamorization of teen pregnancy – as Doyle (2010) and Piazza (2010) accused – but its insidious perpetuation of the bad mother stereotype (Klein, 2010). Portrayed as volatile and abusive, Amber “operates as the series’ archetypal Bad Mother” by continually failing to offer her daughter a secure home environment or empathetic care (Klein, 2010). Media scholar Amanda Klein (2010) notes that Amber is frequently juxtaposed with the “other, more responsible mothers” in the series, particularly Maci who has not only continued her education and achieved independence thanks to the support of her middle-class family, but also vigorously pursues child support from her baby’s father. *Teen Mom* also, as Klein argues, further condemns Amber and other working-class teen mothers by reinforcing the idea that “the only way that the poor and abused can be Good Mothers is by giving their children away to someone else.” Similarly, in *Teen Mom 2*, Jenelle (a single teen mom) refuses to accept the end of her carefree adolescence and constantly goes out and parties with friends instead of taking care of her son. Jenelle claims that as long as she is there to put her son to bed, it doesn’t

matter what she does afterwards since he's asleep – especially with her mother there to take care of him. After Jenelle's continued verbal abuse, hard partying, and persistent refusal to be a responsible parent, her mother finally takes her to court to take custody of the baby, which angers Jenelle but does not induce her to change her ways. *Teen Mom* demonizes the mothers who not only perpetuate their own precarious upbringings, but also refuse to modify themselves to be more inline with cultural expectations of good motherhood. The failure to adopt the values of good motherhood – such as self-sacrifice, domestic labor competence, and unconditional maternal love – thwarts the survival of this unconventional family and reinforces the importance of both the nuclear family dynamic and the financial means to support a family.

The teen fathers present in these same reality series are also subject to harsh criticism when they fall short of paternal expectations, most notably correlated to the idealization of the masculine breadwinner. Although the figure of the “deadbeat dad” is the antithesis to the stoic breadwinner fashioned on television in the 1950s and 1960s when the division of gender labor was more pronounced, as noted in chapter three, recent portrayals of fatherhood on television have moved beyond the promise of financial support to also necessitating the creation of a more nurturing and emotional bond between father and child (Freeman, 2002). More often than not, “the figure of the ‘deadbeat dad’ has been framed as a problem” for African American families,” but *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* have expanded this lack of paternal involvement to White, middle class families as well (Jay, 2010). Many of the teen fathers depicted in the two reality series have no gainful employment, do not live with their children, and their interest in forming a relationship with their child declines over the course of the episode

or season. Whereas their respective partners are consistently shown undertaking domestic labor and childcare, these “deadbeat dads” are depicted playing video games, drinking, sleeping, and generally not participating in child rearing. As media scholar Samuel Jay (2010) notes, these teens are not deadbeat dads “because of [their] absence, but because of [their] inability to be an effective father.” By the end of these episodes, the deadbeat dad has disappeared entirely with the occasional mention of the teen mother receiving minimal child support.

Interestingly, the fictional series that center on teen fathers, such as *Roswell* and *Everwood*, often end the teen pregnancy narrative with the father – under extreme emotional distress – deciding to give up the child for adoption. Even though both teens had the financial means to parent their respective sons by way of their upper-class families, they understood that they were not emotionally ready and sacrificed their paternal desires for the best interests of their child. The same can be said for *Teen Mom*’s Tyler, who, along with his girlfriend Catelynn, chose to put their child up for adoption against the wishes of their working-class parents. Coming to terms with his own unstable and abusive household, Tyler is committed to breaking the cycle of deficient parenting by offering his daughter a life he could not yet give her (Benfer, 2010). The threat of the deadbeat dad to the stability of the family engenders the significance of a strong paternal figure within the familial dyad. Tyler exhibits a maturity that is necessary for “good” fatherhood, and unlike many of the other teen fathers depicted in these reality series, he yearns to re-create the idealized family he did not have. More often than not, teen pregnancy narratives perpetuate this disparity between the romanticized nuclear family

one desires and the turbulent non-nuclear family one experiences in order to reaffirm and give preference to the “right” kind of family and its inherent familialist ideology.

Parenthood is unquestionably an arduous task, but one made far worse when compounded by adolescent vulnerability. While financial stability undoubtedly has an affect on a teen’s ability to successfully parent his or her child, television illustrates that constructing a family within the highly contested space of teenage parenthood requires a remarkable depth of emotional commitment and determination. Obstetrician and educator Frank C. Miller (2000) reports that children of teen parents “are less likely to grow up in a home with fathers [and] their homes are not as nurturing and have less emotional support” (6). But this reality is not necessarily depicted on television, which prefers to emphasize narratives centered on teens “managing to survive, and eventually maybe thrive” in the aftermath of reckless adolescent behavior (Benfer, 2010). The teen pregnancy discourse, as represented on television, remains resolutely focused on reinforcing the traditional familial dyad by engaging with and highlighting the problems inherent in teenage parenthood. Even though most of the television series discussed here tend to resolve, or at least ameliorate, the dilemmas these teen parents face, overall they reassert how untenable parenthood can be without financial security, proper childcare, and emotional stability. Many of the teens featured in these series presume that they are well-equipped to deal with the realities of parenting and display almost an exaggerated confidence in their ability to be better parents than their own. This romanticized idealism very nearly leads to their undoing, and it is not until they gain a much needed perspective that they are finally able to proceed as *good* parents. Thus, to create a family – to *be* a

family – teen parents must constantly reaffirm the conservative familial ideal even when they themselves cannot achieve it.

### **The Life and Times of the Teenage Family**

By the end of 2010, harsh criticism began to be directed at MTV's reality series *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* for what some claimed as the network glamorizing teen pregnancy (Benfer, 2010; Doyle, 2010). But according to a survey conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, "among those young people who have watched *16 and Pregnant*, 82 percent think the show helps teens better understand the challenges of teen pregnancy and parenthood and how to avoid it" (Albert, 2010). Thus, according to Benfer (2010), "watching the show has made most teens less likely to want to become teen parents." Though critics are inclined to believe that exposure to television, particularly sexual content, can contribute to and shape certain attitudes and behaviors regarding teen pregnancy (Chandra et al., 2008), it is not within the scope of this dissertation to address the media's influence on teenage behavior. Still, one could argue that the complexities of teen parenthood rendered in these reality series could be "the best teen-pregnancy-prevention public service announcements ever made," as Bill Albert, chief program officer for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, is wont to claim (qtd. in Wetzstein, 2010). Although it is true that the current spectacle made of the trials and tribulations of teen pregnancy may be a teaching tool amongst adolescents (Bates, 2010), these series are also a particularly clever device for reasserting the highly stylized preservation of the "right" kind of family – the *nuclear* family and its values – to teenage audiences.

As Amy Kramer, director of media relations for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy observes, “Pregnancy is the *easy* part – it’s the parenthood that’s really, really difficult” (qtd. in Bates, 2010). The increase in television series centered on or featuring a teen pregnancy within the last decade speaks both to the continued social and political relevance of teen pregnancy and the prolonged televisual emphasis on narratives focused on familial dynamics. What drives the discourse of teen pregnancy is the construction of “the family” within a highly contested space, highlighting the “need [for teens] to transition into parenthood while simultaneously going through adolescence and becoming an adult” (Kimball, 2004). While in the past teen pregnancy was depicted as more of an artificial or abstract consequence within the scheme of teenage sex, the new media script is concentrated on what happens before and after: “Why are these kids getting pregnant and what happens afterward” (Kliff, 2008)? Series that feature a teen pregnancy attempt to construct and reflect what ABC Family likes to define (or brand) as the “New Kind of Family” – one that “reflect[s] the diversity of family now” – while at the same time, stays firmly rooted in the familialist paradigms of the hegemonic nuclear family (Romano, 2002). These series, whether dramas, sitcoms, or reality TV, each develop a “pro-family” message that is reflected in the endeavors made by teens to adhere to a narrowly-defined interpretation of maternal and paternal behavior even when this kind of child rearing may no longer be tenable.

For the most part, the teenage pregnancy discourse presented on television is a testament to recreating the self-sufficient familial unit. While on the surface the series discussed in this chapter seem to extricate contemporary familial dyads from the mythical nuclear family, ideologically they promote the restoration of familialism amongst teens



and young adult viewers. Hence, teen pregnancy and the subsequent construction of alternative families do, in some ways, offer more diverse depictions of familial organization. As Amy Lippman, co-creator of *Party of Five* observed:

The definition of family...is not two kids, mom and dad, and a dog in the suburbs. Today's family is much more complex, diffused, and undefined. Kids are figuring out the value they have to each other without any parental presence enforcing them. They have to find their way to it themselves. (qtd. in Owen, 1997, 146)

Moreover, teen parenthood can be a mechanism for teens to re-create their lost “nuclear” family and resolve long-held resentment over the family of origin’s failure to live up to a teen’s familialist expectations. But, at the same time, these series extend a circumspect message of how to *be* a family when they focus so heavily on the naiveté of pregnant teen mothers and the apathy of teen fathers. The pregnant teens portrayed in *16 and Pregnant*, *Reba*, and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* all unwisely assume that they can easily mold parenting to fit with their adolescent lifestyles and grumble when the realities of parenthood finally arise. Though each teen longs for the assumed stability that comes with entrance into adulthood and creating one’s own family, the transition is neither instantaneous nor effortless and is almost always conditioned on the acceptance that teenage parenthood does not automatically correlate to a successful teenage marriage or parent-child relationship.

In a world that is considerably anxiety-riddled towards contemporary adolescence, it is not surprising that “purveyors of pop culture feel compelled to send a corrective message to young viewers” – whether these messages come in the form of topical social problems easily resolved within a stand-alone episode or derived from particularly garrulous discussions about teenage parenthood (Stanley, 2008). Similar to television’s response to the so-called “crisis” in fatherhood, whereby father-centered series assess and

reinvent the patriarch's familial role, teen-oriented programming counters the recent sensationalistic headlines of a teen pregnancy "epidemic" with a more complex assessment of young parenthood and familial creation. The discourse surrounding teenage pregnancy on television continues to prolong teen-oriented media's penchant for wistful attitudes towards the current state of the American family, while it also examines the ways in which teens are more dynamically involved in conceptualizing the "family" and its values. Within the contested space of teen parenthood, television series articulate and reaffirm familialism as a solution to the emotional and financial difficulties that ensue from an unexpected teen pregnancy. Comparatively, the next chapter, an examination of television series featuring extended and multigenerational families, reveals that familialism is utilized to cultivate strong family ties in times of crisis. The pathos and intergenerational melodramas that are rampant in these particular series is only resolved through family fellowship, once more, extolling the importance of familialism to the twenty-first century family.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### FAMILIAL MULTIPLEX: FAMILIAL MELODRAMA AND FAMILIALISM IN MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILIES

“Families, like life, have a way of changing, never staying the same.  
But they’re your family, this eclectic deeply bonded group.  
So you evolve, you adapt”  
–Nora Walker (*Brothers & Sisters*, “Walker Down the Aisle,” 5/8/11)

For much of the late 1980s and 1990s, family ties on television were depicted as a complex mix of what sociologist Ethan Watters (2003) referred to as *urban tribes* – family-like communities that a generation of young people fashioned from friends and co-workers rather than biological relations. Watters (2003) describes how these alternative familial forms, as seen in popular series such as *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Will and Grace*, and *Sex and the City*, perform the same ritualistic functions of an extended family network except the members are mutually chosen and circumstantial. However, in a remarkable reversal from nearly a decade of these massively popular, family-lite sitcoms, television series moved away from the urban and urbane lives of swinging singles and returned to suburbia jam-packed with relatives at every turn. The family home – *the* backdrop for familial connection and a base of operation for the nuclear family – was now rather overcrowded with multiple generations amassed from “boomerang kids,” elder adults and in-laws, and extended family members (Ludden, 2010). Writer and American culture scholar Neal Gabler (2010) remarks that television is no longer

committed to simple nuclear familialism but the “flock family,” one born of the extended family and shown within a constant stream of “family gatherings with lots of bonhomie and jokes and an outpouring of love.” Amidst a new era of confusion and complexity in our own family trees – with several compositional changes that have rendered the traditional nuclear family moot in light of tangled webs of (re-)marriages and blended families or genealogical bloodlines intermingled by surrogacy, sperm donors, and same-sex parenting – these “flock families” envision a new version of the bucolic ideal but one more reflective of this perplexity of familial structure and function.

The extended or multigenerational family is not a new phenomenon – in either real life or on television – but its presence has declined within the last few generations in favor of smaller, nuclear families. According to historian Stephanie Coontz, (2000), extended family households – comprised of a nuclear family and extended family relations such as a parent or in-law, uncle or aunt, and sibling as individuals or with their respective families – were prominent in the late nineteenth century, but they were never the norm; “the highest figure for extended-family households ever recorded in American history is 20 percent” (12). By World War II, “the extended family household fell out of favor with the American public,” and by 1980 only 12 percent of the population lived in one (Pew Research Center, 2010). However, a new and significant reversal has taken place, whereby nearly fifty million Americans, over 16 percent of the population, “live in households with at least two adult generations, and often three” (Moeller, 2010). The 2000 U.S. Census revealed that the nuclear family, which had “reached a peak of 45 percent of the American population in 1960,” had declined to below 25 percent – due in large part to rising divorce rates and extended singlehood (Benfer, 2001). Today, the

extended family offers a highly integrated support network; one particularly suited for adult children seeking the (once stifling) haven of home as a refuge from life's tribulations and expectations unmet (Browne, 2011). Active extended family networks, once prominent in the working-class, ethnic sitcoms of early television such as *The Goldbergs* (1949-1954) and *I Remember Mama* (1949-1956), but then relegated to the oft-overlooked soap opera (which typically centers on the interaction of two or three large and distinguished families), now form the core of a number of family dramas and sitcoms.

It is hard to claim that the increase in television series centered on extended or multigenerational families since the late 1990s points to a new restoration of the American family during recent economic and social upheaval, particularly since “the family” itself has repeatedly been utilized as a symbol of strength in difficult times for each subsequent decade since the birth of television.<sup>33</sup> However, these extended families, within the borders of the rapidly confining domestic space, are still demonstrative of a familialist ideology that the “urban tribes” or *chosen* families had discarded in favor of more individualistic values (Giddens, 1992). Even though the latest U.S. Census data indicates that the traditional nuclear family appears to be waning, alternative familial forms, such as the extended and multigenerational family, are still heavily reliant on the conservative family values associated with nuclear family organization (Carr, 2008). Moreover, the conflict and internal melodrama that seem to plague today's televisual extended families is actually a therapeutic mechanism to underpin the continued significance of familial relationships. Though a far cry from the heavily romanticized

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<sup>33</sup> See Appendix 2 for a list of extended and multigenerational television series to date.

perfection of 1950's suburban domesticity, the constant contestation and repair of family ties recognizes that every branch of the family tree is conscribed in the ultimate survival of the American family.

If, as media scholar Estella Tincknell (2005) notes, early 1990's television "represented the family as intrinsically pathological – or dysfunctional" – in series such as *Married...with Children*, *Roseanne*, and *The Simpsons* (150), more recent family dramas and sitcoms take this supposed dysfunction and re-imagine it as inevitable, perhaps even central, to the constitution of the family (Pomerance, 2008). Film scholar Andrew Horton (2008) writes that screen families are typically depicted in an "equivocal way, as sites of actual or potential disasters and as sanctuaries and reasons for reunion and celebration" (45). Although discussing families in film comedies, his reasoning is adaptable to the small screen. For the extended or multigenerational families in these new family dramas, family "is often about learning the art of compromise so that family members with very different personalities or goals can get along together," thereby strengthening the family unit as a whole (Horton, 2008, 48). The family, in all its shapes and sizes, remains the ideal form despite the relentless attempts from outside forces to question its validity and render it powerless (Horton, 2008). In this day and age, as argued by sociologist Ken Browne (2011), "extended family members tend to gather often for family events and...feel responsible for helping and supporting one another, both emotionally and financially" (107). Thus, it is unsurprising that the members of the "flock families" represented on television should each feel a personal responsibility towards their family members even in the most tenuous situations such as personal deceit, addiction, and even professional intrigue. The strength that these families acquire is

directly related to the way in which each conceives of what “family” is, how to be a “family,” who can be a part of this family, and how it can successfully move past the struggles continually thrown at it?

The extended or multigenerational family series examined here – *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005, HBO), *Brothers & Sisters* (2006-2011, ABC), *Modern Family* (2010-, ABC), and *Parenthood* (2010-, NBC) – signal a renewed endeavor to understand the negotiation of familial networks, particularly as they are challenged and reconstituted week after week. These series each portrays an extended family via adult siblings (and their respective parents), sophisticatedly delving into the generational and behavioral divergences between each member of the family set against the confines of the “family” home. Although each sibling seeks to mold their own nuclear family, the constant retreat to and congregation with the extended family points to the unwavering commitment to the larger kinship structure. In these series, resolution to family crises comes not from within the individualized nuclear unit, but in the relief that comes from sharing the burden with extended family members. Once the *entire* familial network is mobilized, which is now easily and instantly achievable with modern communication technology and because they are geographically co-located, critical situations that threaten to breakdown and contaminate the family are stoutly withstood. Even though it has been the *nuclear* family that has constantly been employed as the symbol of American preservation (Chambers, 2001; May, 1999), now, contemporary family life – formulated within a hodge-podge of familial construction – is solidified and made the new consummate ideal, carefully framed within the extended family familialism portrayed in these series. In the *performance* of “the family,” these series continually subvert the

desires of individual members in order to foster a rebirth in familial fellowship and strengthen the family as a whole. Whether this familial renaissance is initiated after an unexpected family crisis, as examined in *Six Feet Under* and *Brothers & Sisters*, or enveloped within the intergenerational tensions between parent and child portrayed in *Parenthood* and *Modern Family*, in the end, the televisual extended or multigenerational household reinvents not only how we envision family life, but also, as previous chapters have examined, what it means to be a family. Moreover, despite the fact that the domestic relationships depicted in these series are more reflective of today's complex conceptions of "family," they continue to valorize a hegemonic image of family life that resiliently affirms familialist idealism and preservation.

### **The Extended Family on Television**

Extended or multigenerational family series follow a growing trend in both actual household demographics and television's narrative attempts to stimulate the revival of the American family at a time when politicians' rhetoric laments its decline. Whereas the domestic comedies of the 1950's and early 1960's were completely devoted to the nuclear family as the ideal, or at least the aspiration to achieve this type of family structure, the "family stories of the late 1970s and early 1980s took the *breakdown* of the middle-class white family as a new given" (Tincknell, 2005, 138). As Coontz (2000) observes, the supposed idyllic nuclear family organization of the postwar era was quite atypical of actual familial experiences, and the ideology inherent in this kind of family – the breadwinner father, nurturer mother, and dependent children – was never really viable. Today, "family" can no longer be straightforwardly defined – socially constructed from a nebulous network of blood, marital, and self-ascribed kin structures (Galvin,



Brommel, & Bylund, 2004). Even though “adults are [still] expected to leave home after marriage to begin their own nuclear-based households,” strong and genial family ties, along with a variety of unforeseen economic and personal circumstances, tend to result in a continued reliance on and desire for extended family relationships (Browne, 2011, 107; Yen, 2010). Data from the 2000 and 2010 U.S. Census reveal a surge in multigenerational households, with a rising number of seniors moving in with their adult children and grandchildren (Moeller, 2010; Simmons & O’Neill, 2001). In 2000, there were 3.9 million multigenerational family households, two percent of which consisted of four generations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). By 2008, 16.1 percent of the total U.S. population lived in a household that contained at least three generations (Pew Research Center, 2010; Ludden, 2010).

Television has reflected this fluidity of the American family household. According to Thomas Skill and James D. Robinson’s (1994) content analysis of four decades (1950-1990) of television series featuring families, “the extended family has been the most frequently occurring form of household since 1960” (449). Also, media scholar Marvin L. Moore (1992) found that conventional nuclear families on television have steadily decreased over the last few decades. The increased serialization of television and the advent of the prime-time soap opera in the 1980s, helped usher in series composed of “large families of characters leading chaotic personal lives” (Taylor, 1989a, 154). The humdrum simplicity of nostalgic television sitcom families like the Cleavers or Andersons gave way to the histrionics and inner turmoil of the Ewings and Carringtons. Creatively, then, the extended and multigenerational family unlocked the number of storytelling possibilities for the narrative in these series. And by the mid-

1990s, “TV family relations, although comparatively conflictual, [were] characterized by mutual love and respect” (Douglas, 2003, 161). Whether it’s the habitual bickering and tough love of the sitcom family, the parental machinations and familial discord of the soap opera, or the wholesome affection and hopefulness of the family drama, the extended family television series, in any genre, has a rich history of “affirm[ing] the primacy of the family” when under constant threat from outside influences (Modleski, 1991, 451), and have given us some of the most highly appealing and critically acclaimed families in television history.

#### *Extended Family Comedies*

Although common for early working-class ethnic sitcoms, the extended family waned as television, trying to reflect and acquiesce to a growing patriotic consumerist ethos, migrated to the suburbs that supposedly abounded with white middle-class nuclear families featuring “a professional father and a full-time, stay-at-home mom” (Leibman, 1995, 8; May, 1999). The extended and multigenerational families that reappeared in the 1960s such as *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *The Addams Family*, and *The Munsters* were often considered inherently “dysfunctional,” misfits, and outsiders within the more pedestrian domestic households viewed on television – though the kin structures in these series offered an opportunity for viewers to criticize the bucolic imagery of the nuclear family (Chambers, 2001). Like the traditional domestic sitcom, the humor within these series came from the “interrelationships of the family members” (Leibman, 1995, 8); but it also stemmed from the ways in which these extended families broke “the rules of traditional family values and family life” (Chambers, 2001, 71).

As (White) middle-class tranquility began to fray and fade as the schisms of race, class, and gender exploded by the late 1960s, the bland nuclear family sitcoms further gave way to a more open, if not alternative, display of family dynamics (Taylor, 1989a). Although a number of extended and multigenerational comedies premiered in the 1970s, frequently featuring adult children who move back in with their parents, most did not make it past their first season except *All in the Family* (1971-1979) and *Phyllis* (1975-1977). These extended family sitcoms humorously highlighted intergenerational differences in family values that created familial tensions; yet, by working through this dysfunction, the family negotiated and eventually found common ground thereby allowing it to adapt to the important socio-cultural changes of the decade. By 1980, extended family sitcoms had all but disappeared in favor of single-parent sitcoms such as *Benson* (1979-1986), *Silver Spoons* (1982-1987), and *Kate & Allie* (1984-1989), and reinvigorated nuclear family comedies such as *Family Ties* (1982-1989), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), and *Growing Pains* (1985-1992). These sitcoms more pointedly dealt with the family's struggle to exist within and navigate external crises, such as financial hardship, the War on Drugs, and school bullying, rather than reflect on any internal familial difficulties. Thus, conflict was, once again, displaced to persons outside of the family and easily resolved by reaffirming "the family" united against the world.

By the 1990s, intergenerational discord and internal family dynamics, once more, defined the extended and multigenerational family sitcom, particularly as adult children tried to break away from their parents to pursue their independence and create their own families. Series such as *The Sinbad Show* (1993-1994) and *All American Girl* (1994-1995) featured characters attempting to balance more progressive or "modern" interests

with the conservative cultural values of their ethnic families. Meanwhile, other series such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005) depicted adult children constantly challenged about their life choices by parents with whom they maintain a difficult, yet incredibly close, relationship. Despite the turn towards more internal friction between children and their parents, these series ultimately expose familial melodramas as mere consequences of the predilection for adult children to be proximally located to their parents. While more recent extended and multigenerational family sitcoms continue to examine the evolving parent-child relationship compounded by close quarters, they also derive humor from the depiction of the everyday realities of individuals within the extended family. It is within these separate family narratives and how they eventually inform and affect the larger kinship network that provides the weekly internal conflict in these sitcoms. For example, in each episode of *Arrested Development* (Fox, 2003-2006) – which features the outrageously oddball and dysfunctional Bluth family comprised of four siblings, their parents, and their respective families – each individual family experiences a conflict that invariably involves the other members until the entire Bluth family is amass with variations of the same problem, which can only be overcome by working together. Hence, the dysfunction and dissention inherent in these extended family sitcoms actually cultivates stronger familial bonds.

According to media scholar Dana Heller (1995), a family typically “envisions itself as a closed system against which certain family members plot their paths through life, in defiance of their role within the system” (82). Yet, what these sitcoms – as well as their melodramatic counterparts – demonstrate and confirm, is the way in which one cannot easily defy the significance of the familial network to individual identity. In fact,

these sitcoms offer a performance of familialism that reaffirms the importance of one's family despite its shortcomings and shifting dynamics. Thus, whether these extended family sitcoms are deemed as articulating counter-hegemonic family values (e.g., *All in the Family*, *Mama's Family*, *Roseanne*, *Arrested Development*, or *Raising Hope*) or highlighting how diverse family dynamics can achieve common ground (e.g., *Full House*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, or *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*), they demonstrate that the American family is never fully beaten down by the constant stream of "harangues and foibles" it faces (Horton, 2008, 46).

#### *Extended Family Dramas*

While television has been a "'showcase' of family comedies from its beginning," (Horton, 2008, 46), dramas, too, have paid tribute to the inner-workings of the familial unit. In her chronology of the American family on television, Marla Brooks (2005) notes, "by 1967, most of the classic domestic comedies that featured intact nuclear families were canceled while 'broken' families thrived" (3-4). Seeking to stem this decline, dramas began to retreat to a more austere and innocent era of familial fellowship with series such as *The Waltons* (1972-81) and *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-83). These sentimental series, brimming with family togetherness and *family* drama, revitalized a sense of familial recuperation as being a necessity amidst life's growing uncertainties. It was, once more, the family against the brutal world set to subvert it.

But depicting a bygone era of familial stability was not the only avenue television pursued to offer positive familial affirmation to viewers. Family was prominently featured in the melodrama *Family* (1976-80), which was premised on articulating "real" family experiences. Since the episodic nature of television meant that programs could

perpetually reintroduce crisis into the family, sitcoms and dramas alike became more like soap operas. As one of the first dramatic extended family series, *Family* often crossed over into the melodramatic realm of the soap opera with topical storylines (e.g., infidelity, divorce, breast cancer, and homosexuality) and familial crises that could only be resolved within the boundaries of the family unit (Taylor, 1989a). The series chronicled the lives of the Lawrence family – middle-class California parents Doug and Kate and their three children – which is continually beset by external problems and internal strife. *Family* is set against the socio-cultural and generational changes of the 1970s, which are reflected in the dynamic relationship between parent and child. In the pilot episode, eldest daughter Nancy catches her husband in bed with her girlfriend and subsequently moves back into her parents' home with her young son. Meanwhile, Doug and his son Willie are constantly at odds over their different perspectives on the teen's future, resulting in Willie defying his father and quitting school to become a writer. Kate, meticulously well-groomed and the epitome of the "happy homemaker," struggles to connect with her tomboy, pre-teen daughter Buddy during the height of women's liberation. *Family* made familial melodrama chic for prime-time in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the emotional backdrop made these families very relatable to viewers.

Whereas *Family* aimed to reflect "real" family experiences, the burgeoning prime-time soap opera was more invested in the over-the-top dysfunction within the extended family. The advent of the prime-time soap opera in the late 1970s and 1980s, including series such as *Dallas* (1978-91), *Knots Landing* (1979-93), *Dynasty* (1981-89), and *Falcon Crest* (1981-90), capitalized on the melodrama of extended and

multigenerational families feuding over the family business.<sup>34</sup> In terms of narrative development, melodrama is typically “driven by the experience of one crisis after another,” crises of a familial nature often involving emotional excess that feature plots of seduction, betrayal, murder, revenge and obsession (Landry, 1991). As media scholar Tania Modleski notes (1991), the soap opera continually undermined the nostalgic ideal family of the past “by portraying a family in constant turmoil and appealing to the spectator to be understanding and tolerant of the many evils which go on within that family” (452). These series often took place outside the middle-class milieu of the suburbs in favor of the lavish splendor of upper-class trappings and corporate greed (Feuer, 1995). Television scholar Jane Feuer (1995) writes, “Both *Dallas* and *Dynasty* deal with the economics of multinational corporations, but they do so in terms of the familial conflicts that control the destinies of these companies. This is typical of the domestic melodrama’s oft-noted tendency to portray all ideological conflicts in terms of the family” (123).

Even though the prime-time soap opera dominated television serials in the 1980s, as the decade progressed into the 1990s, the generic format was integrated with the more traditional family drama (Feuer, 1995). Since individual genres frequently change and borrow from one another, conventional genres like comedy and drama have all become hybridized, expressing not only a combination of stylistic features but also a significant ideological shift (Langford, 2005). Melodrama, in particular, becomes more of a modality of narrative than a genre simply because it has become integral to the success of the more mass-appeal genres (Williams, 1998). Thus, in addition to the serial narrative and

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<sup>34</sup> The first series classified as a “prime-time” soap opera was actually *Peyton Place*, which premiered in 1964. However, the series was divided into half-hour episodes that aired three times a week, unlike traditional serialized prime-time soap operas.

melodramatic subject matter, another feature that remains elemental to contemporary dramatic family series is the persistent deferment of “happily ever after.” Here, marriages are not a “symbol of narrative closure,” as “the very existence of the continuing serial rests on the premise that” familial stability is under constant duress and there is an inherent “need to ‘rupture’ the family in order for the plot to continue” (Feuer, 1995, 120, 128). Previous melodramatic series that centered on extended and multigenerational families such as *thirtysomething* (1987-91), *Sisters* (1991-96), and *Once & Again* (1999-2002), each continue the soap operatic tradition by drawing on constitutive melodramatic factors such as pathos, overwrought emotional states (e.g., greed, jealousy, anger, etc.), and moral polarization (Singer, 2001). Most importantly, familial melodramas make “dynamic use of a *secret*” which haunts the family in different iterations throughout the series (Gerould, 1991, 124).

Today’s family melodramas also draw heavily from aspects of the maternal melodrama popularized in film during the 1930s and 1940s. As noted in work by feminist media scholars Mary Ann Doane (1987) and E. Ann Kaplan (1992), maternal melodramas, a sub-genre of the “woman’s film,” typically feature plots that concern a sacrificial, selfless mother figure who suffers a continual cycle of emotional hardships. Within the familial structure, mothers were typically made to sacrifice their own desires for the good of the family (Kaplan, 1992). While the self-sacrifice and endless forgiveness of the mother figure remains a mainstay of the family melodrama, current television dramas are equally concerned with paternal turmoil and discord. According to media scholar Deborah Chambers (2001), “What was melodramatic about maternal melodramas were narratives of separation or threatened separation and return, centered



on the mother/child relationship” (67). Now, it is the *parent/child* relationship – particularly between parents with adult children – that is the site of emotional upheaval. Whereas melodramas tend to reconcile conflicts “in ways that confirm and reinforce women’s roles” within the family (Chambers, 2001, 70), contemporary familial dramatic series distinctively assert the patriarch’s role in familial tensions and their subsequent resolution. The position and function of men in the domestic space – which is explored earlier in chapter three – is not only magnified and muddled in the melodrama, but also ruled the source of much of the family’s inner turmoil. As will be discussed below, the paternal figure’s struggle for authority within the home is often a common point of familial strife and solicits further examination of what it means to be a family.

The troubled families featured in more recent extended and multigenerational sitcoms and dramas offer a depiction of family fellowship that reaffirms the primacy of the family and its ability to overcome life’s obstacles. Because television is the most ubiquitous medium and assigned into the domestic space, the intimacy with which the audience can experience the narrative amplifies television’s ability to cultivate and articulate contemporary familial norms. Today, this norm grants acceptance towards the idealization of an extended family that isn’t necessarily perfect but always predicated on the power of the binds of family ties.

### **Familial Crisis, Reunion, and Rebirth**

Whether deserving or not, television is often accused of reifying dysfunction and discord, portraying the family “in crisis” and awash in animosity. But, broadly speaking, contemporary extended and multigenerational family television series are about rebirth; the resurrection of “the family” as an institution, a confirmation of a universalized

familialism that is not necessarily defined by the hetero-normative nuclear family. The families that populate these series struggle to conform to societal expectations of marriage and parenthood, and in doing so, reveal that the so-called “dysfunctional” family “has become more the norm than the aberration” (Boggs & Pollard, 2003, 449). Notably, even though the members of the extended families portrayed in *Six Feet Under*, *Brothers & Sisters*, *Modern Family*, and *Parenthood* may berate, fight, and challenge each other, it is within the extended family that one finds resolution, respect, and comfort from outside forces demanding uniform observance of a particular style of family. Despite the many ways in which family members develop their own path, each individual’s uniqueness, their inherent differences, are always subverted in favor of family fellowship. On these series, it is no longer about the intricacies of the family tree but the fact that the parents and children who inhabit these shows will always and inevitably “choose” the family that is their own.

In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Alan Ball, creator of *Six Feet Under*, describes the genesis of the series: “The show is about the loss I’ve felt in my life...The grief I’ve felt over loss, the people I’ve lost...About greeting grief and being able to move past it” (Waxman, 2002). But the series is not simply about the painful realities of physical death. Instead, as with *Brothers & Sisters*, it is about how familial guilt and repression can lead to family members permanently divesting themselves from the fellowship of the extended family, the consequences of familial rifts, and the eventual renewal of family bonds (Fahy, 2006). Hence, both series begin with a death and a homecoming that initiates the unlocking of prolonged internalized feelings and problems. The combination of these unexpected life moments inevitably brings about a degree of

enlightenment and freedom to the family (Fahy, 2006). Although each series “presents a fragile notion of family through its consistent interest in how people alternately manage and botch their relationships with those whom they love” (Russell, 2006, 107), it is the underlying familialist ideology that affirms the centrality, intimacy, and stability of kinship itself as fundamental in the face of external struggles (Merck, 2006).

### *Celebrating Death by Burying Life*

*Six Feet Under* depicts the members of the Fisher family who run a funeral home in Los Angeles. The series begins with the Christmas homecoming of aimless, prodigal son Nate Fisher after a long absence – presumably brought about by Nate’s unwillingness to take over the family business. Nate’s homecoming is interrupted by the death of Fisher family patriarch, Nathaniel, with whom the anxious and closeted homosexual son David now works. Nathaniel’s death unleashes long repressed issues that have vexed the father’s relationship with his sons and his unhappy marriage to wife Ruth, as well as the bond between alienated siblings Nate, David, and teen-aged sister Claire. The death of the patriarch incisively unravels the Fisher family, revealing each individual member’s latent identity crisis and inability to seize a modicum of happiness by fulfilling deep-seated desires (Munt, 2006). Nate’s homecoming, then, results in his effectively replacing the paternal figure, but in doing so, Nate and David must confront their dormant sibling rivalry and David’s resentment towards Nate for fleeing the family home.

Over the course of the series’ five seasons, Nate and David’s personal failings and professional enmity, along with Ruth and Claire’s penchant for equivocating and flitting between hobbies, keeps each of them impotent in renovating their own lives. For the most part, aside from professional necessity, the family rarely spends quality time together.

Because the Fishers' funeral home is also the site of their domesticity, they are caught in a contested space that tangles "family" and "business" "into an impossibly complex knot, lashing the Fishers to...control and decorum" (Rahilly, 2005, 55). Thus, the Fishers continually repress their anger, grief, and joy, unable to voice their distress or even express the sentimentality of family – at least not to their own family members, even though each expertly comforts bereaved clients. In fact, it is only through various crises that the family is forced to truly come together and perform the rituals of family. For example, when Nate is diagnosed with a potentially fatal brain condition at the end of the first season, he initially elects not to tell his family or his fiancé ("Knock, Knock"). It is only after he confesses to his family that together they convince Nate to pursue a risky surgery, and the family comes together to support him at the hospital ("The Last Time"). Individually, each episode of *Six Feet Under* – which begins with a death that their funeral home will eventually provide services for – is beset with a melancholia that bleeds into the lives of the Fisher family rarely allowing it to exist outside the end stages of life. In "Familia" (6/24/2001), Nate's girlfriend Brenda comments on the dourness of the Fisher family: "Jesus! No accident you guys are undertakers. You take every fucking feeling you have and put it in a box and bury it." This repression also leads each member of the Fisher family to over-identify with the dead and bereaved.

And yet, the Fishers also seem to display a life-affirming resilience in the face of all the death that surrounds them (Merck, 2005). Though it is often the case that "death" spurs the Fishers to communicate their suppressed feelings and yearning, which occurs in fantastical sequences of conversations with the dead that occupy their home, it is through these moments of truth-telling that viewers come to understand the verve lurking beneath

the otherwise sedate image of family life, and finally exposes how much the Fishers actually need each other (Heller, 2005). Media scholar Mandy Merck (2005) argues that the individual secrecy and repression that plagues each member of the Fisher family eventually results in a metaphorical homecoming through “an exaggerated disclosure (often under the influence of drink or drugs)” that liberates the pathos within the family (65). *Six Feet Under* literally depicts the demise of a family in each episode, but it is fundamentally a story of the Fisher family’s revival through the death that invades its home week after week.

#### *Navigating Life by Reconciling Death*

If *Six Feet Under* examines the revitalization of a family through death, *Brothers & Sisters* is a complicated exploration of a family’s life after death. The series details the lives of the extended Walker family comprised of patriarch William Walker, his wife Nora, and adult children Sarah, Kitty, Tommy, Kevin, and Justin. Like *Six Feet Under*, *Brothers & Sisters* begins with a homecoming followed by the death of the family patriarch. After a prolonged absence instigated by a rift with her mother, Kitty returns home for her birthday – though the visit is actually a pretense for a job interview. Conservative and outspoken, Kitty always clashed with the liberal Nora, but their discord amplified after Kitty supported her brother Justin’s decision to join the Army after 9/11. Kitty, the only member of the Walker family not co-located near the family home, is constantly reminded of her absence both literally in conversations with her siblings and symbolically in the extended family portrait – in which she is missing – that Nora proudly displays in the foyer (“Family Portrait”). Though Kitty’s political views and conflict with her mother seem to be the basis for the family tension, her homecoming

reveals underlying crises in the lives of each member of the Walker clan. The unexpected death of William Walker at the end of the pilot episode, then, exacerbates these issues to the point that they can no longer be contained.

Unlike *Six Feet Under*, in *Brothers & Sisters* the fragility of the Walker family is not exposed through its encounter with the death of a family member. Instead, it is revealed in how it moves forward, or survives, in the aftermath of the death of the patriarch. William Walker's death becomes an opportunity for eldest daughter Sarah to re-evaluate her life as a working-mother as she becomes further ensconced in the family business. On the other hand, Tommy questions his enthusiasm for following in his father's footsteps, especially after he is passed over for Sarah as head of the company. Meanwhile, Kitty, Kevin, and Justin suffer their own identity crises as their grief transforms into a spiral of indecision, repressed homosexuality, and addiction, respectively. William's death seemingly releases these pent up troubles, and Kitty's homecoming enables the family to begin repairing itself. By closing ranks, the renewed Walker family can now confront and resolve not only internal family tensions, but also external forces that beset its individual members.

As with most family melodramas, *Brothers & Sisters* examines how the family survives despite being constantly tested and pushed to its breaking point. In contrast to *Six Feet Under*, which attributed the familial discord to a lack in communication with each other, for the Walkers, excessive communication between the extended family members leads to heightened tensions; yet, it also remains paramount to the stability of the family. Family gossip in *Brothers & Sisters* is used both as a means of character exposition and as a method of keeping the communication lines open. Many of the

familial conversations take place over the phone where another family member is constantly trying to “beep in.” Secrets that are confided between siblings or mother and child are quickly divulged – often humorously – to other family members that conference in to the call. The importance of this exaggerated familial communication underlies the ability for the extended family to integrate the myriad personalities present within the family. Now, with constant updates, confessions, and plotting, there is no excuse for estrangements within the family. However, the Walker family’s excessive communication also generates much of the family’s internal tension because family members are rarely able to disconnect from the family – even one’s personal life becomes subject to family discussion.

Another common trope employed in *Brothers & Sisters* to demonstrate the melodramatic cycle of familial discord and consensus is the extended family dinners that Nora reinstates after William’s death. Family revelations, arguments, and subsequent reconciliations are all expressed while the family has gathered together around the table – an intimate space where feelings can be revealed. As the quintessential familial meeting place, the dinner table recalls the nostalgia of both a lived past and the safe haven of home. According to communication scholar Carolyn M. Prentice (2008), “Families have routines that they have produced and reproduced throughout the course of their life together,” and these routines “create a sense of ontological security – a sense that all is right with the world, that is how a family should conduct its daily life” (74). Thus, *Brothers & Sisters* employs the ritual of the family dinner as a therapeutic mechanism to not only express individual familial tension, but to also subsequently resolve and reaffirm the family as a unified unit.

Nearly every episode of *Brothers & Sisters* contains some kind of dinner table scene that marks either the commencement or cessation of an argument between two or more of the siblings and/or their mother. At the dinner table, the Walkers display their own particular brand of family communication, which typically consists of incessant bickering and one-upmanship until Nora exasperatedly mollifies everyone with some moral lesson or an unknown truth is revealed. Spouses or partners of the members of the family take the beginning of the dinner table shenanigans as their cue to leave as the immediate extended family resettles itself. Familial outsiders are then cast as interlopers in this family dinner process.

Furthermore, it is significant that this communication takes place at the dinner table – the new family hearth – because it, once more, establishes the family home as the focus of the family saga. However, instead of finding themselves trapped and repressed within their home like the Fishers in *Six Feet Under*, the Walker family home becomes the setting for the performance and embodiment of family. The home, itself, is often the site where familial fellowship is constantly stretched to its limits on a weekly basis. But for the Walkers, the home is also a refuge, a sanctuary in which the trials and tribulations of life outside the family can be assessed and wrestled with by the entire family as a unit. Thus, *Brothers & Sisters* depicts a constant stream of homecomings, as the home becomes “the unquestioned bastion from which virtually all social interaction flow[s]” (Boggs & Pollard, 2003, 449). If communication is the mechanism by which the internal familial tensions and secrets are revealed and resolved within the Walker family, its capacity to restore and fortify the family is only possible within the confines of the family home where the entire clan can assemble. Amidst the increasingly complicated



constructions of “family” in the twenty-first century – which is demonstrated in the various iterations of kinship within the extended Walker family – and the continued anxiety that perceives “the family” as “in-crisis,” *Brothers & Sisters* re-establishes the importance of and necessity to preserve the familial bond above all else, which can only occur inside the domestic space.

### *Reaffirming “Family First”*

Society has long held “the family” to a certain idealized ideological paradigm of behavior concerning aspects within the familial household. Contemporary extended and multigenerational family melodramas specialize in upending the nuclear, hetero-normative family in order to explore other ways of “*doing family*” (Pennington & Knight, 2011, 59). The families depicted in these series offer “myriad points of entry” for those looking for families that better reflect their own lives (Snierson, 2010, 46). That this diversity is ensconced in *one* extended family, creates a safe haven for exploring the complexities and crises of individual family members while still offering “one universal sentiment: Family first” (Snierson, 2007, 47).

In concert with the reaffirmation of the extended family, another important attribute of these series is the way in which the family is enfolded within the bourgeois family home. The home becomes infused with an expressive coding that can translate directly to the overwrought emotions the family is struggling with, sometimes even reflecting the pent-up feelings the characters have yet to voice – such as the Walker family portrait. Consequently, the extended family series taps into the importance of “home” and the familialism it breeds even as the composition of common twenty-first century American families evolves. Hence, the *mise-en-scène* that constructs these

extended family series not only groups the extended families together, but it also serves to accentuate how conventional these families really are in spite of their respective diversity. In making the private space of the family home public, the extended family series becomes a site for performing the familialist conventions of the hegemonic “family” that still has bearing on twenty-first century families, making the eccentric and nearly implausible stream of family gatherings that take place in these homes seem realistic.

### **Intergenerational Disparities and Reconciliations**

Contemporary articulations of “family” reflect the diverse forms that real families now take. Today, television families inhabit various forms, and in doing so, demonstrate that there is no one “right” way to *be* a family – only that “family” is valued above all else. Although the extended and multigenerational television series may displace the hegemonic nuclear family norm in structure, it remains dedicated to affirming the primacy of the family and, thus, familialist ideology. A popular narrative trope utilized to validate this primacy is the perverse cyclical break-up, breakdown and eventual re-formation of the family. Often this familial conflict is derived from intergenerational tensions within the parent-child relationship associated with different lifestyle philosophies. As media scholar Deborah Chambers (2001) writes, familial “melodrama performs the ideological function of a safety valve, exposing and working ideological contradictions in the family by exploring those tensions in the family” (70). Parenting is one particular space in which the families depicted in multigenerational series are constantly at odds. In *Six Feet Under*, *Brothers & Sisters*, *Modern Family*, and *Parenthood*, sons and daughters interrogate their upbringing through interactions and

experiences rearing their own individual families. According to film scholar Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1987), not only is the survival of the family at stake in this intergenerational domestic melodrama, but also “the possibility for individuals of acquiring an identity...within the [family], a place in which they can both be ‘themselves’ and ‘at home’” within their family of origin (73). Thus, paternal and maternal legacies indubitably affect and underscore the parent-child relationship in each of these series, expressed in both the exhaustive expectations that adult children have for themselves and the latent parental identity crises that surface as parents face their children’s adulthood.

#### *Paternal Authority and the Performance of Fatherhood*

As previously discussed in chapter three, within the last hundred years fatherhood has cycled between the detached, authoritarian father and the more compassionate, nurturant dad (Morman & Floyd, 2002). The multigenerational series often enacts this cycle with uncanny literalness in its depiction of diverse constructions of fatherhood within one extended family. *Parenthood* and *Modern Family*, in particular, examine the paternal relationship and deviations from conventional notions of patriarchy, resulting in men constantly trying to reassert their respective familial authority. Whether adjusting to first-time fatherhood, navigating the rearing of teenagers, or nurturing a new rapport with adult children, the fathers that populate both series struggle with how to perform fatherhood in diverse circumstances. And yet, paternal anxieties depicted in these series remain bound together in a general concern for how men can best serve their families and reiterate strong familialist values.

Over the years a variety of television series have depicted ineffective and disinterested fathers; however, recent programming has attempted to explore the father-child relationship in more complex ways. In *Representing Men: Maleness and Masculinity in the Media*, media scholar Kenneth MacKinnon (2003) describes the complicated notions of fatherhood in various media platforms. MacKinnon writes, “the fundamental requirement of approved fatherhood is that the father is physically present and, in that particular but limited sense, supportive” (47). Yet, this seemingly diminishes, or perhaps simplifies, the range of contradictory models of the paternal figure that now exist on television. Instead, the portrayal of multiple versions of fatherhood facilitates an interesting amalgamation of how men perform fatherhood and the ways in which this performance is affected by their own experiences of being fathered (Clare, 2001; Feasey, 2008).

*Parenthood* features the outwardly unflappable Braverman clan, consisting of four adult siblings, Adam, Sarah, Julia, and Crosby, their respective families, and their parents, Zeek and Camille. While his children are engrossed with the complicated chaos in their respective lives, Zeek is going through his own crisis. Zeek Braverman is the epitome of the archetypal patriarchal father, “characterized by restrictive emotionality, a preoccupation with success, the inhibited expression of affection, [and] a need for control and power” (Morman & Floyd, 2002, 97). However, as with most men, he fears being judged by his family and found wanting (Feasey, 2008). Thus, when his family learns of his numerous failings, such as an affair he had and a bad real estate investment that has put him in debt, Zeek’s children immediately reassess his paternal authority and question how to adapt to the abject failure of their paternal role model. Examining the character of

Zeek Braverman, one blogger writes: “Where once he was king of his castle stoically issuing orders in his Vietnam-War-acquired-bark, Zeek’s now looked at by his family with a variation of pity, wonderment, and exasperation as he struggles to change” (Gwool, 2010).

In an interview with Jason Katims, executive producer of *Parenthood*, he explains, “The premise of the show is that your children aren’t who you expected them to be; that’s what you have to deal with as a parent” (Arky, 2011). However, the series also establishes the corollary, as the Braverman siblings learn to accommodate their parents’ failings. This theme is personified in the relationship between Zeek and son Adam, as well as when Adam and his wife Kristina must come to terms with their eleven-year-old son Max’s Asperger’s diagnosis. In addition to his personal failings, Zeek’s relationship with his son Adam is constantly tested as the two clash over parenting styles. In the pilot episode, Zeek elbows his grandson Max in the face during a particularly rough game of basketball. Citing it as an opportunity to “toughen the kid up,” Zeek extols how he was similarly aggressive with Adam and his brother growing up. To which Adam replies, “Dad. We’re not raising him the way you raised us.” At the same time, Adam struggles to accept that he and his son will not experience typical father-son bonding like dinner table conversation (“Man Versus Possum”), baseball (“The Situation”), and theme park rides (“Qualities and Difficulties”). The pervasive and highly variable condition of Asperger’s syndrome, renders Adam emotionally wrought and frustrated when he is unable to connect with his son and realizes that the life he had imagined for Max has vanished, which he now has to convey to his son (“Qualities and Difficulties”).

The relationship between Zeek and Adam is further tested as they both acknowledge and confront Max's Asperger's diagnosis. Zeek's immediate reaction is denial; absolutely refusing to see Max's behavior as anything but a petulant child's ill-timed outbursts. He scoffs at Adam and Kristina's attempts to placate Max, such as when they dismiss Zeek's annual over-the-top Halloween party and ask their entire neighborhood to use glowsticks in lieu of candles because Max gets anxious around people and candlelight ("Orange Alert"). It is not until a stubborn Zeek decides to take Max on a camping trip that he fully comes to appreciate and understand how much of a challenge Adam faces in raising Max. In "A House Divided" (2/1/2011), Zeek foregoes his extended family's advice and plans a one-on-one camping trip with Max. He is woefully unprepared to deal with Max's impaired social interaction and intense preoccupation with bugs. Believing Max to be just like his own children, Zeek expects an interactive, "manly" fishing experience. But once Max becomes bored, Zeek cannot handle Max's unexpected and severe tantrum and has to seek out Adam for help.

In contrast to his father's bullying behavior, Adam Braverman is more affable and tries to establish a close paternal connection with his children, sixteen-year-old Haddie and Max. He attends Haddie's soccer games, helps both kids with their homework at night, and fully embraces his role as co-parent. As the oldest Braverman child, Adam often takes on the role of surrogate family patriarch for his siblings and is portrayed as the moral center of the family. As a sounding board for his siblings, Adam lifts the spirits of his sisters and builds up the confidence of his brother, very much contrary to their overbearing and gruff father. When Adam's world is rocked by the startling diagnosis of his son's Asperger's, he unfailingly tries to take on this new challenge along with the

weight of caring for his extended family and corporate family at work. But eventually his latent anxiety concerning his, now, imperfect family surfaces: “I can deal with anything. I can deal with disease, illness, broken bones. But I don’t know how to deal with this. I can’t fix this. This is for life” (“The Deep End of the Pool,” 3/16/2010). The way that Adam embraces his fallibility further distinguishes him from the obdurate Zeek.

Despite his unflappable exterior, underneath Adam displays feelings of considerable inadequacy in both the private and professional realms. In fact, he still seeks validation from his father who often withholds praise – a function of Zeek’s own emotionally distant father. Unlike his proud father, Adam is of a generation who more openly expresses emotion, even turning to therapy when necessary. Moreover, Adam is shown to distinguish his success not only through his ability to be the breadwinner, but also in terms of his embodiment of companionate marriage. The display of diverse fatherhood models in *Parenthood* – which also includes stay-at-home dad Joel, the absent and struggling alcoholic Seth, and immature first-time father Crosby – reflects the way in which men “combine their own recollection of being fathered with their own ideas of what a parent should be” (Clare, 2001, 169). Parental anxiety and failure, particularly amongst fathers, runs rampant in the multigenerational television series, but it also makes the extended families more realistic to the viewers. What is particularly compelling about *Parenthood*, as well as the other series, is watching these fathers discover the positive aspects of these unexpected challenges and utilize them to make the family unit stronger.

#### *“Modern Family” Fatherhood*

In some respects, the paternal melodramas featured in the multigenerational television series, stem not only from the need to reassert authority as head of the family,

but to also prove oneself worthy of fatherhood. Oftentimes, fathers in these multigenerational series, particularly *Modern Family*, tend to overcompensate in proving that they are good fathers, and their method of parenting is the more desirable one. The multigenerational family on *Modern Family* depicts four different types of fathers, each struggling with how to perform fatherhood in diverse circumstances. *Modern Family* utilizes a mockumentary narrative technique to document the interweaving stories of the three different families that comprise the extended Pritchett clan, which includes Jay Pritchett, newly married to a Colombian trophy wife (Gloria) with a young son (Manny), and his adult children, Claire Dunphy and Mitchell Pritchett. Overwhelmed housewife Claire, her husband Phil, and their three adolescent children Haley, Alex, and Luke represent the conventional nuclear family with the stay-at-home mom and husband-provider. Uptight Mitchell and his partner the overdramatic Cameron, a gay couple, recently adopted a Vietnamese daughter, Lily. Jay Pritchett as the family patriarch is, like Zeek Braverman, the quintessential detached father born of an era where men need only provide for their families to be considered a good father. However, after raising two grown children, Jay finds himself a stepfather to precocious pre-teen Manny, who is the same age as his grandson. Fatherhood the second time around is more challenging for Jay because he must not only readjust to the disappearance of his once comfortable late-life bachelorhood, but also accept that he is expected to be more involved in raising a child in this day and age. Still, when asked the key to being a good dad Jay replies, “when all is said and done, 90% of being a dad is just showing up” (“The Bicycle Thief”). His parenting style mimics that of Zeek Braverman on *Parenthood*, in that he doesn’t offer



affection freely but believes it's implied by his gruff mannerisms and attempts to keep his kids from making fools of themselves.

In stark contrast, Phil Dunphy – married to Jay's daughter Claire – is overeager to prove he is the “cool dad.” His attempts to bond with his three children often end in hilariously unexpected ways, such as his perfect imitation of a dance number from *High School Musical* (“Pilot”), his overzealous child-like competitiveness with his son, and his awkward penchant for using teen slang as a method of connecting with his kids on their level. Phil remarks that his style of parenting is “peerenting” – “Act like a parent, talk like a peer” (“The Incident”) – and he is reluctant to discipline his kids. Phil is similar to the “bumbling buffoon” oft portrayed in early sitcoms and the put upon husband now frequently depicted on television; and yet, because the direct camera address offers the audience insight into his “peerenting” motivations, he does not exactly embody either of these stereotypes. Still, his lack of focus and happy-go-lucky attitude often result in Phil placing himself in precarious situations that will likely end with his wife having to step in and save him from himself. When Claire, tired of being the constant disciplinarian of the family, challenges Phil to take on the role while she becomes the “fun mom,” he reacts so violently against character that Claire hastily trades back positions to keep Phil from turning into an overbearing drill instructor (“Good Cop Bad Dog”). Phil's delicate, if not anxious, relationship with Jay is greatly a result of Phil's more generative parenting style and incessant need to *sell* those around him on his parenting capabilities.

Nestled between the two prior extremes, Mitchell Pritchett and his partner of five years, Cameron Tucker, are experiencing first-time fatherhood. An uptight, mild-mannered worrywart, Mitchell takes a methodical approach to parenting. He reads all of

the baby books, fully baby-proofs the house, and is generally an overprotective and cautious father. Although he is emotive with his adopted daughter, his inhibited personality far contrasts that of Cameron who is more outgoing and flamboyant. Cameron acts as the stay-at-home dad to daughter Lily, while Mitchell is the family provider. According to media scholars Adrienne H. Ivory, Rhonda Gibson, and James D. Ivory (2009), television has homogenized the image of the traditional family underscored by “power imbalances in gender role behaviors, with one partner more dominant and the other more submissive” (170).

However, *Modern Family* often rejects the notion that the dynamics of the household consequently marks Mitchell as the “dad” and Cameron as the “mother figure” in their family. In fact, the series adroitly challenges socially constructed assumptions about “family” and fatherhood through unexpected character divergences, especially those made by Cameron. For example, even though Cameron may act more maternal than Mitchell because of his domestication and preference for hobbies such as flower arranging, he also happens to be the more butch of the couple. Cameron was a starting lineman in college and, despite being portly, triumphs over Jay in racquetball (“Moon Landing”). Additionally, Cameron prefers physical aggression – he threatens to beat up a man who is rude to Mitchell – compared to Mitchell’s penchant for verbal equivocating (“Fizbo”). Straight-laced Mitchell, on the other hand, used to participate in competitive ice dancing with his sister (“En Garde”), is obsessed with a child’s professional puppeteer act (“Not in My House”), and embodies the very clichéd love of opera and iconic gay musical artists (“Run For Your Wife”).

As television scholars Esteban del Rio and Kasey Mitchell (2010) argue, though the portrayal of the Tucker-Pritchett family may rely on exaggerated stereotypes, it also tries to defy them within the familial context. Similarly, television critic Ken Tucker (2009) writes in a review of the series, “Partners Cameron and Mitchell struggle hilariously to fit into the most straight society that comes with adopting a child...The actors take what could have been stereotypical gay comedy roles and invest them with layered anxieties,” particularly concerning fatherhood. Unlike other same-sex parents on television who are assailed by others as being unable to adequately raise a daughter, such as Kevin Walker and his partner Scotty on *Brothers & Sisters*, Mitchell and Cameron’s parenting seems intuitive. Notably, *Modern Family*’s depiction of same-sex parenting is not riddled with anxiety from whether or not gay men can or should be parents; instead, it contemplates the very challenging act of parenting in the twenty-first century, thereby mainstreaming the non-traditional family with conventional family values.

Each of the multigenerational family series examined here feature different iterations of fatherhood, encompassing fathers who, in desperately trying to idolize and live up to their own father’s expectations, begin to question the adequacy of the father-son relationship. Notably, each father inevitably chooses to adopt a parenting style that, though greatly informed by, is different than the generation before. Thus, the family patriarchs are ultimately replaced with the re-imagined fatherhood of their offspring developed within the extended familial network. That “family” in all of these series is so heavily infused with a concern for creating or rectifying the paternal relationship speaks to the continued importance of the paternal figure within the family. But it also demonstrates how, amidst today’s changing familial organization, what a family is and

how it re-enforces familialism is not contingent on a conservative construction of fatherhood. Instead paternal melodramas signal that families are defined by and enacted through the emotional relationships that converge within the multiple generations of the extended family.

### *Navigating Multigenerational Motherhood*

In the past, the maternal figure – perhaps *the* most important familial character – was typically portrayed through essentialist stereotypes in films that were specifically geared towards women. These maternal melodramas endorsed the pathos of the self-sacrificing mother figure and actively promoted a patriarchal value system masked by the romantic happy ending for the heroine. Feminist criticism, after the empowerment politics of the 1970's and the conservative backlash of the 1980's, calls into question the current and future viability of this traditional depiction of motherhood. On television, in particular, the pathology of the maternal melodrama has been recontextualized within a complex construction of feminist discourse. Today, the mothers who populate the multigenerational television series confront conflicting expectations of motherhood and feminism, often failing to balance her own desires with those of her family. In *Six Feet Under*, *Brothers & Sisters*, and *Parenthood*, the relationship between a post-menopausal mother and her daughter(s) becomes a space to explore not only the inner turmoil and dysfunction within the family and how it is resolved, but also the ways in which daughters contend with the challenges of an expanded range of choices now available to them.

Television scholar Kim Akass (2005) argues that in *Six Feet Under*, the depiction of Ruth Fisher “reveals an aspect of mothering that is routinely repressed and silenced

within patriarchy” (111). The death of the Fisher family patriarch, then, afforded Ruth the opportunity to begin negotiating her way through the unfamiliar terrain of her repressed desires (Akass, 2005). This is also the case for Nora Walker in *Brothers & Sisters*. In true melodramatic fashion, both series create moments of emotional excess – particularly in terms of their personal and romantic desires. Both series initially depict each mother as conforming to conventional notions of motherhood, framed in her kitchen busily preparing the family meal. But as newly single women, both Ruth and Nora are suddenly overwhelmed by the fact that their lives had previously been defined by their maternal responsibilities. However, even though each voices mild contempt for the lost opportunities of female empowerment, such as educational and professional attainment, in the end they take heed of familialist sentiment to feel pride in the knowledge that they have created a family.

Still, both series portray the dogged pursuit of these mothers to achieve fulfillment outside of the home. A number of episodes of *Brothers & Sisters* have included storylines in which Nora, recognizing a long repressed drive for success outside of her family, pursues a variety of opportunities for herself. Although it took some time and a lot of chastising from her children and friends, Nora tries to slowly reinvent herself. In addition to the charities she continues to head, Nora takes up writing, even going so far as to attend a college creative writing course. The only problem being, that all of her writing has no heart. It is not until Nora writes a thinly veiled account of her experiences within her own family, something real, that she finds praise from her teacher and young peers (“All in the Family”). Unlike the more vocal Nora, Ruth Fisher has bottled away most of her frustrations and resentments. However, she too has trouble pursuing a life

outside of the home without falling back into the quiet comfort of domesticity. For example, she takes a job at a flower shop only to become romantically involved with the owner, but the relationship does not last because her innate need to “mother” eventually leads to the man feeling suffocated. While they may believe themselves emotionally ready to be liberated from the domestic space, in the end, both Nora and Ruth unconsciously deem their position as “mother” as essential to their identity.

A mother’s sexual independence is also showcased in the multigenerational melodrama. Unlike the maternal melodramas of the past, the modern-day pursuit of the heterosexual relationship is more comical and realistic than hampered by pathos. For instance, Nora finds herself with a number of suitors after her husband’s death – and many of them are not strangers. Not only is Nora groped by a family friend (“For the Children”) and has her first sexual encounter of her widowhood with the family contractor (“Mistakes Were Made”), she also pursues her high school flame, whom she ironically lost her virginity to before meeting her husband (“A Father Dreams”). While she does express concern over how her children will interpret her relationships, the anxiety is tempered by the comical hijinks of her dating encounters, including when she seeks out the services of a professional matchmaker (“Sexual Politics”).

On the other hand, Ruth almost immediately, and guiltily, reveals to her family that she has been having an affair with her hairdresser prior to her husband’s death (“Pilot”). In another episode, “In the Game” (3/3/2002), during a family dinner Ruth reveals she is having a sexual relationship with Nikolai, her boss at the flower shop. Though her children are thoroughly embarrassed by her admission, Ruth proudly tells her children: “We’re all adults. We’re all sexual beings. We should acknowledge that.”

According to feminist scholar Michelle Boulous Walker (1998), for the middle-aged mother, “sexuality simply does not exist beyond her reproductive potential” (136). Thus, Ruth’s children are reluctant to afford their mother the same sexual privilege and desire that they exhibit. As Boulous Walker writes, in the family, the maternal figure “should be either woman or mother, never both” (136). For Akass (2005), the consternation that the adult children in *Brothers & Sisters* and *Six Feet Under* hold over their mother’s burgeoning sexuality is a function of a desire to “keep the family intact and unchanging” (114). The fact that these maternal sexual relationships are often short-lived or rife with conflict and regret only adds to the subversion of a mother’s romantic desires for the intimacy of the intact family dynamic.

In addition to reconciling maternal desires, the multigenerational series also examines how adult daughters contend with the challenges of what feminist scholar Elspeth Probyn (1997) terms “choiceoisie.” Probyn uses “choiceoisie” as a type of feminism that singles out women’s life choices as being a consequence of individual choice rather than culturally determined or directed choices. Thus women choose for themselves whether or not to stay at home or work. Choiceoisie is a function of new traditionalist rhetoric that promotes the unparalleled opportunities that women now possess, but in actuality, urges a woman to adopt, or *choose*, a more conventional model of motherhood (Probyn, 1997; Projansky, 2001). The matriarch in *Six Feet Under*, *Brothers & Sisters*, and *Parenthood* each embodies a woman portrayed as having willingly subverted her feminist desires for her maternal responsibilities. Their daughters, on the other hand, are still struggling with the implications of this expanded choice, particularly working mothers such as Sarah Walker and Sarah and Julia Braverman.

The mother-daughter relationships in *Brothers & Sisters* and *Parenthood* personify the intergenerational tensions of feminist ideology and its connection to motherhood. Unlike the father-son relationship in multigenerational series, which, as noted earlier, is often predicated on altering the previous generation's style of "fathering," daughters are not so much rejecting the way they were mothered as they are trying to negotiate modern-day maternal experiences and choices. While a "mommy mystique" amongst mothers and daughters produces within both a relentless and demanding adherence to an impossible standard of success, it also affects the strength of the bond between mother and daughter (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). For example, just as Nora begins to experience a personal rejuvenation and liberation from her domestic containment, her daughter Sarah is beset by multiple failings both at work and at home, culminating in a divorce and eventual job loss. Sarah is discouraged by the fact that she cannot reconcile the iconic motherhood that Nora has seemingly always represented with her desire for a career and duty to the family business. However, Sarah and Nora often bond over the complexities of motherhood and personal sacrifice.

Camille Braverman has a similar relationship with her daughter Sarah, a proud single mother forced by the tough economy to move back in with her parents. Both mother and daughter are starting a new chapter in their respective lives – Camille searching for fulfillment outside of the home and Sarah struggling to "find herself" after sacrificing her desires for those of her family and unsuccessfully trying to get her life together. Because Camille and Sarah exhibit similar dispositions – both are artistic and free-spirited – they often confide in each other and, more often than not, Camille forces Sarah to accept the realities of her choices. For example, in "Man vs. Possum" (3/9/10),



even though her father encourages Sarah to pursue a dream job working at a marketing company, Camille warns that she is better off continuing to work as a bartender like she has done for the past ten years. When Sarah is disappointed to learn that her lack of a college degree precludes her from getting the marketing job, it is Camille who reminds her that the choices she made years ago as a young woman and new mother now have consequences. Thus, Camille attempts to help Sarah by using herself as a model of such consequences. In the end, Sarah exemplifies the complex burden “choiceoisie” extols on today’s mothers, though here, it is not exacted through guilt over choosing work over family – which is the case for Sarah’s sister Julia, an attorney – but manifests as a rebuke for making the “wrong” choice.

Instead of instigating an irrational competition over a “right” kind of motherhood, in these multigenerational series motherhood becomes a place where the mother-daughter relationship can be redefined and “the family” renewed. As television moves into a new era of feminist discussion, one expects that socio-cultural changes in familial structure would finally result in a broader expression of femininities and motherhood. However, television continues to perpetuate and subsequently cultivate implicit hegemonic maternal narratives. By offering the supposed availability of “choice,” television represents feminism’s more liberal politics but this choice is “freed of the necessity of thinking about the political and social ramifications of the act of choosing” (Probyn, 1997, 134). Hence, we tend to see more women on television actively choosing to stay at home and raise a family, or career women weighed down by an inherent guilt for not spending enough time with their families. Women automatically

assume that “choice” is the marker of feminist liberalism, when, in fact, it is merely another mechanism of normalizing judgments.

In all of the multigenerational series examined here, mothers eventually voice their admiration for the differences they see between their daughters and themselves. Whether it is Ruth’s tenuous connection with Claire in *Six Feet Under*, Nora’s deep appreciation for her daughters’ pursuit of a life outside of the home in *Brothers & Sisters*, or Camille Braverman’s recognition of her daughter Sarah as a kindred spirit, these series showcase the underlying intergenerational commonalities as a mechanism for a strong extended family. Bonding over their own repressed desires strengthens the rapport between mother and daughter, which, in turn, intensifies the familialist desires within the family. Hence, the narrative will always return to the family facing adversity together and reaffirms the primacy of the familial institution despite its own fluctuating characterization of what “family” – or here, motherhood – entails.

### **A Portrait of Twenty-First Century Family Melodrama**

Extended and multigenerational family melodramas can be, without doubt, terribly clichéd and far-fetched: Do multigenerational families really reside in the same town? Is it a near crisis when one sibling contemplates leaving the “nest?” Can family crises really be resolved over a wine-infused dinner table conversation? As television critic Marney Rich Keenan (2010) argues, excess and quick resolution to conflict is essential in the melodramatic modality: “interactions are more dramatic, sensibilities heightened, conversations full of rapid wit and spot-on comebacks. And, too, the endings are predictably upbeat, not like real life. [These shows] manage to tidy up the discord and conflict with a nice bow.” Today, parents and children find it increasingly difficult to

spend time together, let alone attend endless school plays, sporting events, and family barbecues with extended family. Still, these series advance a renaissance of family fellowship that makes bearing the pathos of individual adversity like divorce, disability, single parenthood, and financial hardship survivable, if not, easier. Whether it's Sarah Braverman (*Parenthood*) and Kitty Walker (*Brothers & Sisters*) moving back into the family home, Justin Walker on *Brothers & Sisters* trying to overcome a debilitating drug addiction and learning disability, or Kristina Braverman (*Parenthood*) and Claire Dunphy (*Modern Family*) endeavoring to accept *choosing* to be stay-at-home moms, the series examined here tap into the current unsettled state of the American family. That all four series are centered on adult siblings and their parents, adds to the potential ways that "family" can unfold, as each child tries to raise children of their own.

In the extended and multigenerational family series, familial fellowship is continually strained week after week by way of particular challenges to conventional notions of "family" and family crises. Populated by a variety of individual personalities, which feed the melodramatic spectacle, these multigenerational families still struggle to embrace difference, which inevitably is appropriated in favor of positive familial affirmation. Film scholar Peter Brooks (1976) identified melodrama as expressing an "anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue" (20). In the series examined here, the "new" and/or "different" is initially problematic to the family unit, but must eventually be embraced in order for "normalcy" to return. The frequent melodramatic interludes that tend to shake the otherwise quiet calm of the extended family is not simply a narrative device common to television series with soap operatic affinities. Instead, the

melodramatic structure manifests as ideological challenges to the familial status quo, utilized to demonstrate that this status quo is inevitably unachievable.

The families represented in *Six Feet Under*, *Brothers & Sisters*, *Modern Family*, and *Parenthood* deal with a variety of conflicts and calamities, each, in its own way, challenging the validity of the homogenized nuclear family. Today, television wholeheartedly embraces the fact that families have problems, and by doing so, provides an interesting counter to the idyllic series of the past. This is not to say that television does not still rely on false niceties and easy answers to quickly resolve conflict within an episode or two, but the formula for the “happy family” has been altered to accommodate and reflect diverse constructions of happy families.

American studies scholar Neal Gabler (2010) argues “flock families” are “pure wish fulfillment,” offering us as viewers “friends and family at one’s beck and call without any of the hassles.” But perhaps, at a time when familial bonds are tested by war, collapsing economies, horrific natural disasters, and the countless family-related homicides portrayed in the news, these family dramas and their insular rifts and resolutions are a pleasant respite. These extended families, assembled from an eclectic cast of characters with each one accepted, respected, and appreciated, make even us in front of the screen welcome members of the family. Even in boundary pushing treatments of families, such as the extended mob family in *The Sopranos* (HBO), the polygamist family in *Big Love* (HBO), or the riotous family of tricksters in *Shameless* (Showtime), the survival of the core family unit is of utmost importance. And even as families turn into intricate jumbles of genealogy, these televisual families, too, question the legitimacy of familial relations; and yet, they never fail to restore the lost members back to the fold.

Although familial discord is oft rendered a sign of domestic dysfunction, in these series (and therefore households) it symbolizes the necessity and importance of maintaining the familial network for adults, even at the expense of one's personal values; because it is the family valued above all else and all others. The next chapter continues this examination of family fellowship within the spectacularization of "the family" within the reality TV genre. Instead of portraying and reaffirming familialist ideology through tenuous family relationships, as has been a hallmark of the shows examined in these last few chapters, the spectacle families that populate reality TV challenge familial difference in favor of constructing family life as a universal experience.

## CHAPTER SIX

### REAL FAMILIALISM: REALITY TV, SPECTACLE FAMILIES, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF FAMILY

Although the stress of having two sets of multiples doesn't always bring out the best in us, we're a family and we're in this together.  
It might be a crazy life, but it's *our* life.  
-Opening to *Jon & Kate Plus 8*

We ain't your next door family.  
-Opening to *Gene Simmons Family Jewels*

On October 15, 2009, breaking news streamed across network news outlets relaying the peril of six-year-old Falcon Heene, who was reportedly stranded in an oversized weather balloon soaring across the Colorado landscape. Cameras documented the boy's flight, the massive rescue effort, and his parent's hysteria only to report hours later that Falcon had been safely hidden in the family's garage the entire time. Days later panic turned to anger as the viewing public learned that it was merely a stunt put on by the family to earn a little face time on television and parlay that 15 minutes of fame into a reality show. Speculation was already mounting when the family was immediately and continually associated with its earlier appearance on ABC's reality series *Wife Swap* in the news reports, but it all came to a head when little Falcon confusedly mentioned later during a litany of morning show interviews that, "You guys said we did it for the show." Police investigations revealed that patriarch Richard Heene had concocted the elaborate

hoax and it wasn't the first time he had tried to capitalize on America's exhibition of what I term spectacle families, except this time his pursuit of infamy landed him in jail.

Spectacle families have incurred public interest since 1935 when the Dionne quintuplets became a significant tourist attraction for the Canadian government, and can be seen more recently in the controversy surrounding Nadya Suleman's (a.k.a. the Octomom) delivery of octuplets in 2009. "Spectacle" families are those that defy the nuclear family unit norm in some notable way such as through substantial familial size, celebrity, bizarre behavior or disability, yet celebrate their nonconformity. Not only a carnivalesque attraction to solicit the prying eyes of travelers, showcasing (and exploiting) families has also been a lucrative media trope for a number of television genres, particularly soap operas, melodramas, and dysfunctional family sitcoms.

Of late, spectacle families have been a staple of reality TV, which has angled successfully to capture the zeitgeist of the American people since its humble beginnings in the late 1940s. Amongst competitions (e.g., *Survivor*), dating programs (e.g., *The Bachelor*), talent contests (e.g., *American Idol*), makeover shows (e.g., *Extreme Makeover*), and docu-soaps (e.g., *The Real World*), reality TV has found a profitable niche in documenting so-called "ordinary" or "authentic" families on television for audiences' voyeuristic pleasure.

What could be more natural, more authentic than the family? But not just any family, it has to be extraordinary, unusual, or bizarre. Reality TV requires the spectacle family – namely, a family that performs unusual occupations together (e.g., undertakers in *Family Plots*; pawn brokers in *Pawn Stars* or *Hardcore Pawn*; bounty hunters in *Dog: The Bounty Hunter*), evinces the perks and burdens of celebrity (e.g., *Being Bobby*

*Brown, Family Forman, Househusbands of Hollywood*), or challenges conventional expectations of familial size (e.g., *Jon & Kate Plus 8, 19 Kids and Counting*). The spectacle family can lift our spirits as it triumphs over adversity, while at the same time remind us how complicated being “different” can be. It can condemn us for our misguided stereotyping and demonstrate the ordinary among the seemingly abnormal or dysfunctional. And, sadly, its misfortune can make us feel superior about our own families. The spectacle family reflects the state of the twenty-first century American family: its diversity, its roller coaster existence of triumph and tragedy, its position economically and culturally, and, most importantly, its observance of conservative family values to promote stability and happiness.

As reality TV continues down the path of hit or miss romances, quixotic contests that feature inedible delicacies or humiliating tasks, and the perfunctory use of stereotypes cohabitating in posh living spaces, it is hard to imagine that it has also played a noteworthy role in showcasing the restoration of familialism on television. But this restoration is subtle; nearly invisible amidst the outrageous, and oftentimes bizarre, behavior of celebrity families or peculiar dynamics of so-called “ordinary” families portrayed on television. Reality TV is at the forefront of illustrating the constantly evolving structure and function of American family life (Matheson, 2007). It is a genre that “implies the documentation of ‘reality,’” and its authenticity stems from its modes of surveillance and therapeutic discourse (Pioto & Otter, 2007, 3). Television has long offered viewers a glimpse into the lives of others; now, not only does reality TV allow viewers to enter into the confidential space of one’s home, but they are also invited to examine and wax nostalgic over the behaviors and emotions they witness. Similar to the



other genres examined in this dissertation, the families under surveillance in reality TV offer a *performance* of contemporary family life; however, the way in which reality TV represents “the family” is unlike that of the simplistic familial models prevalent in sitcoms or the intense pathos within familial melodramas. Instead, these “real” families blend eccentric family dynamics with the re-edification of conservative family values.

Whereas previous chapters of this dissertation have examined how television reinforces a hegemonic family by highlighting the difficulties and resolve of families who deviate from the so-called *norm*; here, I want to explore how reality TV ultimately eschews the spectacle or difference that typifies individual families in favor of constructing and representing “the family” as a universal experience. The spectacle families that populate the series under analysis in this chapter often evoke a visceral response of shock and awe from the audience as it tries to reconcile these atypical families to heavily ingrained notions of what “the family” looks like and how it behaves. Unlike scripted comedies and dramas, which utilize a constant stream of familial crises to reinforce the social and cultural value of the family, reality TV emphasizes the performance of family as authenticating the power and reverence that “the family” continues to hold even as its definition and structure continually changes.

This chapter specifically examines reality programming that deconstructs the spectacle of eccentric or bizarre families within a self-contained and decidedly ordinary day-in-the-life narrative. Aptly labeled “reality sitcoms” by media scholar Joanne Morreale (2003b), these familial surveillance series can be “truer reflections than scripted sitcoms” despite the fact that they depict an edited performance (Smith, 2008, 396). As a derivative of the traditional sitcom, reality sitcoms (or docu-sitcoms) enact traditional

narrative conventions of exposition, disruption, and resolution, and continue its predecessor's focus on the nuclear family – albeit one more broadly defined than in the past (Morreale, 2003b). Sitcoms have always carried out the ideological function of reflecting the changing social mores of the time, typically by modeling desirable and appropriate behavior (Brooks, 2005; Brown & Hayes, 2001; Taylor, 1989a). Predictably, sitcoms portrayed and easily rectified “the harangues and foibles” of the American family in order to emphasize the family's central cultural importance within the modernization of the nation itself (Horton, 2008, 47). The reality sitcom continues to solidify the ideological significance of the family within the domestic space. However, whereas the sitcom invariably offers a highly stereotyped ideal of “family,” the reality sitcom demonstrates that there are now functioning alternatives to the hegemonic nuclear family norm – though these “different” families still promote a conservative ideology. Thus, the reality sitcom most assuredly reinvigorates our commitment to family in any form, all in the midst of advising us on how to wrangle large broods and difficult children, deal with substance abuse and family crises, and navigate the ordinary tribulations of everyday life.

Here, I explore how reality sitcoms have utilized two versions of the spectacle family – celebrity families and mega-families – to maintain television's resilient commitment to a hegemonic ideal, that is, familialism. Familialism, again, is the idea that within the social patterns of familial organization, there are specific cultural qualities (e.g., gendered hierarchy, intimate familial relationships) that have thoroughly defined how we conceptualize the ideal American family. Each form of the spectacle family presents an occasion to examine modern-day familialism within the protracted surveillance of popular and self-defined “ordinary” families. Broadly speaking, these

reality series mitigate the presumed “difference” of these families and employ spectacle families as role models who embody “society’s basic values” and serves “to initiate individuals into its way of life and dramatize its controversies and struggles” (Kellner, 2003, 2).

For example, celebrity family reality series expose the seeming normality of celebrity life despite cultural assertions to the contrary. Moreover, the most successful of these series – that is, those that have aired longer than one or two seasons – reveal a strict distinction between the extravagance of celebrity and the spectacle of performing “family” within famous families. Celebrity reality series that are merely manufactured docu-soaps angling to showcase the star’s personal life before the cameras to either raise their own celebrity status or resurrect dwindling careers (e.g., Pamela Anderson, Denise Richards, Bobby Brown and Whitney Houston, Dina Lohan), have generally been less successful than reality sitcoms centered on documenting the domestication of the celebrity. Series featuring Ozzy Osbourne, George Foreman, Deion Sanders, and, for a time, Hulk Hogan, fully integrated the public persona and family life, thereby circumscribing the trappings of celebrity through the presentation of strong family morals and simple parenting lessons for twenty-first century families. In the celebrity reality sitcom, even though fame remains symptomatic of their attractiveness to an audience, the implied message remains that celebrity families “might seem different from yours at first,” but you will come to recognize them as “essentially ‘the same’” (Gillan, 2004, 56).

Hence, I argue that the celebrity reality sitcom invariably defies viewers’ assumptions regarding celebrity and its accouterments in favor of translating spectacle as domesticated and genuine. Even though celebrity families exist within the privileged

circumstances of a hyperreality, seeing how they navigate and manage the pressures of family life, such as working parenthood, familial crisis, and child rearing, marks them as authentically “real” and representative of viewers’ families. Since the debut of *The Osbournes* on MTV in 2002, celebrity reality sitcoms have reinforced domestic ideology within unconventional lifestyles, manipulating star power, gender roles, race, and even class, to create and advance new models of domesticity and patriarchy for modern-day families.

Meanwhile, non-celebrity spectacle families – typically uncommonly sized and/or consisting of multiples, or those nonconforming to hegemonic nuclear norms in (dis)ability, familial activity, and structure – reached new heights of popularity during the 2000s, with cable networks like The Learning Channel (TLC), A&E, and the History Channel offering original programming documenting the domestic environments or professional activities of unconventional families. Series such as *19 Kids and Counting* (TLC), *Family Plots* (A&E), and *Pawn Stars* (History Channel) demonstrate the ways in which families accentuate their so-called “difference” while, at the same time, asserting, like celebrities, that they are just like everyone else’s family. For the past decade, TLC has devoted much of its network content to producing “Life Unscripted” television docu-series, and, as of late, aired a number of successful reality family sitcoms. These “lifestyle documentaries,” have been dedicated to examining relationships, parenting, and family issues (Matheson, 2007). Moving away from documenting specific and progressive familial “moments,” that is, dating in *A Dating Story*, a wedding in *A Wedding Story*, the birth of a child in *A Baby Story*, TLC now offers programming which follows the daily lives of attractive and noteworthy spectacle families. I argue that the

spectacle family reality sitcom, particularly those that feature what writer James Poniewozik (2009) termed “mega-families,” effectively mitigate familial “difference” by propagating “the family,” at its very core, as a universal entity and a reflection of the cultivation of familialism in everyday life.

In *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* (1998), writer and American studies scholar Neil Gabler writes that in this era of media spectacle and sensationalism we essentially see our lives in cinematic terms created and performed “for an audience of our peers, following the scripts of media culture” (Kellner, 2003, 4). According to Mark Patterson (2006), “spectacle” is “taken out of the context of everyday life” (121), and yet, reality TV paradoxically embeds “everyday life in the context of the spectacle” (Hughes-Fuller, 2009, 98). Unsurprisingly, the popularity of reality sitcoms, then, mirrors the fascination of seeing not only the spectacle of our own lives, but also to “peer into the private lives of others” (Kellner, 2003, 19-20). What follows is an examination of family-centered reality sitcoms that manipulate the public’s fondness for voyeurism and fly-on-the-wall surveillance, while at the same time, enact and highlight familialist ideology as directive of today’s familial experiences. But how does this highly constructed performance of “reality” shape reflections of the twenty-first century American family on television? How does reality TV conceptualize the “real” family amidst the spectacle of everyday life?

Media scholar Jan Jagodzinski (2003) defines reality television as the careful constructing and displaying of “the ‘lives’ of ordinary people engaged in sometimes extraordinary events” (320). It promises “access to the real via comprehensive monitoring” (Andrejevic, 2004, 3). Reality sitcoms focus on the “unscripted rhythms of

daily life” and how family, itself, becomes the spectacle (Andrejevic, 2004, 8). To that end, this chapter discusses the origins of reality sitcoms, including television’s first family reality show (PBS’s *An American Family*, 1973) and its evolution into a generation of celebrity family branding (e.g., *The Osbournes*, 2002-2005; *Gene Simmons Family Jewels*, 2006-), scary and accusatory depictions of careless parenting (e.g., *Wife Swap*, 2004-; *Nanny 911*, 2004-; *Supernanny*, 2005-), and an amalgamation of lessons integrating family, (in)fertility, and religion (e.g., *Jon & Kate Plus 8*, 2007-2009; *19 Kids and Counting*, 2008-). The chapter concludes with a discussion of each of the respective subgenres of familial reality television: a comparison of two similar celebrity families (*Gene Simmons Family Jewels*, 2006-, and *Run’s House*, 2005-) and an analysis of TLC’s portraits of “real” families (*Jon & Kate Plus 8* and *19 Kids and Counting*). Although the attraction of series such as *Jon & Kate Plus 8* and *19 Kids and Counting* lies within the controversy, curiosity, and derision of uncommonly sized families, the celebrity series chosen have not only shown a remarkable longevity for reality sitcoms but also center on the more uncommon point of view of the patriarch. The construction of the domesticated rocker – here, the flamboyant hard rock bassist Gene Simmons and hip-hop originator Joseph “Rev. Run” Simmons (no relation) – and his family speaks to highly conservative and patriarchal notions of marriage and child rearing missing in other celebrity reality series. Each series examined here actively promotes a universal familialist ideology in contrast to the individuality of each family, as necessary to creating a stable family life in line with current political and cultural motivations to revive a commitment to family values at the turn of the century. In the end, reality sitcoms reframe unconventional

families by manipulating our admiration, or antipathy as the case may be, into a fascination with making the “odd” the “ordinary” and daily life spectacular.

### **The Family and Reality TV**

In the face of economic crisis, industry instability and drive for profit, and the rise of celebrity culture, reality television has embedded itself not only on prime-time schedules, but also within our own lives as water cooler fodder and lifestyle education (Holmes, 2006). Driven by cheap production values and competitive ratings, particularly with young demos, reality TV has grown exponentially in the early twenty-first century and marked its place in television history by creating a few central narrative elements that have solidified into a set of standards and practices incorporated into most every series within the genre. Reality sitcoms depict “people portraying themselves, filmed at least in part in their living or working environment rather than on a set, without a script, with events placed in a narrative context, for the primary purpose of viewer entertainment” (Nabi, 2007, 372-3). Reality TV is not simply “real” life recorded for the small screen but “real” life produced and constructed for the entertainment of the audience. The growth of reality TV as a viable television genre has occurred simultaneously with both the advancement of cable television audience fragmentation and the instigation and popularity of more prescriptive, do-it-yourself television series. But, with any workable and profitable innovation in television comes an overabundance of imitations. According to Huff (2006), “During the 2003-2004 TV season, reality programs made up 13 percent of the prime-time landscape, up from 4 percent in 1999. In the fall of 2004, there were 21 shows on the six broadcast network’s prime-time lineups” (20). Reality TV has not only

conquered prime-time on the broadcast networks, but also solidified niche cable networks like HGTV, The Food Network, Fox Reality Channel, and TLC.

Although cinema vérité-styled programming has been around since the inception of television in the form of shows such as *Candid Camera* (1948-1967) and *Queen for a Day* (1956-1964), reality television exploded in the 1990s and early-2000s with the experimental *The Real World* (1992-) and the top-rated *Survivor* (2000-). Viewers were astonishingly amused by the fly-on-the-wall antics of strangers living in small quarters, contestants forced to contend with demanding stunts, and sneak-peeks into the “normal” lives of popular celebrities. Ranging from the salacious to the educational, reality TV has quickly become a primary mechanism for storytelling, even if it is more of an “edited” reality. But more interesting than the latest winner of the infamous “15-minutes” or lavish home designs, is the genre’s surprising link to the sitcom and subsequently the family.

#### *Ozzie and Harriet’s Star Sitcom*

Though many would mark the MTV debut of *The Osbournes* in 2002 as the beginning of the celebrity reality show craze, the “star sitcom” first appeared in 1952 when Ozzie Nelson fused fame and family life in *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. Television scholar Jennifer Gillan (2004) defines the star sitcom as a series that “featured star couples... playing themselves in fictionalized versions of their actual lives, often in replicas of their actual houses” (55). Like many of the celebrity reality shows we recognize today, the Nelsons provided a realistic glimpse into the daily life of the famous family, even modeling the soundstage after their own home. Though television in the 1950s aired a number of star sitcoms, such as *The Jack Benny Program* (1950-1965), *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), and *The Burns and Allen Show* (1954-65), these series were



either far more flexible in breaking the fourth wall or centered on familial discord instigated by celebrity, and did not embody the nuclear ideal. Contrarily, *Ozzie and Harriet* edified the advantages and necessity of a harmonious suburban life: “Thoroughly middle-class and middle American Ozzie spent each week learning the lessons of togetherness that he had forgotten from the week before: how to get along in the new environment of domesticity and companionate marriage” (Gilbert, 2005, 12). In short order, *Ozzie and Harriet* became emblematic of an idyllic middle-class domestic arrangement, “a comic vision of a national adjustment to male domesticity and companionate marriage” (Gilbert, 2005, 143), while, at the same time, allowed viewers an insider’s look into the domestic life of America’s famous family (Gilbert, 2005; Gillan, 2004; Morreale, 2003a).

Gillan (2004) argues that the 1950’s star sitcoms were “an embryonic form of reality television” and that contemporary versions of the reality sitcom are merely a new “development of that form” (56). Present day celebrity reality sitcoms play upon the same “star-as-ordinary, star-as-special” dynamic inherent in the (edited) autobiographical footage and narratives of the star sitcom (Gillan, 2004). Moreover, as discussed later in this chapter, Ozzie Nelson’s “weekly comic escapades surveyed the nagging problems of men adjusting to a confusing new world of women, children, and mass consumption,” not unlike the domesticated celebrity patriarchs in today’s reality sitcoms (Gilbert, 2005, 12). However, unlike the star sitcoms of the past, reality sitcoms are less likely to present a ready 30-minute resolution to well-timed comic dilemmas, instead opting for a more subtle staging of domestic lessons and familial crisis evocative of the complexities surrounding modern-day families (Gillan, 2004).

Although *Ozzie and Harriet* exemplified the standard for star sitcoms, it eventually transformed its original focus on integrating celebrity and comedic familial situations in favor of emphasizing middle-class suburban life like many of the domestic sitcoms of the 1960s. The show abandoned musical numbers and the Hollywood locale for “straight-ahead family stories...[in] a more typically American [middle-class] neighborhood, full of normal, easygoing folks” (Jones, 1992, 92). Furthermore, Ozzie’s career was no longer center stage. In fact, like other domestic sitcoms of the era, the series rarely showed or discussed the patriarch at work, opting to direct his attention towards domestic household harmony and gratification (Jones, 1992; Morreale, 2003a). Domestic sitcoms thereafter, specifically those that either featured well-known celebrities in a domestic setting (e.g., *The Lucy Show*, 1962-1974; *The Doris Day Show*, 1968-72; or *The Tony Randall Show*, 1976-78) or fictionalized the domestication of celebrities (e.g., *Make Room for Daddy*, 1953-1964; *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, 1961-1966; or *The Partridge Family*, 1970-74), were less likely to exhibit the realism that the Nelsons first tried to demonstrate in their series. Although one could argue that the documentary-like narration by comedian Bernie Mac in *The Bernie Mac Show* (2001-2006) is a near-perfect reinvention of the star sitcom, the reality sitcom aspires to integrate “a voyeuristic exposé of the lives of the rich and famous” with a genuine depiction of a family, famous or otherwise (Kellner, 2003, 19).

#### *Re-Presenting “An American Family”*

Despite successful iterations of the star sitcom, it is important to remember that these series were overwhelmingly fictionalized versions of celebrities’ actual lives. Reality TV, on the other hand, incorporates a cadre of cameras to capture, supposedly,

unadulterated moments without the benefit of a clear-cut narrative. It is a genre that benefits from the candid display of human emotions and circumstances all edited together for the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience. Hence, while it is not entirely wrong to advocate the star sitcom as providing the original architecture for reality sitcoms, reality TV would not be nearly as popular with audiences or economically efficient for networks had they not integrated documentary filmmaking techniques with extraordinary public surveillance of intimate moments.

Allen Funt's *Candid Camera* remains the ultimate precursor to today's reality TV, but the caught-on-tape moments that generate exciting television took on more of a narrative form in the 1970s with PBS's *An American Family* (Huff, 2006; Murray & Ouellette, 2004). Filmed over the course of seven months in 1971, *An American Family* followed the family of Bill and Pat Loud as they confronted marital turbulence, their son's revelation of his homosexuality, external social upheaval, and eventually a divorce. The unobtrusive cinema vérité documentary series did not just feed viewers' voyeuristic tendencies but also served as a social experiment breakthrough (McCarthy, 2004). *An American Family* "portrayed everyday life without embellishment," here, an upper-middle-class California family exposed their familial trials to the world in a real life soap opera (Ruoff, 2002, xii). But despite its status as a media phenomenon, the series was criticized for what some viewed as the exploitation and manipulation of an unwitting family (Kompare, 2004). Critics maligned the show as a "sign of a society increasingly based on spectacle; indeed, some reviewers perceived the Louds as a family *invented* by the media" (Ruoff, 2002, 106).

However, what the series accomplished was a depiction of an “every family” dealing with real issues, thereby prompting both discussion of the status of the American family and the generation of an entirely new genre of television. As media scholar Sarah Matheson (2007) explains, “[The show] was considered controversial due to its frank representation of [the Louds’] domestic life and for what it revealed about the less than ideal dynamics that underpinned the ‘typical’ suburban family” (33). In spite of television’s past adherence to promoting the mythic familialist nuclear family, it was becoming clear that a revolution in family values was underfoot in the 1970s. In fact, film scholar Jeffrey Ruoff (2002) notes that producers “deliberately chose an upper-middle-class family whose lifestyle approximated that of families seen on situation comedies,” but it was clear by the end of the series that “the old ideal of carefree sitcom families had crumbled” (xii). *An American Family* also “asked audiences to think seriously about family, marital relations, sexuality, and affluence” (Ruoff, 2002, xii). According to Ruoff’s *An American Family: A Televised Life* (2002), an estimated 10 million viewers experienced each episode of the series, provoking “debates concerning family life and sexuality, the state and character of the nation, and the role of television in American culture” (xvi).

With *An American Family*, producers Craig Gilbert and Alan and Susan Raymond developed “a portrait of a family that captured the breakdown of fixed distinctions between public and private, reality and spectacle” (Ruoff, 2002, xii). Notably, *An American Family* generated a new category of reality television that media scholar Jon Dovey (2000) would later label the “docu-soap.” For Dovey, the docu-soap deviates from the traditional documentary format by engaging with everyday life and emotions while

playing up the personalities in front of the camera. But as television scholar Stella Bruzzi (2001) noted, the paradox of docu-soaps is that “they purport to be interested in the excessively ordinary, while at the same time having reached the level of success and notoriety they have done by the discovery and promotion of ‘stars’” (134). As of late, popular docu-soaps such as *The Real World* are more focused on the exhibition of conscious performance than on depicting natural behavior (Kompare, 2004). Even *An American Family*’s creator Craig Gilbert warns, “Real life depiction is not the same as real life” (qtd. in Ruoff, 2002, 3). Still, as popular culture scholar Robert Thompson argues “the family” continues to be at the center of the docu-soap narrative: “What *The Real World* did was come up with the idea of setting up a completely artificial family, under artificial circumstances and do *An American Family* treatment” (qtd. in Huff, 2006, 13).

#### *The Birth of the Reality Sitcom*

As reality TV becomes fully mainstreamed within American life, its reliance on traditional television narrative structure is ever more apparent. Television scholar Rebecca Feasey (2008) notes that reality TV programs “draw on documentary traditions, employ soap opera narratives, use voiceover commentaries, demand minimal writing, focus on real lives and engage with first person accounts” (135). In merging a number of television camera techniques and narrative stylistics it is not surprising that reality TV would evolve into a generic hybrid built on the most basic genre of television: the sitcom. Notably, despite the reality sitcom’s spotlight on the spectacle family it still embraces the ordinary – though not monotonous – pleasures and commonplace activities of domesticity. Additionally, Bruzzi (2001) explains that the reality sitcom emphasizes both

the characters' personalities and social roles, all while using the traditional sitcom techniques like editing together sequences with "a limited number of narrative strands per episode" (132). Even though the reality sitcom relies on the blurring of the boundaries of real and fiction, it has become more practiced than traditional sitcoms at engaging contemporary social issues, particularly those that involve the twenty-first century family, such as drug and alcohol abuse, marriage, and religion.

The transition from docu-soaps such as *The Real World* to reality sitcoms took place with the debut of MTV's *The Osbournes* in 2002. Unlike *An American Family* and *The Real World*, *The Osbournes* (2002-2005) was modeled more as an updated, though unconventional, version of early domestic sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best* and "star sitcom" *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. Although it depicts a celebrity family rather than a "real" one, the program's true appeal was its "absurd juxtaposition of the self-proclaimed Prince of Darkness, former Black Sabbath singer Ozzy Osbourne, and the 1950s family ideal" (Kutulas, 2005, 59). From outward appearances, the Osbournes certainly seemed unconventional with their Gothic-themed household décor, incessant cursing, and tattooed and pierced bodies. However, despite their dysfunctional family relationships, Ozzy, his wife/manager Sharon, and teen children Jack and Kelly, offered an interesting alternative interpretation of nuclear familialism:

Like [Ozzie and Harriet] Nelson, the Osbournes have had an enormous impact, in spite of the program's thin comedy situations, by making people think about what makes a family and what constitutes family values...*The Osbournes* offer the reassurance that no matter how wacky, weird, and seemingly dysfunctional things may look on the surface, everything really is okay at the foundation because the family will prevail. (Linder, 2005, 67-68)

Even as a parody of the domestic sitcom, *The Osbournes* used its own definition of family to show that family values was still at the heart of American life (Kutulas, 2005; Linder, 2005).

In 2002, *The Osbournes* quickly became MTV's all-time highest-rated series with more than six million viewers per week – success unheard of even for the network's reality pioneer *The Real World* – and won an Emmy Award for best nonfiction alternative program (Kompare, 2004; Linder, 2005). Over its four seasons, *The Osbournes* referenced Ozzy's past drug abuse, portrayed Sharon's cancer diagnosis and subsequent treatment, and followed the phoenix-like career of the drug-addled rock star. Although the show helped reinvent Ozzy and jumpstart his children's careers in the music business, both Ozzy and Sharon claim they were motivated to put their life in front of the cameras in order to expose America to *normal* family values. Quoted in the *New York Times*, Ozzy stated that, "he wanted to showcase his version of family values" (Rutenberg, 2002). Later, Sharon explained that they "agreed to do the show because she thought that America needed to see what a normal family was really like" (Bentley, 2002).

Stemming from an appearance on MTV's *Cribs*, an updated version of *The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* (1984-1995), *The Osbournes* "gave viewers a glimpse into the life of a star family and completely played against the expected stereotypes... Few, if anyone would have expected the Osbournes at home were, well, regular. They were, to a point" (Huff, 2006, 48). Unlike *An American Family*'s Loud family, "who were meant to represent the 'every family' whose surface contentment hides emotional distance, the Osbournes were promoted as a specific 'anti-family' whose visible eccentricities hid a reservoir of intimacy and affection" (Kompare, 2004, 100). Even with

the screaming, swearing and over-the-top tantrums by all members of the Osbourne clan, *The Osbournes* brought “a new reality-based dimension to the old faithful genre of the family situation comedy, [and] also offer[ed] reassurance that the past is not forgotten and traditional values of family love and commitment endure” (Linder, 2005, 64). In short order, Ozzy Osbourne became a Ward Cleaver for a new generation, the likes of which fictional dads like Homer Simpson, Tim Taylor, Raymond Barone, Peter Griffith, and Jeff Foxworthy – all who satirize fatherhood’s most iconic traits for laughs – could not compare.

*The Osbournes* ultimately utilized alternative and dysfunctional domesticity to play with viewers’ assumption of *family*, similar to the way in which postwar sitcoms employed capitalist materialism and suburbanization to render, and subsequently praise, familialist idealism. In spite of the satanic décor, lack of proper schooling, and general disregard for decorum and propriety, more in-depth scrutiny reveals, “the Osbournes are remarkably conventional in their daily routines” (Linder, 2005, 66). Television scholar Joanne Morreale (2003b) argues that much of the Osbourne’s success and domestic appeal stems from its resemblance to working-class families, particularly those traits of working-class fathers as portrayed on sitcoms, such as men as buffoons, immature, or lacking common sense, regardless of the fact that they were celebrities:

The Osbournes represented otherness by virtue of their “authentic” outsider status as a celebrity rock star family. Their inversion of middle-class norms worked primarily because they were marked as different in the first place; they represented a familiarization of otherness at the same time that they rendered the familiar as other. (Morreale, 2003b, 10)

While Ozzy was much more erratic and buffoonish than Ozzie Nelson, he was afforded a number of perceptive moments of fatherly advice bred from and in contrast to his former



life as a rock star. Now domesticated and harried like many sitcom dads, Ozzy and his family demonstrate for twenty-first century families a way to “remake the 1950s family ideal in ways that work for us, too” (Kutulas, 2005, 59).

The popularity of *The Osbournes* led to two important realizations for the television industry. First, despite its marked difference from other television fare, reality sitcoms that “engaged with established normative codes of genre and family” could be quite successful (Kompare, 2004, 99). Second, the domestication of celebrity life could prove lucrative to celebrities and cable networks alike (Escoffery, 2006). Functioning much like the fan magazines of the early days of film, celebrity reality sitcoms both allowed the audience a glimpse of the luxury of celebrity life and this portrayal of domestication offered the celebrity a brand of authenticity (Escoffery, 2006). According to media scholar David Escoffery (2006), “On the one hand, [the domestic setting] draws the viewer in by offering them a glimpse of the good life, giving them a chance to see how the other half lives. On the other hand, it simultaneously humanizes that other, presenting him or her as ‘a regular person, just like me’” (101).

Seeking to capitalize on the newfound marketability of the reality sitcom, a number of celebrities tried their hand at capturing their day-to-day lives on camera, and cable networks happily gave them access to airtime. MTV gained other hits with the domestic eccentricities of *Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica* (2003-2005), and later, *Til Death Do Us Part: Carmen & Dave* (2004) and *Meet the Barkers* (2005-2006). Meanwhile, A&E, Bravo, and VH1 experienced a gain in viewership with the explosion of celebrity families seeking their own reality sitcoms, ranging from *Growing Up Gotti* (2004-2005) to *Being Bobby Brown* (2005) and *Hogan Knows Best* (2005-2007). Although the litany

of celebrity reality sitcoms has certainly created a deluge of monotonous “plots” within the television milieu, it is still important to note that each is premised on the creating, raising, or well-being of the family, even a celebrity one.

### **Celebrity Reality Sitcoms**

While *The Osbournes* may have harkened back to the bumbling dads of early television, two recent incarnations of the celebrity reality sitcom feature fathers more like the paterfamilias, or patriarchal authority figure, of *Father Knows Best* or even *The Cosby Show*. Both *Run’s House* (MTV, 2005-), featuring Joseph “Rev. Run” Simmons of Run-DMC, and *Gene Simmons Family Jewels* (A&E, 2006-) starring the KISS legend, have overtly set out to showcase “spectacle” families that Americans can emulate, particularly for those post-Boomer parents raised on their (hip-hop and rock, respectively) music. All in all, these domesticated rockers have actively preached traditional family values, even though they do so in quite an unconventional fashion. Reminiscent of the domestic sitcoms of the past, each show raises awareness of nuclear familialism and “old-school” family morals, particularly ways in which parents can communicate with their kids, although they do so in a distinctive and modern way. Both rockers are now business moguls, though neither has left the music scene entirely, raising children with their partners and learning valuable lessons, all the while attempting to preserve the conservative ideals of nuclear familialism – at least when it comes to their families. Amidst the current celebrity reality show craze, these two fathers stand out both for their seminal reinvention of the iconic nuclear family and atypical patriarchal parenting styles.

### *Celebrity and “Real” Life*

Reality TV changes the way we come in contact with celebrity and, importantly, perceive the distinction between the real and what Baudrillard terms the simulacra.<sup>35</sup> Celebrity has always been heavily constructed and marketed to provide a clear-cut distance between the star, their “real” life, and the fans. Fan connection to celebrity was built on admission to the performance, consumption of commercial items, and review of fan magazines and tabloid journalism featuring behind-the-scenes access to the star. Each offered fans simulated experiences of attachment to their idols, a kind of parasocial relationship or intimacy with fame unlikely to occur in reality. However, in light of today’s expansive and immersive media environment, television and new media have afforded fans near unfettered and unprecedented access to the personal lives of celebrities. Once a minimal picture of carefully regulated information, celebrity public relations has evolved into a profitable field of celebrity gossipmongers, entertainment news shows and magazines, and autobiographical tweets and blogs. Within this new celebrity environment, reality TV has played an important role in not only reinforcing a surveillance-based society, but also by allowing celebrities and individuals alike an opportunity to interact with the public in a way that blurs the lines between the real and the simulacra (Andrejevic, 2004).

For celebrities, reality TV transforms the cultural capital earned in other areas (e.g., music, literature, film, etc.) into an extension of a manufactured parasocial relationship driven by the seemingly ordinary life of celebrities. Audiences are often

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<sup>35</sup> Fiske (1996) interprets Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (1985) for television specifically referring to the way television constructs a hyper-reality, which invariably “collapses the binary concepts of reality and representation into a single concept” (2). In other words, as Baudrillard noted, we have become so reliant on the media’s perception of reality (i.e., the simulacra) that the distinction between reality and representation has broken down.

surprised by how “normal” their favorite stars are, particularly those celebrities that have achieved fame for their lack of deference towards conservative norms and the cultural status quo. But whether it’s the sincerity and loyalty of a family with Mob ties (*Growing up Gotti*), the maturing of a bad-boy recording artist (*Hammertime*, *Snoop Dogg’s Father Hood*) or the unexpected humor and conservative values of the grandfather of the World Wrestling Federation (*Hogan Knows Best*), reality sitcoms defy stereotypical celebrity archetypes in favor of showcasing the domestication of celebrity spectacle. Granted there have been instances of celebrities utilizing reality TV to merely enhance the spectacle that propelled them to fame in the first place – for example, *Britney and Kevin: Chaotic* (2005), *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (2007-), and *Denise Richards: It’s Complicated* (2008), all come to mind. However, the most successful celebrity reality sitcoms are those that attempt, like *Ozzie and Harriet*, to domesticate the “spectacle” of celebrity by demonstrating for the at-home viewers a careful balance between the public and private selves of celebrity.<sup>36</sup>

Significantly, nearly all of the recent crop of successful reality sitcoms have centered on a famous patriarch, which harkens back to the domestic sitcoms of the postwar era whereby the male breadwinner was the only member of the family to effectively straddle the public and domestic sphere.<sup>37</sup> Contrarily, reality sitcoms focused on the celebrity mother tend to further exacerbate the debate between the working-mother and the domestic goddess, often depicting the mother’s failure to perform either task –

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<sup>36</sup> I speak of success here in terms of more than just ratings, but also critical acclaim, cult status, and length of series run, which – unlike for broadcast networks – can all be used to interpret a successful cable series.

<sup>37</sup> Even series that feature two celebrity parents have seen moderate success, emphasizing the importance of a work-life balance to successful co-parenting and domestic bliss (see Oxygen’s *Tori & Dean: Home Sweet Hollywood*, 2007-2012, in particular).

see *Living Lohan* for example.<sup>38</sup> The lack of television success for female celebrity-driven reality series is particularly notable when one considers the kinds of reality series geared towards women that *have* reached large audiences, particularly the onslaught of makeover shows (e.g., *Extreme Makeover*, *What Not to Wear*, *Bridalplasty*, *The Swan*), dating competitions (e.g., *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *Flavor of Love*), and wealthy housewives series (i.e., any of Bravo's *The Real Housewives...* oeuvre), all of which stem from our culture's obsession with traditional notions of feminine beauty standards and heterosexual coupling. Hence, the relative success of male-centered celebrity reality sitcoms may come from both our own stereotyped perception of family values *and* the unexpected portrayal of celebrity patriarch as paterfamilias.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, as an offshoot of the domestic sitcom and given the current social rhetoric to galvanize fatherhood, as mentioned in chapter three, it is unsurprising that reality sitcoms have endeavored to examine unexpected instances of domesticated fatherhood within the context of modern-day patriarchy.

I have previously described how, from the beginning, sitcoms have sought to assimilate a particular conservative familial worldview; one that I argue has since continued to be emulated because of its remarkable ability to adjust to, or homogenize, contemporary cultural values in spite of its exaggerated idealism. As I will further discuss below, celebrity reality sitcoms tend to uphold conventions of gender roles and identity, though not without modification. Although the patriarch is still presumably the

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<sup>38</sup> There are exceptions that have both positively depicted a celebrity mom's work-life balance and been successful, such as *Kimora: Life in the Fab Lane* (Style Network) and *Bethenny Ever After* (Bravo). However, in terms of variety and strength of celebrity status, father-led reality sitcoms are unparalleled.

<sup>39</sup> Also, since reality TV is driven by the spectacle, it could be argued that it has opted to showcase the celebrity paterfamilias because matricentric television series, celebrity or otherwise, are dominant in fictional television.

breadwinner, mothers and daughters are not relegated to the domestic sphere, and, in fact, actively participate in formerly masculine domains such as sports, business, self-defense, and marksmanship, while at the same time enjoying the typically feminine domains of fashion, cooking, and consumerism. Being the breadwinner of the family validates the patriarch and his power within the domestic sphere; however, companionate marriage and co-parenting, now thoroughly ensconced in familial construction, affords mothers equal, if not more, control over familial actions both privately and publicly.

Philosophy towards gender is not the only area in which sitcoms have provided instructional value to its audiences. Race and class, and the complexities related to each, have also been performed to various degrees within the sitcom (Jones, 1992; Morreale, 2003a). Most assuredly, the sitcom was once used to emphatically impress upon Americans the importance of assimilating to the White, suburban, consumption-driven, nuclear family lifestyle (Jones, 1992; Lipsitz, 1992). The creation of a new bourgeoisie middle-class existence supposedly afforded “everyone” the opportunity to achieve the “American dream” (Haralovich, 1992; Lipsitz, 1992). But what television failed to portray was the large-scale discrimination and disenfranchisement of racial minorities struggling to emulate the White nuclear family, leading essentially to their absence on television. Instead, entrance into the middle-class, and its portrayal on television, became associated with patriarchy and separate spheres ideology – a model of domesticity reserved for White families.

Despite the overwhelming presence of middle-class suburbia on contemporary television, these depictions have actually collapsed the once strict boundaries between class cultures, likely brought on by a modern-day refashioning of class structure. Today,

on television, class is not so much an obstacle as it is a narrative element that carries humor within domestic discord – particularly amongst men trying to reassert their power within the domestic space. Celebrity reality sitcoms reiterate the idealized middle-class suburban home, though in actuality they depict a thoroughly upper-class household. As discussed in chapter three, today’s sitcoms have often feminized fatherhood, leading to the portrayal of a more “mock-macho” dad who struggles to maintain his masculine dominance in the family but often is rewarded with a mocking of his manly (macho) qualities (e.g., *Home Improvement*, *According to Jim*, and *Two and a Half Men*). The reality sitcom with its portrayal of upper-class domesticity re-examines the changing values associated with twenty-first century fatherhood, including its attachment to the feminine domestic sphere and sentimentality, yet reaffirms the household hierarchy encouraged by patriarchal values.

### *The Domesticated “Rocker”*

Media scholars Rick Pioto and Kelly Otter (2007) describe *The Osbournes* as a performative documentary, one that brought “to the mainstream middle-class American...[a] Beverly Hills family but ‘played’ as ‘normal,’ ‘everyday’ family” (8). They add, Ozzy performed “a new myth of rock ‘n’ roll: the myth of the aging rock star as doting father and the rock star as domesticated family man” (9). The birth of MTV married the cultural currency of musical artists with the commercial viability of television; a relationship that demonstrated the successful overlap between media industries as song and image combined to reinforce the musician as a cultural commodity. But the popularity of these artists, from all musical genres, depended on branding and demarcating them as outside the rules of convention and decorum. Rock ‘n’

roll, long a site of intergenerational conflict and criticized for its supposed link to sexual proclivity, along with Hip-Hop and Rap, produced dynamic subcultures characterized by their socio-political commentary on race, and each lyrically defied White, middle-class conservatism. Sonically, these genres gave birth to a cultural evolution amongst America's youth that was outside of prescribed notions of what had been considered acceptable behavior and values. What *The Osbournes* did was manipulate this artistic excess of substance abuse, wild and bizarre behavior (e.g., biting the head off a bat), and extreme consumerism into a surprisingly therapeutic depiction of life after stardom and affirmation of the conventional lifestyle previously ridiculed (Pieto & Otter 2007).

As of late, a variety of male celebrities ranging from athletes to musicians, have turned to reality TV to either recover from a purported "bad-boy" past or break free from preconceived notions leveled against their chosen careers. I have specifically chosen to concentrate this discussion on the genre's depictions of the domesticated "rocker" in light of the triple critique of promiscuity, commercialism, and the endorsement of social discord directed at the rocker/rapster "lifestyle." Examined below are two successful celebrity reality sitcoms, *Run's House* (MTV) and *Gene Simmons Family Jewels* (A&E), which feature the domesticated "rocker" and his modern conception of "family." The approach to family of hip-hop artist Joseph "Rev. Run" Simmons and theatrical rocker Gene Simmons are remarkably conventional despite their unconventional lifestyles. Even though fame has brought them considerable wealth and a comfortable standard of living, the surveillance of their domestication offers a depiction of "family" that is realistic and can be emulated by their viewers without seeming to be overly judgmental. Rev. Run and Gene face the same trials and tribulations of the "every" family, running the gamut from



first dates to graduations, adolescence to adulthood, and politics to religion. These domesticated “rockers” affably use their cable shows as a pulpit to address the American family’s need for a more fully cultivated appreciation for parenting and the importance of raising children in an era of ever-growing uncertainty for family values. By putting a new spin on the nostalgic imagery of the postwar suburban lifestyle, these reality sitcoms acknowledge that there is no version of the perfect family, only the opportunity to create a strong foundation for the next generation while still remaining thoughtful of the past.

*“Walk this Way”*

As one of the founding members of Run-DMC, Joseph “Rev. Run” Simmons made history as the godfather of hip-hop in the 1980s. Growing up in Queens, New York, Simmons and his brother Russell (of Def Jam Records fame) would later be credited with bringing hip-hop into the commercial mainstream. Father to three adult children from a previous marriage (twenty-somethings Vanessa, Angela, and Joseph Jr. or “JoJo”), Simmons has successfully blended together a family with wife Justine Jones, teenaged sons Daniel Jr. (Diggy) and Russell II (Russy), and recently adopted a daughter, Miley. After retiring from Run-DMC in 2002, Simmons had a religious reawakening that led to his becoming an ordained minister. Though purportedly active in church life, the extent of his religiosity as depicted on the show occurs through Rev. Run’s “Words of Wisdom” BlackBerry texts to close friends from his bathtub inside his palatial New Jersey estate.

According to journalist Allison Samuels (2006), Rev. Run’s clean living and parenting style inspired many of his celebrity pals, including Sean (Diddy) Combs who approached Simmons with the idea of creating his own reality show. Debuting on MTV in 2005, *Run’s House* features the comedic hijinks of the entire family, though tempered

with life lessons, words of wisdom, love, and religion, unseen in any previous reality sitcom. While Simmons credits *The Osbournes* for opening the door for reality sitcoms centered on family values, his family is more like the Cosbys than the Munsters: “Our show is less of a dysfunctional show, it’s more function in our family,” Simmons said (qtd. in Hanley, 2006). Despite the trappings of wealth, such as an indoor basketball court, a theater room, and the Rolls Royce sitting in the driveway, the Simmons experience the same difficulties as every family.

In August 2008, after the start of the series’ fifth season, Simmons and his wife published *Take Back Your Family: A Challenge to America’s Parents* dispensing the same kind of wisdom and parenting techniques they do on the show. While reality shows have started to be a bastion of parents trying to control unruly children, such as *Supernanny*, *Nanny 911*, and *Wife Swap*, *Run’s House* stays the course of wholesome family fare. Says Simmons, “Reaction to *Run’s House* has convinced me that promoting the value of family life is what I was put on this earth to do. I might have earned my reputation as a rapper but when it’s all said and done I hope that I’ll ultimately be remembered for being a good dad” (*The West Australian*, 2008, 26).

#### “*We Ain’t Your Next Door Family*”

In stark contrast to Rev. Run’s tribute to religious reawakening, Gene Simmons continues to forego all convention with his zealous performance of the licentious celebrity rocker...at least in public. The infamous tongue-waver from the iconic rock band KISS prides himself on the excessive number of women he’s slept with over the years – a number greater than 4600, he claims – and his keen business-sense that has led to him becoming a marketing mogul. He has leveraged KISS’s fame on every

commercial item one can think of from lunchboxes to condoms. Carrying his little black book full of business contacts, *not* women's phone numbers, Simmons travels the globe promoting himself, and always with a few good-looking gals on his arm. While it isn't hard to miss his incredible ego or his lavish lifestyle, the 2006 debut of *Gene Simmons Family Jewels* (A&E) revealed a completely different side to the larger-than-life mogul, one that depicts the rocker as a dedicated and conservative family man.

It is unsurprising that Gene Simmons jumped on the reality TV bandwagon. In fact, *Family Jewels* was not Simmons' first foray into the reality genre having "starred" in *Gene Simmons' Rock School* (VH1) where he tried to turn British boarding school students into rock 'n' rollers. But for a seemingly public man, very little was known about his private life; that is until he figured out how attractive his family life could be to viewers. *Family Jewels* features Gene and his girlfriend of over 25 years Shannon Tweed, a former *Playboy* playmate, along with their two teenaged children, Nick and Sophie. Although "happily *unmarried*" instead of "married and miserable" to Tweed, Simmons is committed to raising a conventional family, albeit one living in a Los Angeles mansion surrounded by KISS and *Playboy* memorabilia (Gardiner, 2008).<sup>40</sup> Nick and Sophie, despite being raised in the shadow of a rock star, are incredibly down-to-earth and drug free (like their father), always amused at their dad's antics as he struggles with their impending adulthood. Unlike other reality sitcoms, *Family Jewels* revels in its self-consciousness with the family actively acknowledging the cameras in family confessionals more in tune with *The Real World* than *The Osbournes*. The confessionals

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<sup>40</sup> In October 2011, Simmons finally married Tweed after much consternation and intense familial discord between the couple that had been imperceptible over the course of the series. Although the strife and eventual reconciliation of the couple was the focus of the series' sixth season narrative, obscuring the family's inner turmoil for so long solidified and drew attention to the edited "reality" of this particular reality sitcom.

act as a space for Gene to offer life lessons to his kids and take time with Shannon to analyze the family's functional relationships, all the while reinforcing his place as head of the family.

Both Simmons families attempt to normalize celebrity, confirming their resemblance to every family in America. In an interview with *The West Australian* (2008), Rev. Run even asserts "Family is the one game where everyone is on an equal playing field" (26). Though his statement is problematically inclusive and simplistic in the scheme of contemporary family life, it does relay the reality sitcom's attempt to universalize the familial experience. But celebrity is not the only departure from more conventional television imagery of family life that these reality sitcoms put forth. *Run's House's* depiction of a blended family, as well as its prominent demonstration of active religious observance (e.g., Rev. Run dons a priest's collar when out in public), are the most telling displays of nonconformance to the idealized nuclear family. Meanwhile, Gene Simmons' blatant refusal of commonplace societal ethics towards the domain of marriage renders *Family Jewels* a less than perfect account of domesticity as prescribed by conservative familialism. However, the series' flawed obedience to traditional Victorian family values and structure is underscored by an emphasis on constructing a more contemporized, and subsequently *real*, version of long-accepted gender and parental roles. Moreover, each series continues to reconcile the appeal of consumerism with familial success, imparting to viewers that spending money (wisely) helps sustain the family – very much like the postwar sitcoms. Each patriarch's emphasis on their respective bootstraps career achievements – both musicians came from humble beginnings – and tendency to instill a firm work ethic in their children, reflects a variety

of families and their social circumstances. By putting their private lives before the cameras both Simmons families convey that wholesome family dramedy is more than a mere profit center for reality TV, but can redraft familialist ideology by portraying neo-conservative family values as fashionable, enlightening, and ideals worth emulating in real life.

### *Celebrity Paterfamilias*

In one interview Gene reflects on his job as a parent: “Our responsibility is to protect our kids, supply the money and the structure and the love – and we’ll protect them with our lives” (Bianculli, 2006). He enthusiastically promotes familialism for the twenty-first century, even though *Family Jewels* is prone to a vision of an alternative family lifestyle. Although dismissive towards marriage and parental negotiation – “The idea of democracy in a home is highly overrated,” he says – Gene preaches conservative family values and the importance of ruling his roost (Gardiner, 2008). The legendary KISS demon displays his love and respect for his family, offering a quirky vision of *Father Knows Best* paterfamilias. Although he is a renowned ladies man, he is also “the kind of dad who brings Gatorade to his daughter’s soccer games and stands in the front row when his son’s rock band plays gigs” (A&E, 2009).

Furthermore, Gene often overemphasizes his role as the breadwinner and family provider by mercilessly teasing Shannon for her spending habits and his kids’ at-ease lifestyle – though he also readily acknowledges his own drive to attain wealth. In one promotional video, Gene kids Shannon: “My relationship with money begets your relationships with shopping. No shopping no relationship” (A&E, 2009). As a literal version of the *companionate* marriage, Gene is quick to praise Shannon’s role in

generating a stable family life amidst unconventional circumstances. He tells Sophie, “Even though your dad is a powerful, attractive man, at home at least, your mom is the boss.” Yet, he retains his position as patriarchal figurehead by minimizing Shannon’s influence to the home and underlines her dependence on his accumulated wealth. Though Gene acknowledges his predecessor Ozzy Osbourne, he notes, “I had no interest in doing that kind of show where the kids are running wild and the father is a burnt-out rock star. My life couldn’t be more different. I am the master in my castle” (Ryan, 2006, 5).

In *Run’s House*, Rev. Run also highlights his position as breadwinner of the family when on the one hand he counsels Justine about her knack for overspending, but on the other, doesn’t curb his own consumption habits. Episodes from the sixth season show Rev. Run distressed over Justine’s lack of purchasing restraint when buying items for baby Miley (“Run’s Big House”) and the entire family’s excessive waste (“The Secret of My Excess”), as well as his preference for do-it-yourself thriftiness in lieu of hiring a professional (“Tapper’s Delight”). At one point he takes Russy aside after failing to reuse a plastic cup and explains:

Listen to me very closely. See this cup. It costs money. You know why you don’t care about it? Because you don’t work, you don’t have a job. All you think is you take a cup, you take a sip, you throw it away. You don’t realize it costs money. (“The Secret of My Excess,” 6/22/09)

But when it comes to himself, Rev. Run is less inclined to curb his spending. In fact, he often uses consumption and the acquisition of expensive items as a deserved outward display of his hard work. The fortune that he has amassed came from his record sales, but also his investment in businesses with his brother Russell, a music and fashion mogul. So when Russell asks Rev. Run to become a more active participant in the company – meaning coming into the office every day – he claims the only way he can be productive

is if he can remodel an entire conference room as his personal office space: “It’s the biggest room in the house! There’s nothing else comparable to my taste of living” (“An Office He Can’t Refuse,” 7/6/09). After spending a large sum of money to outfit his new “office,” Rev. Run finds that he is not an “office-type of dude.”

Spending and accounting for the family finances are not the only ways in which *Run’s House* displays Rev. Run’s patriarchal authority. Though the series emphasizes Rev. Run and Justine’s co-parenting style and bedroom congress, the entire family always defers to Rev. Run for the final word in any situation. It is not uncommon for Justine and the kids to acknowledge the power bestowed to the Simmons patriarch – “Wait until I tell Daddy” is a frequent retort in the Simmons household. And much like the traditional sitcom, Rev. Run eloquently employs disappointment rather than anger, which can be a devastating though highly effective and instructive punishment technique. Unlike *Family Jewels*, which has yet to portray a situation in which Gene was forced to be a disciplinarian, *Run’s House* models typical familial situations and utilizes the sitcom’s generic structure to enforce Rev. Run’s position as authority figurehead.

#### *Daddy’s Little Girl*

Both Simmons men acknowledge a worldview of racial diversity, childhood independence, and feminism, but they apparently still fall prey to holding their daughters to a double standard. Gene Simmons’ promiscuity is well documented and though he has been faithful to Shannon for over 25 years he is not above enjoying the company of over-sexualized women; often encouraging other men – including his own son – to value beautiful women and expresses an overwhelming dissent towards marriage (see “The

Wingman” episode in particular).<sup>41</sup> However, when it comes to his daughter, this nervous dad does all he can to prevent Sophie from growing up and dating boys. When Sophie first starts dating, Gene insists she enroll in a self-defense class (“Driving Me Crazy”). On a trip to Aspen, Gene risks his health to spy on Sophie when he learns of her attraction to snowboarder (“Snowblind”). And even though he was comfortable leaving Nick to travel London with a cute, *older* co-ed, Gene adamantly accompanied Sophie while on a photo shoot in Paris because he worried that the much-older male photographer would take advantage of her (“All Grown Up”). In one interview, Sophie announces, “I have no problem being a virgin for a long time,” to which Gene happily replies “Whatever my daughter wants” (Bianculli, 2006). Television critic Andrew Ryan (2006) notes, “By his own admission, Simmons applies a double standard when it comes to his young daughter. He’s still the man who claims to have slept with more than 4,000 women, but he can’t bear the idea of his daughter even talking to boys.” Gene says, “I’ve never apologized for my own behavior, and I’ve always believed in the freedom of sexual expression, but not when it comes to my daughter” (Ryan, 2006).

Similarly, Rev. Run is very overprotective of his daughters, Vanessa and Angela, particularly when it comes to their romantic relationships and careers. In the spin-off series, *Daddy’s Girls*, Rev. Run visits the girls in Los Angeles to both interfere with a potential promotional opportunity and meet Vanessa’s steady beau (“What’s in Store”). Upset that their father cancelled a good public relations prospect for their fledgling design company, the girls awkwardly attempt to chastise the well-meaning Rev. Run.

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<sup>41</sup> Episodes of *Gene Simmons Family Jewels* that aired after this dissertation was written revealed that Gene had, in fact, not been faithful to Shannon. After Shannon threatens to leave him if he does not alter his playboy lifestyle and attend therapy, Gene rediscovers his domestic role in the family as more than simply the breadwinner and marries Shannon.



Cautiously, the girls remind him that they are no longer “daddy’s little girls” and need to be allowed to make their own mistakes. In another instance, Vanessa is selected as one of *Maxim* magazine’s top 100 hottest celebrities (“Maximum Growth”). The lad magazine is known for its provocative pictures of women, and Rev. Run has a crisis of conscience in determining whether to allow Vanessa to proceed with the shoot. The situation is eventually resolved when Rev. Run acknowledges that Vanessa is growing up, that he must respect her choices, and that he believes that he has done all he could to instill in her good values.

Gene also contends with his daughter’s impending adulthood, often overlooking her need to exert her independence in shaping her future. In “Sophie Couture” (5/13/08), Gene schemes to make a big production out of Sophie’s first runway show by offering her new employer, an indie fashion designer, the funds to take her small collection to L.A.’s Fashion Week. Unbeknownst to Sophie, it is her dad who has become her employer’s last-minute benefactor. Upon learning of Gene’s role in her sudden success, she complains to her mother how distressed she is that her father has, once again, waylaid her pursuit for independence. But, in the end, Sophie is grateful for Gene’s intrusion and he winds up teary-eyed as his beautiful daughter struts down the runway.

Through their interactions with their daughters, both Simmons men exhibit a tendency to adhere to traditional gender roles. Like every father, Rev. Run and Gene Simmons find it difficult to relate to their daughters as women without being overprotective. Attempts to encourage liberal, feminist independence are often hilariously stifled by the father’s inability to free himself from more culturally conservative attitudes towards women within his own family –which is seemingly contrary to the assumed

misogynist public persona of the rocker/rapster. Like the traditional sitcom, celebrity patriarchs awkwardly rear daughters, uncomfortable with their femininity and associated concerns; however, reality sitcoms show them to be far more active participants in parenting daughters and developing emotional ties with them.

### *A Pre-fabricated Cosby?*

Often referring to his show as *Father Knows Best* on steroids, Rev. Run takes pride in the fact that *Run's House* has been particularly resonant for African American families, and continues to hope that he can be an example of a “good dad” to urge black fathers to engage with their children (*The West Australian*, 2008). Rev. Run's rap and fashion mogul brother Russell Simmons added, “I'm happy for this kind of success. Especially for the black family, there's always a discussion of positive images. He's the Bill Cosby of his generation” (Huff, 2007). This association with *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) carries a particular implication for the Black community and its representation on television. As television scholar Debra C. Smith (2008) writes, “*The Cosby Show* broke all the molds for the negative representation of Black people in media by supplanting them with an upper middle-class family whose forays into high culture and familial values served to dignify Blackness on television” (393). Moreover, the series' ability to capture both White and African American viewers was equally significant. The series made the African American family – at least the one presented here – palatable to White audiences. But Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis' seminal work, *Enlightened Racism* (1992), argued that the Huxtable family reinforced a notion of social mobility for African Americans that countered institutional racism as culpable in racial oppression. The Huxtables “proved” that one is accountable for their own achievements and failure to rise

up through the system (Fiske, 1996). Though *Run's House* is based on a “real” Black family, it is hard to discount its similar lack of attention to racial politics and promotion of bootstraps ideology.

Media scholars Leslie B. Inniss and Joe R. Feagin (1995) note that *The Cosby Show* “was hailed as portraying Black men in a positive light; portraying Black families optimistically; showing Black Americans as being like other U.S. Americans; and modeling good examples for Black children” (Smith, 2008, 394). Although many previous sitcoms depicted the Black family “as female-headed, characterized by conflict, and having children in the home who experience little supervision and concern from their parents,” both *The Cosby Show* and *Run's House* contradict this image (Smith, 2008, 394). But Rev. Run specifies that “the show is less about dismantling longstanding Black stereotypes and more about toppling stereotypes about rap music artists” (Smith, 2008, 395). In promotional materials for the series, Simmons notes the distinction: “I’m just trying to give another perspective and show what rap is all about, especially for someone who knows only the negative things. Me and my family are rap all grown up” (MTV Online, 2008). However, Smith (2008) argues that as a representative of “rap grown up,” an “explicitly Black form of expression that situates their life experience in racialized ways,” the series does “assist in avoiding one of the building blocks of enlightened racism,” but it still renders the successful achievement of the American dream as “possible only through limited venues (e.g., rap music or sports) contribut[ing] to problematic existing stereotypes” (408). Another seminal text, Herman Gray’s *Watching Race* (1995) examines the media’s mobilization of both the “black menace” and the “model minority.” Gray acknowledges that Black cultural politics do not operate in a

vacuum, and neither do representations of the Black family. Although *Run's House* does not actively deal with questions of race for the Simmons family, it does offer a complex rendering of a successful Black family constructed from its social location in both the discourses of rap and preconceived *mediated* expectations of Black family life.

*Run's House* offers a recuperated image of Black men and Black fatherhood.

Television critic Allison Samuels (2006) writes, "In a time when TV families have to be outrageous, dysfunctional or both, *Run's House* is sweet, wholesome and charming." The series is a testament to both twenty-first century families and familialism, and Simmons declares:

My children don't talk back to me or my wife or cuss. Can you imagine a black family where the children cuss out the parents? There is just no way that's happening around here – and that's the biggest difference you will see on our show: total respect. You can't live in here with me without it. (Samuels, 2006)

Brian Graden, former president of MTV, writes, "While *Run's House* gives viewers an inside look at the lives of hip-hop royalty, audiences can relate to and laugh along with the family whose life is fundamentally about heart, humor and everyday challenges" (Pringle, 2006). More than simply documenting a positive depiction of a *Black* family, *Run's House* promotes the importance of adopting a familialist ideology and its inherent values to raise thriving families: "My ministry is family. It's a church that leads by example instead of preaching to you. Showing you the lifestyle that comes from serving God. Not so much the cars and the house, but the peace and health that's in my home" (Betancourt, 2008).

Hence, *Run's House* aims to be a reflection of both the trials and tribulations of every twenty-first century family and the value inherent in reaffirming familialism. The endearing quality of *Run's House* lies not in glossing over the significance of race, but

highlighting the hopes and commitment that everyone puts into raising a family. Of course, this is not only pertinent to race but class as well. Despite the overwhelming presence of middle-class suburbia on contemporary television, both *Run's House* and *Family Jewels* depict the accoutrement of two wealthy families that could potentially make them unrecognizable to the “every” family. But, in fact, both series work to collapse strict boundaries between class cultures, and the wealth, though obviously striking and enviable, becomes less of a factor necessary for creating a functioning and loving family. As media scholar Mark Andrejevic (2004) argues, “the apparent fascination of viewers with the extremes of wealth should not eclipse the fact that much of what goes on in celebrity-based reality shows is the interest generated by a humanizing glimpse of remote cultural icons (11). Thus, the celebrity reality sitcom ultimately mitigates the eccentricities of these celebrity families in favor of demonstrating how they reflect “every” family.

#### *Making Our Reality Yours*

By inviting us into their homes, celebrities present a glimpse of the triumphs and difficulties they contend with in their personal lives in a way that a fictionalized sitcom cannot offer. Here, viewers don't have to idolize some mythical family, but can visualize and emulate *real* families. But celebrity reality sitcoms are not without critique regarding their authenticity in documenting a “real” family experience. In reference to *Family Jewels* one critic writes, “These guys bicker telegenically, with script-worthy one-liners, and always wind up laughing in the end” (Weiss, 2006). The review continues, “If this doesn't come as a deep surprise then you're familiar with promote-yourself reality TV, in which extraordinary types declare that they're just like you and me, except with wireless

mikes attached to their pants” (Weiss, 2006). Reality sitcoms “enact the theme of a nuclear family that faces conflicts but is united by love and affection at its core,” while preserving the normative codes of the genre (e.g., exposition, disruption, and resolution) (Morreale, 2003b, 6). Hence, on the message boards of both *Run’s House* and *Family Jewels* some viewers have accused the series of scripting family discussions and fabricating family conflicts for entertainment purposes; thereby calling into question the authenticity and sincerity of these visions of familial life.

Still, these series do maintain a sense of reality by letting cameras document their daily lives, including family business and vacation trips, work engagements, and family tragedy. For example, when Rev. Run and his wife experienced a miscarriage, they insisted that the cameras keep rolling. While some may have believed this to be exploiting the family’s grief for ratings, Rev. Run and his wife explain that tragedy comes to everyone’s door step: “How could we bring you in to enjoy all the fun, but then during bad times say, ‘This is private?’” (qtd. in Amber, 2007). Along with behind-the-scenes glimpses into the personal lives of celebrities, these reality sitcoms work because they purport to be the experience of the “every” family. Rev. Run comments, “Initially we had a very difficult time convincing television people to take a chance on [the series]. The conventional wisdom was that audiences find TV compelling when the kids are struggling with drinking, drugs and promiscuity instead of getting good grades, staying out of trouble and going to church every Sunday” (*The West Australian*, 2008). It is this depiction of a functioning family that defies audience expectations at the same time as it entertains and edifies the significance of familialism for twenty-first century families.

The celebrity reality sitcoms discussed here refuse to emulate the dysfunction

inherent in their predecessor *The Osbournes*, though that is not always the case. Reality series from rap stars Luthor Campbell and Snoop Dogg have also tried to represent the “positive familial side of rap music,” but they tend to thrive on dysfunction and spectacle (Smith, 2008). The success of both *Run’s House* and *Family Jewels* is based on the novelty of their domestic wholesomeness (Amber, 2007). Each Simmons family utilizes the reality TV platform to reach and teach viewers in memorable ways the inherent value and necessity of familialist ideology to the construction of modern-day families – here, in the form of companionate marriage, co-parenting, and family fellowship – whether the family resides in a mansion or tract home. Through both comedy and drama, reality sitcoms advance the same familialist ideology first depicted in Ozzie Nelson’s star sitcom. Even Gene Simmons’ failure to adapt to traditional marital conventions is small when compared to his rigid adherence to patriarchy and conservative family values. In the end, like the traditional sitcom, these seemingly alternative dads document life in front of the cameras that displays a disciplined attention to the performance of a hegemonic “family” as a universal experience.

### **Non-Celebrity Reality Sitcoms**

In December 2009, news broke that the newest addition to the Duggar family of Arkansas had been born dangerously premature at 25 weeks. For those who had followed the family through their TLC reality show, *19 Kids and Counting* (formerly *18 Kids and Counting*), the birth of little Josie Brooklyn meant the brood had now swelled to and awe-inspiring 19 children. Unfortunately, amidst an already brewing firestorm over the increasing trend in reality TV of showcasing the inner-workings of uncommonly sized or “mega-families,” the news coverage of the precarious birth of baby Josie turned from

miraculous to monstrous. Critics began a full-on assault of the Duggars and others who had decided to expand the average-sized family – particularly those who had employed, and perhaps exploited, fertility therapies in shaping their families. While the Duggars had never utilized fertility drugs or willfully sought the public spotlight, they got caught up in the misdeeds of their mega-family brethren. Between the stunning rise and fall of Jon and Kate Gosselin and their brood of eight and the widely disparaged Nadya Suleman, the so-called Octomom, in the past few years mega-families have become media stalwarts at the same time as they are continually mocked and vilified by society at large.<sup>42</sup> However, despite the spectacle and amusement viewers derive from televised depictions of mega-families, these families continually display and validate familialist ideology.

Television families, spectacle or otherwise, are a meaningful device for disseminating a common familial value system; one predicated on familialism and generally conservative principles that put the family above all else. Despite the myriad forms of families presented on television and noble attempts to reflect evolving cultural and social mores regarding marriage and parenthood, at the heart of every portrayal is a constant endeavor to remind viewers about the significance of practicing familialist values within their own homes. Although mega-families on television are essentially employed to promote a spectacle for entertainment purposes, their popular success is derived from the perceived commonality between all families. The cable network TLC has been singularly adept at cultivating family life into a spectacle of entertainment, particularly the lives of mega-families with eight or more children, while still adhering to

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<sup>42</sup> After five seasons on *Jon & Kate Plus 8* (TLC), the Gosselin family – comprised of twins and sextuplets – shocked viewers with the total collapse of the couple’s marriage. Nadya Suleman gave birth to octuplets in January 2009 via in vitro fertilization. Soon after it was discovered that that single mother already had six other young children and was unemployed.



and promoting conservative familialist ideals. Similar to the celebrity reality sitcoms, mega-family series, such as *Jon & Kate Plus 8* and *19 Kids and Counting*, attempt to minimize the “spectacle” inherent in these families to emphasize the shared aims amongst all families rather than unique differences. Even though mega-families do not conform to the hegemonic nuclear norm in size, they do, in fact, pattern themselves after conventional nuclear families and embody a universal “family.”

### *Mega-Families on Television*

The Learning Channel (TLC) cannot be given full credit for establishing the public’s fascination for multiples, as higher-order births seem to be a news story staple. Although family size has fluctuated over the past few decades, census data portray a general shrinking of the American family since the mid-1970s (Villarreal, 2009). Census data show that 20 percent of women ages 40 to 44 had five or more children in 1976, but by 2006, this number had fallen to only four percent – particularly for natural births (Zernike, 2009). In fact, large broods in the new millennium are typically looked upon with a contemptible “freak show” attitude but one very much in vogue for television, which relies on this kind of spectacle to lure in viewers. These mega-families are often, perhaps unfairly, associated with religious zealotry, polygamy, and, within our entertainment-driven culture, as a means to quickly capture the national spotlight. Mega-families are also a precarious byproduct of the increased use of fertility therapies. Although television has consistently adhered to a smaller, nuclear family norm, according to census data, larger families – though certainly a minority – are not as uncommon as one has been led to believe. However, in opting to homogenize a particular familial size, those families outside of this imaginary norm have become “othered” and therefore a

spectacle with multiple implications.

What is not often gleaned from these family-friendly reality series are the values and ethics that have been attached to higher-order births since the 1700s. Prior to the eighteenth century it was common for families to be large in number in order to assist in the subsistence of the family itself. It was the Victorian era values of the late-nineteenth century that eventually curbed the birth rate, but religious principles and the lack of proper birth control meant that, while perhaps no longer acceptable among the Victorian middle-class bourgeoisie, families with more than two or three children was typical particularly among immigrant and working-class families.<sup>43</sup> The family-planning movement emerged during the early twentieth century, resulting in Planned Parenthood (1942), and advocated for both contraceptive use and population control, leading to an average decline of over one child per woman (Boyer, 2001; Teachman et al., 1999). Aside from the post-World War II baby boom, when women had on average four children, birth rates were low throughout the twentieth century (BabyCenter, 2006).

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, birth rates fell to dramatic lows in the 1970s stirring fear that “if women have an average family size of 2.11 children during their lifetimes, the nation will reach zero population growth within 40 to 50 years” (AP Wire, 1972). The lifetime birth rate per woman has been about two children since 1989 (Teachman et al., 1999). Early twenty-first century data released from the National Center for Health Statistics found that more babies were born in the U.S. in 2007 than any other year in American history, even the height of the baby boom (Eckholm, 2007). However, unlike the baby boom where the average number of children

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<sup>43</sup> In the nineteenth century, the fertility rate of American women fell from around seven children per mother in 1800 to 3.5 in 1900 (Boyer, 2001).

for women was three or four, recent increases in birth rates “reflect a larger population of women of childbearing age” having children; “today, the average woman has 2.1 children” (Eckholm, 2007).

But if women, on average, are only having two or three children, why does it appear that multiples and oversized families are a common occurrence? This apparent trend has likely been fueled by televised representations of fictional large families. In the 1970s, when birth rates were at their lowest, America fell in love with *The Brady Bunch* (6 kids), *The Waltons* (8 Kids), and *Eight is Enough* (8 kids), just a few of the series that featured more than the mythologized “natural” two to three children viewers have come to expect in real life. More recently, series such as *The Cosby Show* (1984-92), *Just the Ten of Us* (1988-90), *Family Matters* (1989-98), *Party of Five* (1994-2000), and *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* (1996-2007) have all featured above-average-sized families.<sup>44</sup> Currently, family melodramas such as *Brothers & Sisters* (2006-2011), *Dirty Sexy Money* (2007-2009), and *Parenthood* (2009-) have featured families with more than three children, which seems to be the Hollywood standard.<sup>45</sup> All of these television families featured natural births, that is, not medically enhanced, and only a few instances of twin births.

Contrarily, the most prominent family-centered reality series depict uncommonly sized families or higher-ordered pregnancies consisting of four or more babies, thereby driving not only our own fascination with the birth of multiples, but also further crafting the family as “spectacle.” According to Brown (n.d.), more than 4.5 million couples experience infertility each year, resulting in an increased use of medical fertility

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<sup>44</sup> We could also include the blended families from *Step by Step* (1991-98) and *Once & Again* (1999-2002) and the family of adopted children on *Second Noah* (1996-1997).

<sup>45</sup> Another exception is HBO’s *Big Love* (2006-2011), which featured a polygamous marriage in which high birth rates are spiritually encouraged.

treatments that can result in the birth of multiples. Between 1980 and 1998, the birth rate for multiples soared more than 400 percent, but has declined 21 percent since then (Martin et al., 2009). This upsurge in higher-order multiples has been attributed to women having children later in life and the growing availability and use of fertility-enhancing therapies. According to the National Vital Statistics Report released in 2009, the twin birth rate, which had risen 70 percent from 18.9 per 1,000 births in 1980 to 32.2 in 2004, remained nearly unchanged in 2006, while the rate of triplet and higher-order multiple births declined 5 percent in 2006 (Martin et al., 2009). The number of triplet and higher-order multiple births was 153.3 per 100,000 total births, and the number of quintuplets and other higher-order births was 67 per 100,000 total in 2006. Statistics show that less than 20 percent of all triplets (or more) born between 1997 and 2003 were conceived naturally (Martin et al., 2009).

What does all this mean? Generally, data illustrate that multiple births are more exceptional than the recent hysteria around multiples tends to portray. And yet, entertainment media have made uncommonly sized families seem almost fashionable now – think of the tabloid covers of the Jolie-Pitt worldly brood. And television has only made this “extreme makeover: family edition” more acceptable, more of a spectacle, even a ratings powerhouse – particularly for TLC.

### *Documenting the “Real” Family*

In this post-network era of cable fragmentation, TLC was struggling to find its niche. Founded in 1972 as a joint venture by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and NASA, it was once called the Appalachian Community Service Network (Laurence, 2005). Programming on The Learning Channel (as it was renamed in 1980)

featured documentary content on subjects ranging from science and history to cooking and home improvement. After Discovery Communications took over the network in 1991, TLC began to rely more heavily on content that would draw niche audiences such as home improvement and do-it-yourself shows and reality-based medical programming that appealed to daytime audiences. Moving away from more educational programming, TLC found moderate success in early 2000 with its more mass-appealing “Life Unscripted” series geared towards reality-drama (e.g., *A Wedding Story* and *A Baby Story*) and interior design (e.g., *Trading Spaces*). Concerned about its reliance on decorating shows and dramatic reality fare, the network launched a new promotional campaign in 2006, “Live and Learn,” which imported stand-alone documentaries on unique families from its sister network Discovery Health, featuring families such as the Gosselins and the Duggars. Viewer interest in the personal stories depicted in these documentaries, once more, shifted the focus of the network towards reality series centered on family. Starting in 2008, the “Life Surprises” campaign began to feature full series for the Gosselin and Duggar families, as well as other spectacle families in shows such as *Little People*, *Big World*, *Kids By the Dozen*, *Table for 12*, and *Quints By Surprise*.<sup>46</sup> James Poniewozik (2009) writes, “The downsizing of fictional TV families left a gap that cable has happily filled... TLC shows are all about extreme parenting.” Recently, TLC’s programming has expanded to family reality series that incorporate the family business such as *Cake Boss* and *D.C. Cupcakes*. However, as of late, TLC has

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<sup>46</sup> *Little People*, *Big World* featured the Roloff family comprised of little people Amy and Matt Roloff, their son Zach (also a little person), and three average height children, Jeremy (Zach’s fraternal twin), Molly, and Jacob. *Kids by the Dozen* showcased a variety of families with 12 or more children. *Table for 12* centers on the Hayes family of New Jersey, which consists of two sets of twins and sextuplets – one of whom suffers from cerebral palsy. *Quints by Surprise* is a continuation of the Jones family’s appearance in the documentary *Too Many Babies?* after Casey Jones gave birth to quintuplets following fertility treatments.

come under media scrutiny for its more outrageous and controversial programming with more extreme reality fare such as *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, *My Strange Addiction*, and *Toddlers and Tiaras*, which has particularly enflamed critics.

Within the explosion of reality TV series, “images of ‘real’ family life now permeate all areas of the TV landscape, presenting a variety of representations of marriage and child rearing” (Matheson, 2007, 33). Like *An American Family* before them, some of these new reality series offer sad and miserable depictions of twenty-first century domesticity featuring helpless or apathetic parents, ghastly and unruly children, and contemptible marital relationships in series such as *Wife Swap* (2004-), *Supernanny* (2005-), and *Nanny 911* (2004-) – a visualization of the proselytized family values in decline. According to media scholar Sarah Matheson (2007), on the surface these reality series “offer the potential to explore the nature of the American Family in a new way” by portraying a diverse set of families, but underneath, the scary and accusatory depictions of careless parenting merely “reaffirm the status quo through discourses of taste and through its narrative of self improvement” (34). In other words, family-centered reality series question nostalgic conceptions we hold for the “traditional” family – the White, middle-class nuclear family – by acknowledging alternative family structure and behavior, while at the same time, celebrating normative families and reinforcing social stability (Brancato, 2007; Matheson, 2007).

For example, the concept of *Wife Swap* is to exchange wives between two antithetical households and allow viewers to witness the conflict that ensues by forcing families of opposing beliefs and social practices to live together for two weeks. In the “Aguirre/Ray” (12/8/04) episode, Cristina Aguirre, a tattooed, free-spirited mother of

three teens is swapped with über-uptight southern Baptist Wendy Ray. The Rays follow the teachings of the Bible, which to them means that the patriarch is in charge and the wife is to be submissive and cater to her family's needs, while the Aguirre's home school their kids and allow them free rein over the household. After a week of trying, and usually failing, to assimilate to their "new" families, the women then enforce a "rule change" whereby each attempts to remake the family as if it were her own – which, of course, does not come without considerable consternation and hostility from the husband and children. When the wives return to their respective families, after much self-reflection and rationalization, viewers glimpse whether or not the exchange had any real impact on the status quo of the family in a follow-up epilogue at the end of the episode.

As Matheson argues, "Rather than offering a critique of the norms associated with the traditional family through the foregrounding of difference, the series effectively...limit the critical potential suggested in [their] representation of contrary family models" (34). Moreover, these reality series also exemplify the conservative gender division of labor in the domestic space (Brancato, 2007; Maher, 2004). For example, media scholar Jennifer Maher (2004) determined that early TLC lifestyle reality series, such as *A Wedding Story* and *A Baby Story*, functioned to "indoctrinate women into traditional gender roles" (197). Similarly, with regard to reality TV shows such as *Wife Swap* and *Supernanny*, Brancato (2007) notes that their very premise is the negotiation of gender roles and codes of femininity and masculinity within the family. Although nearly every family that has appeared on *Wife Swap* has initiated minor changes in their lifestyles, the real value of this type of show is to "reify a historically conservative definition" of family in contrast to depictions of families who fail to

perform this norm (Brancato, 2007, 49). Effectively, these day-in-the-life documentaries are steeped in familialist ideology and failure to conform results not in meaningful diversity, but appalling disgrace.

So what drives interest in these shows, particularly the mega-family series? Psychologists Steven Reiss and James Wiltz (2004) found that viewers are motivated to watch reality TV – series in which ordinary people serve as the main characters, such as *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, and *The Real World* – mainly for status and vengeance. Viewers measure their status against the “real” people seen on television hoping to compare favorably. Through family-centered reality series viewers “can compare their domestic lives favorably and perhaps note how they too can transcend the limits and conflicts inherent in their domestic relationships and material circumstances” (Brancato, 2007, 55). In some ways, these programs deconstruct the fantasy of marriage and parenting expressed in fictional television series. Thus, on the one hand we can appreciate a more authentic vision of “real” life, and on the other, find relief in the fact that our own circumstances place us in a far better position than those featured on reality TV.

There is no denying that mega-family series work on two levels: pure fascination for “different” families and the accessibility of each family vacation, temper tantrum, and tender parental moment. According to Eileen O’Neil, president of TLC, “For television, there’s a strong entertainment value in shows about large families because there are great characters, adorable kids and a lot of chaos. There’s a certain relatability; we all are part of some family structure and connect in some way to watching a super-sized version of it” (Villarreal, 2009). In a segment from *Surviving Sextuplets and Twins* (2006), the first Gosselin family documentary, Kate Gosselin acknowledges that people are interested in



her family because it offers them confidence in their own parenting: it's the "If she can do it with eight [kids], I can do it with one" mentality (Remo, 2009). Ultimately, the interest lies in the spectacle, and then transforming this spectacle into ordinary situations thereby demythologizing familial experiences. What follows is an examination of how both *Jon & Kate Plus 8* and *19 Kids and Counting* attempt to universalize their respective familial experience, as well as highlight familialism as an important directive of the twenty-first century family. Although these two families outwardly challenge the nuclear family norm, internally they rear their families within prescribed familialist values emphasizing familial strength, support, and togetherness.

#### *Jon & Kate Plus the Unexpected 8*

After being diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome, which hampered her ability to have children, Jon and Kate Gosselin pursued fertility therapies to help conceive twins, Cara and Mady, in 2000. In trying to conceive a third child, the couple received an unexpected surprise when they learned that Kate was carrying sextuplets in 2004. At the time, the Gosselin sextuplets were one of 12 sets living in the U.S., hence the media interest in the family following the birth of the babies. The oddity of sextuplets caught the attention of a production team from Figure 8 Films, which documented a day-in-the-life of the Gosselins in 2006 when the twins were five and the sextuplets were 16 months.<sup>47</sup> *Surviving Sextuplets and Twins* (2006) and, later, *Surviving Sextuplets and Twins: One Year Later* (2007) offered a fascinating day-in-the-life perspective of the family trying to manage its newly chaotic existence.

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<sup>47</sup> According to their corporate website, Figure 8 Films "tells stories about incredible people and challenging situations...we hope we can help make the world a more understanding place through the telling and dissemination of these stories."

The documentaries depicted Kate as the extremely organized though harried mother of eight and Jon as the more laid-back though thoroughly invested dad; each trying to manage, both financially and emotionally, the stress incurred with raising two sets of multiples. From the deafening noise level to the poopy diapers and chaotic feeding times, viewers likely found the couple's bickering a trifling consequence compared to how others would deal with the stress if the situation were reversed. Amidst sibling squabbling and disciplinary necessity, fictionalized versions of super-sized families (e.g., *The Brady Bunch*, *The Waltons*, *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*) never seemed to depict this kind of minutiae – concerned with the actual raising of children instead of broad take-away value lessons.

By the time the Gosselins' second special aired, the family had already committed to a series with TLC (Kizer, 2008). According to the Gosselins, the principal goal of filming the series was to record “memories before we forgot them for the kids” (Roberts, 2008).<sup>48</sup> For the Gosselins nothing was off limits. Kate embarrassedly recorded the results of her tummy tuck and mechanically explained her grocery shopping strategy, all while Jon lightheartedly complained about his wife's clean-freak tendencies and bossiness. In no way did the Gosselins promote an idealized image of marriage and parenthood, opting to demythologize the parenting process; yet the documentaries, and later the series, made for compelling and strangely comforting television (Kizer, 2008). According to one reviewer, “In a weird way, this fly-on-the-wall exposé – by highlighting the stresses of temper tantrums, sibling spats and the logistics of diaper changes – is performing a public service for anyone harboring romantic notions about child rearing” (Rubinoff, 2008). Eileen O'Neill, president of TLC, claims that “much of

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<sup>48</sup> Kate Gosselin reiterates this when discussing her reasons for publishing her book *Multiple Blessings* (2008).

the draw [for the series is] how adorable those kids are and the fascination of organizing a supersized family” (Rice, 2009). Filming three days a week for three months, the series recounts a family overcoming adversity and counting the blessings it has been provided, essentially an unflinchingly honest and relatable portrayal of a family.

### *The Ultimate Mega-Family Brood*

Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar married in 1984, and devoted much of their early years together to making ends meet and helping with the local ministry. After their first child, Joshua, was born in 1988, the Duggars decided to put off adding to their family, which led to Michelle resuming birth control. When she conceived and subsequently miscarried while on birth control, the couple retreated into their faith and resolved to strictly adhere to the Bible, particularly references to conceiving children. They were determined to “stop using any form of birth control and let God decide how many children [they] would have” (Duggar & Duggar, 2008, 42). By 2010, the Duggars had 19 children – including two sets of twins – ranging in age from twenty-three to two, all born naturally, and all who have a name starting with the letter “J.” In 2009, the Duggars also welcomed their first grandchild, born only a few months earlier than their youngest, Josie.

After a failed senatorial bid by Jim Bob, a picture of the large family in the *New York Times* caught the attention of a freelance journalist who pitched a story about the mega-family to *Parents* magazine in 2003. A few months later, the Duggars were asked to participate in the documentary *Fourteen Children and Pregnant Again* (2004) for the Discovery Health cable network. Following the success of the documentary, Discovery Health quickly ordered a second film (*Raising 16 Children*, 2006) that would continue to

record the Duggar's unusual lifestyle filled with daily routines, a fidelity to religious conservatism, and an "endless supply of optimism that seems to be a genetic trait encoded into each and every Duggar" (Figure 8 Films, 2006). This time, the documentary observed the family working together to build a new 7,000-square foot home spacious enough to accommodate their continually growing family. Additionally, *Raising 16 Children* delved deeper into Jim Bob and Michelle's preference for home schooling their entire brood – specifically utilizing a Christian home schooling programming. Through the documentary, viewers observed the Duggar family on their annual trip to Texas to meet with fellow home schoolers, many of whom were quite similar in family size and cultural politics.

After a third successful documentary in 2006, which captured the Duggars traveling across the country in a 45-foot bus outfitted with 15 bunk beds, Discovery Health was interested in making the Duggars a permanent fixture on their television schedule beginning in 2008 with *17 Kids and Counting*. Although the fascination of the show still hinges on viewer interest in how a mega-family like the Duggars successfully maneuvers the difficulties of raising so many children, the series also establishes points of departures, both social and cultural, from the world with which we as television viewers and family members have become accustomed. Despite humorous fish-out-of-water moments as the Duggars venture into the world beyond Arkansas, the global message at the core of the series is the significance and benefit of actively pursuing a familial lifestyle based on the tenants of familialism.

#### *Mega-Families and the Gifts God Grants*

One of the principal features that characterize the mega-family is the strength they

exude as they contend with being marked as “othered” within the socialized expectations of familial size. Both the Gosselins and the Duggars articulate a reliance on and celebration of a higher power to guide their families and the “divine” faith that sees their uncommonly sized brood as a blessing. The mere fact that the Gosselins and, in particular, the Duggars challenge the nuclear family norm *and* express an explicit religiosity within the secular world of television makes them a target of scrutiny from various groups. However, the curiosity that mega-families elicit from audiences does not simply stem from anomalous religious undertones, particularly since other mega-family series such as *Table for 12* and *Quints by Surprise* do not depict the same religious devotion, yet are equally as interesting. Instead, it is the fidelity to family, in any shape or size, which reflects a universal familial commitment and mitigates the abnormality of the mega-family.

When the Gosselins recount the day they learned Kate was pregnant with sextuplets, they describe how their overwhelming shock soon turned into righteous anger when the doctor suggested selective termination (*Surviving Sextuplets and Twins*, 2006). The deeply religious couple turned to their faith to guide them over the next few months until the babies were born. The sextuplets were ten weeks premature, but miraculously were born with few complications and were able to come home two months later. Though at various points throughout the series Kate mentions the added precautions she must take because the babies were premies (e.g., the babies needed breathing nebulizers when sick and their vision was checked often), generally the sextuplets are happy and healthy. The Gosselins were lucky to have a number of volunteers assist them for the first few months with domestic chores and acquiring items for the babies, many of who later became close

family friends. Neither Jon nor Kate has a close relationship with their respective families so the couple was reliant on the kindness of strangers (Kizer, 2008).

According to an interview with *Good Housekeeping*, the experience drew them closer to God, leaving them to trust in His divine provision for their family:

“Things that I started wishing for and praying for out loud started materializing,” Kate says. She’d remind Jon that they needed paper towels, and an hour later, a volunteer would drop off a case. She’d make a mental note that the yard needed weeding, and a church group would call two days later offering to do it. “Right when I would flash back to when we’d been just a family of four and thought, ‘We could have just been fine,’ He would very literally give me examples of how He was going to provide for me,” she says. “I don’t care if you believe in God or not. You couldn’t explain it any other way. There’s not a little man who sits behind the sofa phoning people.” (Kizer, 2008, 230)

Thanks in large part to the show, the Gosselins were able to defray the cost of eight kids through “corporate freebies – bikes, toys, personal services – and, of course, the show, which Kate told *Ladies’ Home Journal*, is ‘our family job’” (Poniewozik, 2009).

Although a number of critics have decried the series and the couple for exploiting the children to receive gifts of free trips and household items (Albom, 2009; Dennis, 2010; Villarreal, 2009), in “Gosselins Go West” (4/23/07), Kate explains her perception of the show as, “I think the main message that we want to portray to people is that...God will provide for us.” One could argue that the way in which *Jon & Kate Plus 8* blurred the line between familial subsistence and product placement is quite similar to postwar sitcoms which used materialism and household products to promulgate familial consumerism as necessary for a strong family and country. Still, despite the public criticism and the fact that TLC – not God – is actually the main benefactor of the Gosselin family, Jon and Kate continued to express their thanks to God throughout the series for the blessings they received and explained how faith is foundational to their

relationship.<sup>49</sup> This has been reiterated in the couple's speaking engagements at area churches and in Kate's two best-selling books *Multiple Blessings: Surviving to Thriving with Twins and Sextuplets* (2008) and *Eight Little Faces* (2009).<sup>50</sup> Setting aside the condemnation that besieged the Gosselins towards the end of the series and after its conclusion, the couple propagated and employed a family-as-community discourse by way of celebrating the volunteers who aided the family ("Kate's Labor Day") and giving back to the community when the opportunity arose through charity work ("Yard Sale," "Giving Back," "Kate's Birthday Surprise"). In the end, the fact that the series showcased the mechanisms for the family's survival – which, yes, includes the free gifts it received – and the faith the couple held on to, mirrors every family's pursuit of happiness, contention with emotional and financial burdens, and internal solidification of its foundation.

Unlike the Gosselins, the Duggar family is extremely self-reliant, though they, too, have transformed their unique brood into a fascinating half hour of family television that harkens back to nostalgic family values (Poniewozik, 2009; Villarreal, 2009). Although *19 Kids and Counting* is an interesting amalgamation of lessons integrating family, fertility, and religion, it is focused on acknowledging the ways in which their family is just like everyone else's despite its profound size. The series observes the Duggars' daily schedule, which includes traditional family activities and chores, but it also depicts Jim Bob reading and sermonizing Bible passages each night. In addition to

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<sup>49</sup> In 2009, critics lambasted the Gosselins for purchasing a \$1.13 million home when neither parent held a steady job. The series was also criticized for depicting more contrived moments built around corporate sponsors and event planners than merely observing a day-in-the-life of the Gosselin clan (Albom, 2009; Collins, 2009; Poniewozik, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> While *Multiple Blessings* is an autobiographical account of the Gosselins' life, *Eight Little Faces* features Kate commenting on the life lessons God has taught her broken down into themes like trust, perseverance, joy, and encouragement.

reading from the book of Proverbs each day, the family also hosts a Sunday church service within their home each week (Duggar & Duggar, 2008). Throughout the series Jim Bob and Michelle openly discuss their commitment to sexual abstinence and conception as highlighted in the Old Testament, but they also reiterate that this commitment is the option *they* have accepted. Despite repeated claims to the contrary by cultural critics (Joyce, 2009a) and online detractors, the Duggars' fidelity to their religious beliefs has not exceeded devoted observance to overt proselytizing – at least not within the series.

Families like the Duggars, which follow a pro-natalist stance eschewing all forms of birth control, have been labeled as members of the Quiverfull movement – a Christian movement that derives its name from Psalm 127: children are the gift of the Lord, “as arrows are in the hand of a mighty man,” and “happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them.” According to writer Kathryn Joyce (2009c), Quiverfull women commonly give birth to large families and “have spread their ideas through the booming conservative home schooling community.” Some critics claim that through their reality TV show, the Duggars have, in fact, helped the Quiverfull movement gain exposure and notoriety, thereby revealing it as more than an outlier advocacy group (Joyce, 2009b; Zernike, 2009). While neither the series nor the Duggars specifically identify themselves as part of the Quiverfull movement, they do express many of the same tenets including the philosophy regarding birthing children, mandates concerning gender roles and home schooling, and insulating the family from potential adulteration in the secular world (Joyce, 2009a). Quiverfull advocates remain steadfast in their commitment to “God’s plan” and view each child as a “blessing from God.”



For Joyce (2009a), the Duggars are the first reality TV mega-family to symbolize the Quiverfull movement for a national audience. However, the saccharine details of life with the Duggar family is fairly anomalous from the average Quiverfull family, “many of whom live necessarily simple lives, both as a lifestyle choice and because it’s the only way to stretch limited funds enough to feed and clothe such large families” (Elliot, 2009). Hence, even though the Duggars do not explicitly mention their adherence to Quiverfull philosophy, the family is “often held aloft as attractive representatives of the movement” and therefore a spectacle even within their own brethren of Quiverfull families (Elliot, 2009). But more than an extreme religiosity, the Duggars’ idealism regarding conceiving and subsequent child rearing practices also emphasizes a pro-family advocacy centered on a universal set of familialist values, such as conservative gender role division and commitment to the familial unit. Although *19 Kids and Counting* may have intensified a small but growing spiritual movement, the series remains predicated not on moralizing pro-natalist behavior but encouraging families to fortify relationships with each other and to consider the best interest of the family instead of individual needs. The Duggars’ explicit belief in divine providence is tempered, if not normalized, by a greater accent on the family’s attempt to maintain a daily routine, participate in community service opportunities, and general familial hijinks and special events.

#### *Mega-Families and Family Fellowship*

Another avenue in which the mega-family reality series endorses familialist values is by advocating family fellowship, not perfection. Although many families undoubtedly try to emulate the idealized families depicted on television, more than likely they fall frustratingly short. But that has never made them any less deserving or loving

than *Leave it to Beaver*'s Cleaver family. The picture-perfect image we associate with "the family" fails to recognize and accept the diverse ways in which we observe and construct our families. What makes *Jon & Kate Plus 8* and *19 Kids and Counting* compelling television is how they offer a more well-rounded familial experience; one that is apt to be more familiar and genuine, including the recognizable parental bickering, chaotic mealtimes, messy households, and the complexities of raising children. Importantly, these mega-families thrive on spending time together and establish that familial camaraderie can benefit all families.

As one reviewer notes, "Jon and Kate are regular people, not the Cleavers or the Huxtables. Sometimes the kids act out. Sometimes Jon gets overwhelmed when he gets home from work. Sometimes Kate snaps at Jon after a long day of chasing children" (PR Newswire, 2007). Critics have commented that the marital sparring between the Gosselins has driven much of the show's success, adding that it made the family "all the more sympathetic to viewers" (Stelter, 2009) and offered "the occasional useful life lesson" (Collins, 2009). *Jon & Kate Plus 8* reflected various common familial concerns and tribulations, such as the hectic preparations for family vacations ("Gosselins Go West," "Jon & Kate Plus 8 Hit the Road"), the technical aspects of raising a family on a budget ("Shopping for Ten," "Sara Snow Visits!"), surviving trips to the dentist ("Sextuplets' First Dentist Visit"), and forming special bonds with children. The fortitude and strategy the Gosselin parents display in simply transporting the kids to and from the car, let alone driving down to Walt Disney World, is heroic, even for parents with one child who experience the same kind of parental stresses – though not on this exacerbated scale. Jon and Kate are parents managing to function in a highly irregular situation. The

couple struggles like many other overwhelmed parents, they go to church and uphold their faith, and they encourage their family to be thankful for each other.

But demonstrating “family” and familialism is more than the technical aspects of raising a large brood of children in these mega-family reality series. Even though the Duggars, too, employ particular techniques for child rearing – such as assigning children specific chores, employing the motto “Buy Used, Save the Difference” when considering purchases, and utilizing a buddy system between older and younger kids – they, like many mega-families, isolate themselves from the outside world and remain insulated within the family. Though this may be a narrative function of the reality series being framed around the life of the family, as depicted in each show, both the Gosselin and Duggar children rarely network with those outside of the family. In fact, aside from episodes that feature the family performing missionary and community service (“Duggars in El Salvador,” “Duggars on a Mission”) or vacationing (“Lights, Camera, Duggars,” “Duggars in Dixie”), the Duggars’ only other interactions outside of each other, are with other mega-families such as the Bates family, which is comprised of 18 children (“When Big Families Collide,” “Bates vs. Duggars Smackdown,” “Duggars and Bates Reloaded”). The Duggars’ strong family fellowship is also a function of their retreat from the secular world to insulate the family from more liberal enticements, especially those portrayed in the media. To that end, Jim Bob and Michelle monitor their children’s Internet use and the television is only used for watching educational DVDs or carefully selected “family-friendly” movies (Duggar & Duggar, 2008). The Duggars also cite the occasional event worthy of “getting out the ‘rabbit ears’ antenna,” such as when the Duggar parents are on a talk show, a sporting event, or a presidential speech (Duggar &

Duggar, 2008, 30). The Duggars even admit that they do not watch their own show on TLC but watch the series later on DVD. The family's sheltered lifestyle likely seems overly cautious to many in a world that has become absolutely reliant on media for entertainment and exploration; but the series depicts an extremely happy and active family who seeks out amusement away from the more lazy leisure pursuits of today's children.

The decision to home school the children is also elemental to the strength of the family's camaraderie. Jim Bob and Michelle resolved to home school their children after having met various families who saw remarkable results, both social and educational, after home schooling. In their autobiography, the Duggars don't outright mention that their choice was based on religious principles, though they do indicate that home schooling provided the benefit of more careful supervision and surveillance of their children's actions and "the attitudes of their hearts" (Duggar & Duggar, 2008, 74). Instead, Michelle tells of other familial benefits of home schooling such as greater fellowship between siblings, more one-on-one tutoring, and the ways the older children foster learning skills by helping teach the younger ones. While many of today's television series portray so-called "dysfunctional" families, or, at the very least, perpetual conflict between siblings, the Duggar siblings display a genuine camaraderie and cordiality between each other – even with their great number and diversity. Jim Bob and Michelle attribute much of this to their decision to home school the children. They say, "instead of going away to school and developing best friends from other families and then focusing on interests they shared with those friends, home schooling cultivated an environment in which their children became each other's best friends" (Duggar & Duggar, 2008, 74).

Hence, home schooling the children and isolating them from potential malevolent vices nurtures and reinforces familialist values within the family, which are then projected to the viewing audience.

Even though the series does depict some of the more awkward moments for some of the Duggars brought about by an acute lack of knowledge with aspects of the “outside” world played for humor, such as an uncomfortable outing to an Ethiopian restaurant in which the family squirms during a performance of belly dancers and grimaces over the exotic cuisine (“Duggars in DC”), overall one cannot deny the envy the Duggars invite with their seemingly straightforward and trouble-free lifestyle. Whether or not this familial ease is based on religious fidelity, lack of pop culture knowledge, or a consistently festive, can-do attitude inherent in each Duggar child, one cannot deny the Duggars’ similarity to the nostalgic sitcom families of the past. Despite having never had the benefit of watching series such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver* – which have been counted as illustrative of and subsequently implementing the nuclear family experience – when watching *19 Kids and Counting* the same emphasis on family values is apparent no matter how different the Duggars may seem from other families.

Both *Jon & Kate Plus 8* and *19 Kids and Counting* have demonstrated how self-sufficiency can perpetuate stronger familial ties. Each household fosters strong relationships between family members through saccharine family-friendly activities such as the Gosselins’ family game night (“Games Gosselins Play”) and movie night (“Gosselin Family Movie Night”), or the entire Duggar clan out roller skating (“Duggars on Wheels”), playing broomball (“Duggars and Dugouts”), or constructing a homemade slip-n-slide in the backyard (“Duggars’ New Additions”). Instead of mediated

entertainment, both families have created elaborate play spaces for the kids such as the Gosselins' play houses ("Houses & Big Changes") and the Duggars' custom indoor playscape. The Gosselins and the Duggars, as well as other mega-families portrayed on reality TV, illustrate families rising above individualistic needs in favor of a strong and united familial unit. Mega-families, who must constantly adjust to a world physically and economically constructed for small families, encounter many hardships that the average family takes for granted like traveling, household space issues, and vast age differences. Yet, one of the intended goals of mega-family reality TV series is to showcase all of the ways in which this particular version of "family" is just like any other.

#### *The Mega-Family and Familialism*

While not a new phenomenon, mega-families are both visually distinctive from the nuclear norm and their valuations are inherently different from the more individualistic nature of most twenty-first century families. However, the object of mega-family reality series is not to encourage viewers to enlarge their family size or show the hardship and scrutiny that mega-families encounter on a daily basis. Instead, mega-families like the Gosselins and the Duggars indicate that we are all subject to the same trials and tribulations, and therefore generate and adopt a family gospel with universal appeal, which ultimately shows the strength of a family comes from within.

Granted it is easy to overlook this familialist ideology in light of the extenuating circumstances that continue to mark mega-families as "different." Both the Gosselins and the Duggars have expressed in interviews a desire to use their respective series as an opportunity to document their respective family's commonality with others (Duggar & Duggar, 2008; Roberts, 2008). But they also endeavor to respond to the criticism aimed

at mega-families regarding irresponsible parenting (Koch, 2009). As Poniewozik (2009) writes:

Megafamilies invite admiration and condemnation at the same time. On the one hand, there's no greater act of faith than filling up a house with kids and trusting that ends will somehow meet. On the other hand: Just how do they plan to make ends meet?

Critics accuse these reality sitcoms of perpetuating reckless fertility treatments (Barney, 2009) and exploiting their children for financial gain (Stelter, 2009; Villarreal, 2009).

Some even wonder if taxpayers are assisting these families or what kind of compensation they are offered to put themselves on television, and consequently, what kind of message this offers to families on government welfare. In numerous interviews, Kate Gosselin has said that the series had become her family's livelihood, particularly after the couple's divorce, and without it they would be back to struggling to make ends meet.<sup>51</sup> Still, the spectacle made of the Octomom implies "there's a freak show fascination with multiples that, left unchecked, can border on exploitation" (Albom, 2009).

According to television scholar Margaret Tally (2008), mega-family reality series draw in viewers "through the idea that these are real families with real problems, not unlike those of the viewing audience. At the same time, the behaviors of the children are so exaggerated that most viewers have the ability to distance themselves somewhat from the show" (5). The families depicted in all of these series may not *look* like the "every" family, but they live by the same principles of the average, nuclear family, which makes them an interesting combination of entertaining oddity and familialist agents for twenty-first century families. In this day and age of families proselytized to be under siege and

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<sup>51</sup> The Gosselins reportedly received \$75,000 or more per episode prior to the couple's divorce (Albom, 2009). Estimates were larger once Kate negotiated to revamp the series to feature only her and the children in *Kate Plus 8*.

“in crisis,” these mega-families promote of image of “family” that is neither “dysfunctional” nor “broken,” but presents a renewed commitment to family values in its universal form.

## **Conclusion**

The unique and unusual have always garnered attention and spectacle families, oddities within a world of conventional nuclear family households, are no exception. And their popularity has grown. Whereas only nine spectacle family reality series premiered in 2008, within the next two years 28 new series aired on various cable networks, with 15 beginning in 2009 and 13 in 2010. Although each spectacle family – whether comprised of celebrities or unique attributes and unusual careers – is marketed as “different,” they inherently conform to the same conventional values common within the traditional family sitcom:

That’s the beauty of [these] shows: left, right, and center can find reasons to love and judge. Family-planning is the ground zero where the personal meets the political – where the rubber, or the lack of one, meets the road. It’s the practical application of all those buzzwords: family values, life, choice, our children’s future. (Poniewozik, 2009)

These families lovingly stick together and show viewers how regular people function in highly irregular circumstances (PR Newswire, 2007). In various ways, the atypical families depicted on reality TV establish their ordinariness and similarity to every family; these parents are just trying to make a good life for their children and instill in them a good moral and ethical values system. As the twenty-first century family tries to maneuver its complex socio-political environment, audiences can look to Gene Simmons’ paterfamilias, Rev. Run’s daily “Words of Wisdom,” and even a mega-family’s parenting techniques as guides for ways even the most unconventional family can hold fast to the



more mundane “old-school” family values.

Television scholar Gerard Jones (1992) contends that the sitcom’s “function has always been to show the American family to itself, to open an alternate family room within our own” (5). Reality sitcoms have helped “an entire generation of viewers [who were] unconsciously traumatized because they could never measure up to the image of family life they saw on the [television] screen” (qtd in Ruoff, 2002, 14). Most assuredly, these family-oriented reality series presume that viewers will likely attend to them with a comparative eye – zeroing in appreciatively on their differences from the eccentricities of spectacle families though hoping to emulate their commitment to family fellowship and values. The near religious zeal critics have taken in demonizing celebrity culture, the consequences of fertility therapies, and the exploitation of mega-families, further fuels questions of the influence these reality sitcoms may have on twenty-first century families. For the past two decades, television has been overloaded with a broad spectrum of so-called “dysfunctional” or highly contentious families in popular sitcoms (e.g., *The Simpsons*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Arrested Development*) and melodramas (e.g., *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *Dirty Sexy Money*) that, though arguably fresh interpretations of contemporary family life, rely too heavily on quirky narrative premises and flash, and therefore may not make a strong and precise impact on viewers’ conception of “family.” Instead, reality sitcoms offer a remarkably powerful and singular vision of family that, although outwardly “different,” highlights and reaffirms familialism and the benefits of its tenants to “the family.”

Spectacle families may employ their differences as a mechanism for entertaining audiences, but the goal is to demonstrate all the ways in which they adhere to and support

a universal commitment to familialist values. Familialism refers not only to the ideology of the conventional nuclear family, but also the placement of the family over the individual interests and needs of its members (Harwood, 1997; Revillard, 2007). Television, particularly contemporary reality TV, has helped to construct a domestic hegemonic norm by accentuating a specific “ideal” or mythical family and de-emphasizing diversity between families. In the end, family reality series such as *Run’s House*, *Gene Simmons Family Jewels*, *Jon & Kate Plus 8*, and *19 Kids and Counting*, ultimately utilize alternative domesticity to play with viewers’ assumptions of what is a family and what are its values, and subsequently praise familialist idealism (Linder, 2005). Television has embraced “alternatives to the ideal and thereby celebrat[e] ‘the family’ in all its complex contemporary versions,” but it does so “within a recognition of the myth of nuclear familialism” (Chambers, 2001, 93-94). Reality TV offers viewers a more diverse image of family life, one that is particularly adept at recognizing contemporary struggles as universal for all families. The reality sitcom, then, refuses to condemn families that operate outside of the hegemonic norm, and instead mitigates explicit difference in favor of demonstrating that “family” is a universal experience.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION: THE COMPLEXITIES OF “FAMILY” IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

What is a family anyway?

They're just people who make you feel less alone and really loved.

-Mary Richards, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (“The Last Show,” 3/9/1977)

“Bent or broken, it’s the family tree.” The refrain of singer-songwriter Rain Perry’s “Beautiful Tree” – which, incidentally, was used as the theme song for The CW’s complicated teen pregnancy drama *Life Unexpected* (2010-2011) – is an ode to the unembellished and offbeat families from which we all come from. Contextualized within today’s socio-historical conditions – including the delaying of marriage and parenthood in favor of unwed cohabitation, the increase in multigenerational households, and the rise in single parenthood – the pathology of “the family” on television continues to favor the distinctive trend and fascination with familial conflict, crisis, and melodrama. However, as media scholar Deborah Chambers (2000) notes, these supposedly dysfunctional families merely “perpetuate the myth of a ‘functional,’ pure, ideal family” (202). Still, it is undeniable that fundamental changes in expectations, meanings, and practices of what “family” is and how to *be* a family have characterized much of the last two decades in both reality and on television (Farrell, 1999). Since the mid-1990s, television has articulated a discourse of family as intrinsically unstable, particularly in contrast to the intact, paternalistic families depicted in the idealized domestic sitcoms of the 1950s and

1960s. Moreover, the political condemnation that has dogged both these depictions of families “in-crisis” and attempts to update and respond to new formations of family organization (e.g., same-sex, blended, and divorced families), has only exacerbated comparisons to the nostalgic nuclear family of yesteryear. And yet, while conservative ideological critique invokes a hegemonic model of family and family values, at the same time, this conventional nuclear family is statistically on the wane (Carr, 2008). The incongruence between the rhetoric and reality, and subsequently how the combination of the two has been represented on television, is at the heart of this dissertation project.

### **Family and Familialism in the Twenty-First Century**

This dissertation sought to interrogate how representations of the family on television both reflect and adapt the socio-cultural changes taking place outside the television text, and how the inextricable combination of the two, constructs cultural expectations of and discourse about what family is and what it can be. What it found was that even amidst a multitude of diverse sentiments and structures of families on television, the most successful images of family continue to be bound to a performance of familialism that reaffirms the values deeply rooted in the nuclear family. In many respects, this construction of an idealized nuclear family has driven our expectations in entertainment and life. It is what engenders criticism of the Duggar family and the Octomom for conceivably having more children than they can possibly support financially or emotionally. It provokes conservative proselytizing from political and cultural critics against single motherhood, though not single fatherhood, same-sex families, and all alternative constructions of families that do not meet preconceived notions of “family.” And it, most especially, is the genesis of nearly every television

show centered on the family in all its shapes and sizes, particularly those high in discord. Here, family turmoil is really a mechanism used to highlight the fundamental imperative of familial fellowship to the family's survival. Yes, television has embraced shifting kinship arrangements and adopted non-nuclear family practices, but it resolutely appropriates these different patterns of familial experience into a re-imagined myth of a universal "family" that viewers are encouraged to desire.

Yet, this enviable and accepted nuclear family, affirmed by decades of familial imagery, is impractical and limiting in the real world. Hence, diverse, and at times unconventional, contemporary television families offer a space to re-imagine the boundaries of family while still affirming and cultivating familialism. For example, the current evolution in the discourse of fatherhood on television, with fathers moving away from the stoic hegemonic patriarchal ideal in favor of a more emotive and participative "new father," is riddled with a paternal anxiety that is only resolved by acknowledging and reasserting the significance of the patriarch within the family. The masculine domesticity and subsequent intergenerational paternal conflict prominently featured in a number of current father-centered and multigenerational television series, combined with the portrayal and disapproval of teen father absence, are essentially mechanisms to negotiate and reassert a universal familialist ideology as a necessity to non-nuclear families. Although television depicts more fluid family dyads, ideologically, conscription to the family and its fellowship remains paramount. By the same token, a host of reality family television series lend themselves to a performance of family spectacle, but here too, difference is fashioned in such a way that it is eventually brought into accord with a universalized construction of "family."

But even this “universal” family is subject to the social reality that constructs it; “family” is a concept that is always “in-process.” With statistics indicating that the conventional nuclear family is fading, it is unsurprising that television has appropriated alternate familial models in order to showcase an enduring familialism – a valorization of the importance of family in any form so long as its members conscribe to and affirm “family first.” Thus, the assorted articulations of family depicted in contemporary television series expands the definition of “family,” while also endorsing a particular performance of what it means to *be* a family.

### **The Limits of Familial Research**

The family continues to play a role in communicating the core values of society, but it also is a key site of the tensions between traditional cultural values and the progress of modernity, particularly with regard to the identity politics of race, class, and gender that are articulated in the various forms of family found on television. Although this dissertation examined an assortment of television series and the families that inhabit them, each one of them – or even those I have excluded – could yield an entire book-length project about the family and familialism in and of themselves. I have done my best to be expansive in terms of generic scope by choosing television genres that have yet to be systematically central to previous television research. At the same time, the dissertation adopts a narrow framework of textual and narrative thematic analysis of the specific series examined here in conjunction with identifying the socio-cultural circumstances within which they exist. Furthermore, even though the selection of television series analyzed in this dissertation is congruent with the genres under investigation and the arguments being made, it is assumed that others might make

different textual choices based on other criteria such as ratings, critical acclaim, longevity, or network affiliation.

Moreover, I readily admit that “the family” as a raced, classed, or religiously specific construct is perhaps given short shrift as compared to the attention paid to the problematic articulations of gender inherent in these family series, particularly given today’s political climate. However, that this dissertation devotes so many pages to examining fatherhood, paternal anxieties, and masculine domesticity is essentially a function of the lack of critical research on the representation of fatherhood on television as compared to the literature on motherhood. While feminist media analysts criticize the disappointing lack of equal representation among men and women on television and the subsequent reliance on patriarchal inscriptions of femininity, only a small number of studies have explored the social construction of masculinity and its ramifications on representations of familial roles. Though research on masculinities in the media has grown, particularly in film (see Hanke, 1992; Jeffords, 1994), television scholarship has rarely been updated beyond the mock-macho fatherhood discussed by Hanke (1998) and Scharrer (2001b) or the beleaguered husbands in recent sitcoms (Reed, 2003). The conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity as it interacts with fatherhood is needed, and, in fact, much more directly analyzed than I have done here – this is particularly true of non-White fatherhood, which I only cursorily touch on at various points in the dissertation.

In *Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and the Life Course in American History* (1986), historian John Demos argues that there is a penchant for seeing the family “by the light of our own values” (16). Thus, certain difficulties arise during the

course of researching and reviewing depictions of “family” in any medium. As often noted throughout this dissertation, “family” is a social construction rooted in contradiction thus making it difficult to define without excluding other adaptations. Media scholar Sarah Harwood (1997) notes that family “is an overused and underdefined term which conveniently collapses a complex tapestry of individual and social activities, desires and power relations into a single normative entity” (3-4). Even though “the family” is repeatedly the object of consternation in political, religious, and cultural rhetoric, it has rarely been defined in a rigorous way, and yet we know it when we see it (Harwood, 1997). With the diverse circumstances and formations within which “the family” exists, it is doubtful that one exact definition could ever suffice. In an effort to narrow the scope of this dissertation, I focused on families that centered on the parent-child dynamic which, in turn, eliminated some constructions such as childless couples, reconstituted sibling families, and fictive or voluntary familial relationships (i.e., urban tribes). However, this specific family dyad is quite comprehensive, including not just nuclear families, but also same-sex and multigenerational households – both of which have yet to be critically examined in terms of their representation on television.

Harwood (1997) also notes that not only has there been a “huge social investment in both a universal family type and its appearance of stasis,” but also this type “rarely exists and, where it does, exists in that form for very brief periods of time” (36). More often than not, previous research in both the social sciences and humanities tradition lacks historical context thereby perpetuating nuclear familialism without “revealing a heritage of change and crisis” in family dynamics (Skolnick, 1991, xviii). Furthermore, consistently hailing and juxtaposing the 1950’s nuclear family – which, as noted



previously was constructed from a series of chance circumstances – with modern-day familial patterns is prejudicial and can lead to inaccurate perceptions of families that fall outside this narrow model (Skolnick, 1991). Thus, while “the family” endures as central to American culture, it is easier to discern a *performance* of familialist ideology in families on television as opposed to its actual occurrence in a particular type of family.

Going forward, “family,” in all its iterations, will remain the focus of much of my research. I would like to continue investigating the phenomenon of paternal melodramas, particularly the ways in which they construct generational shifts in dominant masculinities. Additionally, as a counter to this dissertation’s inclination to promote research on men, I believe more analysis is needed on the complicated depictions of working-motherhood on television. Portrayals of motherhood and how it is socially constructed are already a concern for feminist media scholars. Recent television series have presented the range of femininities now available to women, but these apparent options are still burdened by cultural perceptions of motherhood and “family.” Working-motherhood, specifically, is encumbered by both expectations of mothers and maternal guilt for splitting time – often unequally – between work and family. Thus, in the future, I would like to qualitatively examine television series that depict working-mothers negotiating this balancing act, as well as struggling with their own internalized comparisons to a hegemonic and idealized version of motherhood.

### **The Future of the Twenty-First Century Family**

The development of diverse families on television corresponds to changing familial dynamics in real life. However, even though these “new” family narratives give agency to formerly subordinated and excluded iterations of family, they have rarely

threatened the nuclear status quo. If the object of the domestic sitcoms of the mid-1950s and 1960s was to universalize a particular style of family and conservative family values in order to strengthen the nation after decades of discontent, today's reflections of family life – in all its assorted forms – similarly aim to promote an underlying commonality of familialist ideology. So what then, amidst the diffuse notions of “family,” does it mean to represent the twenty-first century family? And could the recent U.S. Census data regarding inherent transforms in family structure affect the types of families we will see on television in the future and the meaning of “family” which they evoke?

“Family,” now, increasingly signifies a more subjective conception of intimate relations rather than biological family ties. Although television may forego the more conventional notion of “family” as a matter of genetics, even series comprised of urban tribes – particularly the rise in friends cohabitating together – emphasize Deborah Chambers' notion of *doing* family, whereby friends, neighbors, or even near-strangers become new relatives. This is evidenced in a host of newly developed sitcoms that have premiered within the last few years such as *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS), *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS), and *Cougar Town* (ABC), which continue in the tradition of *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. Furthermore, family melodrama, which continues to signal internal fissures of family crisis, is now symbolically played out in the domestic settings that these families inhabit – for example, the critique on class that now permeates the suburban settings in *The Middle* (ABC) and *Suburgatory* (ABC).

And what about the supposedly “real” families that populate reality TV? Are reality sitcoms and docu-dramas perhaps the next evolution of reflections of diversity of American families? Although reality competition shows have dwindled within the last

decade, at the same time, the genre has experienced a rise in reality series featuring families. From spectacle families to a host of programs premised on the various familial lifestyles and professions that families can inhabit, reality TV has mined a cacophony of familial performances for both entertainment and edification. Depictions of families previously excluded or subordinated on television are the genre's specialty. The most recent example is TLC's *All-American Muslim*, which aims to problematize the ethnocentrism that has plagued America, particularly since 9/11. The series explores how five different Muslim families merge their cultural values and traditions with American modernity (Khakpour, 2011). Reality TV has been particularly adept at balancing the desire for assimilation and the predicament that this assimilation subsequently causes, especially amongst non-White and non-nuclear families. And even though reality TV continues to demonstrate a mode of familial theatricality in the spectacle it portrays, its more transgressive performance of family may, in fact, be the most direct avenue of redefining what "family" means and the inherent familialism that exists in all families.

### **We Are Family**

As a child born in the last season of the Gen-Xers, I was raised not only by my parents but also with the domestic relationships I saw on television. Granted my family very nearly embodied the nuclear ideal (save for the requisite male sibling), but my mother personified an exotic mix of Lucy Ricardo (*I Love Lucy*), Roseanne Conner (*Roseanne*), and June Cleaver – outspoken, feminist, domestic, and thoroughly dedicated to her family. Like most TV dads, mine was even-keeled and hard-working and usually deferred to my mother in matters concerning child rearing, as well as banking, auto purchases, and home buying. I did not see dads like mine on television until the 1990s

when bumbling fathers like Tim Taylor (*Home Improvement*), Red Foreman (*That '70s Show*), and Ray Barone (*Everybody Loves Raymond*) tried to exert their authority in a home where their method of parenting didn't always work. For anybody, seeing perfect reflections of one's parents, or family for that matter, on television is hardly a realistic expectation – a sentiment made readily apparent in this dissertation's examination of the relationship between “real” and fictional families. And, in fact, based on current statistics on familial organization and lifestyle needs and preferences, perhaps my family is now more the exception to the non-nuclear norm.

Yet, even these overly simplistic comparisons are still muddled by an attempt to conceive of a family that only exists in the public imagination, seemingly more “real” than the real thing (Chambers, 2001). What I continue to notice in the hours spent watching television families is a gradual change in the disposition and structure of these families, but generally, they are beholden – each in its own way – to the idyllic picture of domesticity their predecessors had created. In this post-divorce, post-patriarchal, post-feminist, and most decidedly, post-nuclear family era, the struggle with family definitions and organization are not only articulated in the diverse images of families on television, but also the evolving discourse around motherhood, and especially, fatherhood. “The family,” continues to be *the* battleground of the sexes, generating profound anxieties about the role parents are to perform in this new pattern of family life. We, along with the television programs that we watch, celebrate alternative familial arrangements, and yet, even these remain tainted by aspects of pre-existing notions of “family.” But in *doing* family, which implies a more expansive conception of what constitutes the practice of “family,” we are all still acculturated to familialist expectations that, even within different

contexts, regards the success of one's family as dependent on the close family fellowship of its members. Even though "family" may remain a site of political and moral proselytizing and eternally "in-crisis," in the end, the continuing evolution of articulations of family on television perpetuates the myths of a nuclear familialism.

Appendix 1: Pleck's (1987) four phases of fatherhood.

<b><u>Phases of Fatherhood</u></b>	<b><u>Time Period</u></b>
Authoritarian Moral and Religious Pedagogue	Eighteenth – Early Nineteenth Century
Distant Breadwinner	Early-Nineteenth – to Mid-Twentieth
Sex Role Model	1940 – 1965
“New” Father	1965 – Present

Appendix 2: List of Extended or Multigenerational Family Television Series\*

<i>Title</i>	<b>Run dates</b>	<b>Network</b>	<b>Extended/Multi**</b>
<i>Goldbergs, The</i>	1949-1954	CBS/NBC/DUM	Extended
<i>Mama</i>	1949-1956	CBS	Extended
<i>O'Neills, The</i>	1949-1950	DUM	Extended
<i>Jamie</i>	1953-1954	ABC	Multigenerational
<i>Bob Cummings Show, The</i>	1955-1959	NBC/CBS/NBC	Extended/Multi
<i>Pete and Gladys</i>	1960-1962	CBS	Extended
<i>Tom Ewell Show, The</i>	1960-1961	CBS	Multigenerational
<i>Joey Bishop Show, The</i>	1961-1965	NBC/CBS	Extended
<i>Beverly Hillbillies, The</i>	1962-1971	CBS	Extended/Multi
<i>Munsters, The</i>	1964-1966	CBS	Multigenerational
<i>Addams Family</i>	1964-1966	ABC	Extended/Multi
<i>Pistols 'N' Petticoats</i>	1966-1967	CBS	Multigenerational
<i>Phyllis Diller Show, The</i>	1966-1967	ABC	Extended
<i>All in the Family</i>	1971-1979	CBS	Multigenerational
<i>Jimmy Stewart Show, The</i>	1971-1972	NBC	Multigenerational
<i>Lotsa Luck</i>	1973-1974	NBC	Extended
<i>Phyllis</i>	1975-1977	CBS	Extended/Multi
<i>Family</i>	1976-1980	ABC	Extended
<i>Tabitha</i>	1977-1978	ABC	Extended
<i>Angie</i>	1979-1980	ABC	Extended
<i>Mama's Family</i>	1983-1990	NBC/Synd	Extended/Multi
<i>New Leave it to Beaver, The</i>	1985-1989	Disney/TBS	Multigenerational
<i>Cavanaughs, The</i>	1986-1989	CBS	Multigenerational
<i>One Big Family</i>	1986-1987	Synd	Extended/Multi
<i>Our House</i>	1986-1988	NBC	Multigenerational
<i>Full House</i>	1987-1995	ABC	Extended
<i>Year in the Life, A</i>	1987-1988	NBC	Multigenerational
<i>You Can't Take It With You</i>	1987-1988	Synd	Multigenerational
<i>Munsters, The</i>	1988-1991	Synd	Multigenerational
<i>Roseanne</i>	1988-1997	ABC	Extended
<i>Family Matters</i>	1989-1998	ABC	Extended
<i>Evening Shade</i>	1990-1994	CBS	Multigenerational
<i>Maniac Mansion</i>	1990-1993	Family Channel	Extended
<i>Brooklyn Bridge</i>	1991-1993	CBS	Multigenerational
<i>Roc</i>	1991-1994	FOX	Extended
<i>Royal Family, The</i>	1991-1992	CBS	Multigenerational

<i>Rugrats</i>	1991-2003	Nickelodeon	Extended
<i>Sisters</i>	1991-1996	NBC	Multigenerational
<i>Walter and Emily</i>	1991-1992	NBC	Multigenerational
<i>Frasier</i>	1993-2004	NBC	Extended
<i>Sinbad Show, The</i>	1993-1994	FOX	Extended/Multi
<i>All-American Girl</i>	1994-1995	ABC	Multigenerational
<i>Thunder Alley</i>	1994-1995	ABC	Multigenerational
<i>Everybody Loves Raymond</i>	1996-2005	CBS	Extended
<i>Pearl</i>	1996-1997	CBS	Extended
<i>Promised Land</i>	1996-1999	CBS	Extended
<i>Sabrina the Teenage Witch</i>	1996-2003	ABC/WB	Extended
<i>Jesse</i>	1998-2000	NBC	Extended/Multi
<i>New Addams Family, The</i>	1998-1999	Family Channel	Extended/Multi
<i>Judging Amy</i>	1999-2005	CBS	Extended/Multi
<i>Movie Stars</i>	1999-2000	WB	Extended
<i>Sopranos, The</i>	1999-2010	HBO	Extended
<i>Soul Food</i>	2000-2004	Showtime	Extended
<i>Raising Dad</i>	2001-2002	WB	Multigenerational
<i>Six Feet Under</i>	2001-2005	HBO	Extended
<i>Three Sisters</i>	2001-2002	NBC	Extended
<i>George Lopez</i>	2002-2007	ABC	Multigenerational
<i>Greetings From Tucson</i>	2002-2003	WB	Extended/Multi
<i>Arrested Development</i>	2003-2006	FOX	Extended/Multi
<i>Two and a Half Men</i>	2003-	CBS	Extended
<i>Rescue Me</i>	2004-2011	FX	Extended/Multi
<i>Freddie</i>	2005-2006	ABC	Extended/Multi
<i>Big Love</i>	2006-2011	HBO	Extended/Multi
<i>Brotherhood</i>	2006-2009	Showtime	Extended
<i>Brothers &amp; Sisters</i>	2006-2011	ABC	Multigenerational
<i>Tyler Perry's House of Payne</i>	2006-	TBS	Extended/Multi
<i>Ugly Betty</i>	2006-2010	ABC	Multigenerational
<i>United States of Tara</i>	2009-2011	Showtime	Extended
<i>Better With You</i>	2010-2011	ABC	Extended
<i>Blue Bloods</i>	2010-	CBS	Multigenerational
<i>Mike &amp; Molly</i>	2010-	CBS	Extended
<i>Modern Family</i>	2010-	ABC	Multigenerational
<i>Parenthood</i>	2010-	NBC	Multigenerational
<i>Raising Hope</i>	2010-	FOX	Multigenerational

\*Series included here ran for at least one complete season.

\*\*Extended series are centered on a nuclear family and their extended relations, such as parents, siblings and their families, or other relatives that dwell in the same household. A multigenerational family includes three or more generations represented within the series or residing in the same household.



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