"You're the Worst Gay Husband ever!"
Progress and Concession in Gay Sitcom Representation
A thesis presented by
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my Nana who has always motivated me to pursue my interests, and has served as one of the most inspirational figures in my life both personally and academically.

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First of all, I would like to thank my incredible advisors Professor Shazia Iftkhar and Professor Nicholas Valentino for reading numerous drafts and keeping me on track (or better yet avoiding a nervous breakdown) over the past eight months.

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Abstract

This research analyzes the implicit and explicit messages viewers receive about the LGBT community in primetime sitcoms. The analysis focuses on two cases—ABC's sitcoms *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings.* An extensive textual analysis of the first two seasons of *Modern Family* and the first season of *Happy Endings* was performed (including content up through the 2010-2011 broadcast season). Findings suggest important improvement for gay characterization as these shows refuse the traditional binary categorization of sexual orientation, which links masculine and feminine behaviors as indications of an individual's identification as straight or gay, respectfully. This development expands the possibilities for all characters, in terms of the acceptable personality traits and behaviors individuals can exhibit regardless of sexual orientation. However, while both programs suggest positive growth in their characterization of LGBT characters, the series still generally avoid depictions of physical affection in gay romance, and also underplay the struggles that gay individuals must go through in order to achieve the stable life positions that *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings'* characters occupy. Because homophobia is, for the most part, absent from the two programs, this research suggests that viewers may come to believe that they are living in a "post-homophobia world." This might, in turn, cultivate an attitude of "enlightened homophobia"—the idea that, if these gay characters can achieve professional and/or familial stability, offscreen members of the LGBT community should also be capable of this level of success without additional legal rights and protections.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Americans' moral acceptance and support for legal protection for LGBT citizens have steadily increased since the mid-1990s (Newport, 2011; Jones, 2011; Saad, 2010; "Most Say Homosexuality Should be Accepted By Society," 2010). In 2011, Gallup found that 64 percent of Americans believed LGBT relations between consenting adults should be legal, the highest percentage in more than 30 years (Jones, 2011). Additionally, 56 percent of Americans considered LGBT relations "morally acceptable," the highest percentage since Gallup began asking the question in 2001 (Jones, 2011). These upward trends in the moral and legal acceptability of LGBT relations are paralleled by the steady increase in LGBT series regular characters in primetime broadcast television since the early 2000s (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation [GLAAD], 2007-08; GLAAD, 2008-09; GLAAD, 2009-10, GLAAD, 2010-11; GLAAD, 2011-12).

LGBT characters can be seen in a variety of primetime content—dramas, comedies, and even animated series—on both broadcast and cable television (GLAAD, 2011-2012). As shown in Figure 1, after a three-year slump, LGBT characters rose to 2.6 percent of all primetime

Figure 1:

Percentage of Primetime LGBT Regulars on Broadcast Television
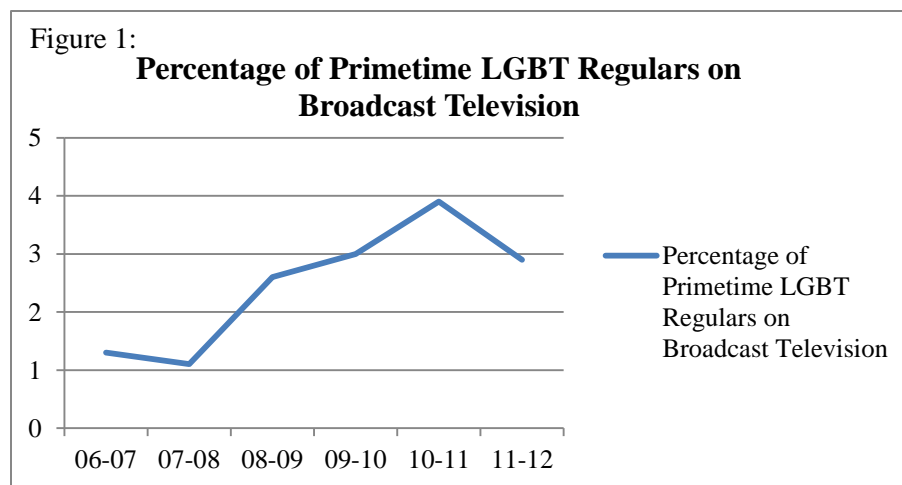
Data provided by series of GLAAD Where We Are On TV Reports 2006-07- 2011-12

regulars in the 2008-2009 season, and numbers have continued to increase before a drop most recently in the '11-'12 season.

A notable increase in LGBT characterization occurred in primetime broadcast sitcoms, two of which – ABC's *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings*—were renewed for the 2011-2012 season, despite the recent drop in LGBT series regular representation (to 2.9 percent from 3.9 percent the previous year). Combined, the two ABC sitcoms contain three of the five lead LGBT characters in primetime network television for the 2011-2012 season. So, while the most recent trend suggests a decline in the number of LGBT supporting and lead characters, these two shows remain successful.

Situational comedies have traditionally demonstrated a readiness to display new types of characters and roles for members of various social groups, reflecting social events such as women's liberation and the civil rights movement (Foss, 2008; Gabbadon, 2006; Walsh, Fursich, & Jefferson, 2008; Means Coleman, 2000). Similarly, cultural perceptions have influenced what LGBT portrayals are made visible. For example, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s likely influenced the way LGBT representations were crafted, in terms of both the range and treatment of gay characters (Hart, 2000; Altman, 1986; Colby & Cook, 1989; Netzhammer & Shamp, 1994; Cadwell, 1991).

This research analyzes and contextualizes current LGBT sitcom representation in order to provide a better understanding of the implicit and explicit messages viewers receive about the LGBT community. An extensive textual analysis of the ABC sitcoms *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* demonstrated important advances for gay representation within network television by reducing binary categorization, expanding the possibilities for gay characters (in terms of acceptable personality traits and behaviors), and incorporating moments that directly address

gay-rights issues. However, the programs could depict gay romance in more comparable ways to straight romance and do more to acknowledge the struggles that gay individuals must go through in order to achieve the stable life positions that *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings*' characters occipy. These improvements would help steer viewers away from the potential interpretation that they live in a post-homophobia world, a damaging interpretation made possible by the series' limited acknowledgment of gay-rights issues such as homophobia.

Literature Review

Television has been described as "a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviors" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). If so, the medium commands a great deal of power, as it "presents us daily with a constantly updated version of social relations and cultural perceptions" (Fiske & Hartley, 1978). Television works to both shape and reflect an image of American culture to audiences, making the medium an essential tool for understanding the cultural context and relational dynamics of a certain moment (Foss, 2008). Media representations of various social groups may therefore have a large impact on how these groups are perceived in society. Hart (2000) posits that many heterosexual Americans may not (knowingly) interact with LGBT individuals on a regular basis and may, therefore, rely heavily on the mass media for their knowledge of LGBT relations. Understanding the patterns of media representation for this group is therefore even more critical than for more visible social groups.

Clark's Stages of Representation

When assessing the progress of LGBT individuals in televised roles, it can be helpful to make comparisons with the way in which other stigmatized groups have been represented. According to Clark (1969), the first stage of media representations is nonrecognition, which involves sheer invisibility in media. Representation signifies power, and nonrecognition can signal that certain social groups are unimportant, or that they simply do not exist (Clark, 1969; Gross, 1994; Hart, 2003). Then, when marginalized groups start to become visible, they are often ridiculed. Characters are presented as "buffoons"—think *Amos n' Andy,* or the character J.J. on *Good Times* (Hart, 2003). In this ridicule stage, not only are characters portrayed in childish ways, but broad jokes about the entire social group also circulate—such as the laziness and lack of intelligence associated with African Americans. After ridicule, groups enter the regulation stage, in which characters are placed in positions of high moral and reputational authority (Clark,

1969). Often these characters serve as defenders of the law, protecting the social order, such as police officers or judges. For instance, LGBT characters are often portrayed as professionals with high-paying, reputable occupations such as lawyers (*Will & Grace*, *Brothers and Sisters, Modern Family*) or doctors (*Grey's Anatomy)*. After the regulation stage follows what Clark (1969) calls "respect." In this stage, roles are not limited or considered stereotypical. Individuals exhibit both positive and negative traits and are granted a wide range of character roles.

Though Clark's (1969) four stages were intended to operate chronologically, he recognized that the boundaries between these stages are not rigid. With stigmatized social groups this progression is not always smooth, as the path for LGBT characters demonstrates. Hart (2000) posits that the influx of gay and lesbian characters in the 90s transitioned the LGBT community into Clark's respect stage. Others argue that programs with gay and lesbian characters are still reliant upon humorous yet hurtful digs at homosexuality that subtly reinforce traditional notions of masculinity (Becker, 2004). This would position the group in Clark's early stage of ridicule. If so, it is quite possible that individual LGBT portrayals may fall simultaneously under two or more of Clark's stages. For instance, while Will Truman of *Will & Grace* is situated as a professional lawyer placing him in Clark's regulation stage, it would not be inconceivable to interpret his characterization to lie within either the ridicule or respect stage depending on how viewers read the character. However, for the purpose of this study, Clark's stages will be considered in order to contextualize different representations and also to suggest something about the complicated progression of LGBT television portrayals.

Sitcoms and Stories of Difference

Over the past several decades, sitcoms have expanded the range of representations and character opportunities for various social groups on television. This feature of the genre was perhaps first noticed in the 1970s when sitcoms began implicitly and explicitly addressing

themes that had previously not been addressed by the genre (Foss, 2008). The 1970s was a decade "full of reconfigurations of identity"; a time in which Americans had to negotiate the new social structure which had been questioned so thoroughly in the 1960s by issues of race, gender, sexuality and class (Bailey & Farber, 2004, pp.4-5). Women and people of color gained significant ground socially, professionally, and educationally, and the sitcoms of the 70s reflected that progress (Berry, 1998; Shaw et al., 1993). These sitcoms were decidedly different and questioned convention especially in terms of gender roles and conceptions of family (Foss, 2008). Several sitcoms, such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Taxi,* and *Barney Miller* moved away from the typical suburban backdrop, situating a majority of the program in the workplace environment (Taylor, 1989). Families were presented in a much less traditional way than in shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Make Room For Daddy*, as stories of divorce and working women became more common (Feuer, 1995).

Offering new representations did not come without its risks, however. When networks pushed the envelope, showing controversial content, they put advertising sponsorships in jeopardy. The two sitcoms *All in the Family* and *Maude* discussed "breast cancer, miscarriage, rape, the Vietnam War, hate crimes, and abortion" (Foss, 2008, pp.45). In 1972, CBS suffered tremendous sponsor withdrawal after airing an episode of *Maude* that included its main character's decision to have an abortion (Montgomery, 1989).

However, not all new representations were met with popular outrage; in fact, many new representations were well-received. Gracie of *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* and Lucy of *I Love Lucy* both made efforts to display a new type of woman; the kind of woman who "seem[ed] to rebel against male dominance," often succeeding (Walsh, Fursich, & Jefferson, 2008). *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* also made noise by featuring a single working woman

whose life was primarily captured at work as opposed to in the home (Foss, 2008; Walsh, Fursich, & Jefferson, 2008). While sitcoms moved women outside the domestic arena, Mellencamp (1997) found that the "shifts between narrative and comic spectacle," which are central to the genre of situational comedies, often detracted from the actual repression encountered by various social groups, particularly the repressive conditions for women (pp.73).

Similar sentiments about the progress and limitations of Black representations in 1970s sitcoms have also been documented (Foss, 2008; Gabbadon, 2006; Means Coleman, 2000). While televised visibility greatly increased for Blacks in the 1970s, these early programs have been harshly criticized for relying on stereotypes (the "coon," the "buck," the "mammy," etc.) to misrepresent the Black community (Means Coleman, 2000; Bogle, 2001; MacDonald, 1992; Hanson, 1996; Cummings, 1988). Still, 1970s sitcoms also introduced a new type of minority representation, not solely rooted in stereotype. This new type of sitcom confronted, as opposed to ignored, the various racial, political, economic, and social issues that affected the Black community in a way that moved "social inequalities and institutional racism" to the forefront of the show's themes (Gabbadon, 2006, pp. 6). In this way, sitcoms validated Black concerns by making them visible and offered those who were unfamiliar with the group a new way of seeing Blackness.

Sitcoms of the 1980s were less overtly political than programs of the 70s, instead taking on a more "escapist" approach (Feuer, 1995). Stereotypes that had characterized earlier black sitcoms became less frequent. Shows like *The Cosby Show* and *Family Matters* displayed Black characters who were "intelligent, articulate, and successful," but these 80s sitcoms were less apt to confront social issues directly than those of the 1970s (Gabbadon, 2006, pp. 7).

Television content in the 1990s was more comparable to the diversity seen in 70s sitcoms than the less confrontational series of the 1980s (Foss, 2008). Sitcoms continued to open the door for narratives of difference in gender roles and interactions (Walsh, Fursich, & Jefferson, 2008). Television content also became more racially diverse with the inception of two networks—the WB and UPN—that crafted several new Black sitcoms (Foss, 2008). Series and storylines revolving around sexual orientation also began to appear much more regularly in primetime television, as will be discussed later. Television programs such as *Ellen*, *Friends,* and *Will & Grace* featured openly gay characters and were more or less positively received (Spangler, 2003; Becker, 2004; Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002).

(Meta-) Disparagement Humor and Audience Reception

While sitcoms have historically featured stigmatized groups, many researchers suggest that the essential link between humor and sitcoms may undermine the positive impact of progressive portrayals because of sitcoms' reliance on disparagement humor and what Brown and Betz (n.d.) title "meta-disparagement humor" (Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Hobden & Olson, 1994; Maio, Olson, & Bush, 1997; Martin, 2007). Disparagement humor features jokes "in which one party is victimized, bullied, or suffers some misfortunes or acts of aggression" (Hobden & Olson, 1994, pp. 239). An example relevant to this study would be relentless verbal bullying because of one's homosexuality. The fact that these moments are coupled with humor makes them even more dangerous. Both Martin (2007) and Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann (1983) posit that audiences exhibit a lack of critical processing when viewing humorous content as opposed to non-humorous content. Without critical processing, this harmful material could possibly go unchallenged. In fact, Brown & Betz (n.d.) found that participants who viewed directly homophobic content (disparagement humor) provided less support for gay rights on a post-test survey than participants who had viewed meta-disparagement or neutral comedy clips.

Even more complicated are moments that incorporate what Brown & Betz (n.d.) define as meta-disparagement humor– the addition of irony to disparagement humor by introducing an implicit target (those who take the joke at face value), while maintaining an explicit target (usually a minority group). Often meta-disparagement humor invokes stereotypes in order to expose the prejudice that leads to these generalizations. In order for humor of this variety to be successful, its irony must be understood both in the moment of encoding (by the joke's teller) and decoding (by the viewer), making meta-disparagement humor more susceptible to misinterpretation (Brown & Betz, n.d.).

Many studies dealing with issues of race have discovered that such invocation of stereotype in sitcoms, in fact, reinforced existing racial attitudes (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974; Cooks & Orbe, 1993). These studies found that the effect of meta-disparagement humor was contingent on pre-existing attitudes about the stigmatized groups in question—that "people tend to interpret this humor in ways that align the joke with their own views" (Brown & Betz, n.d.). Similar results were observed by Ford (2000) who found that sexist individuals were more prone to find sexist humor funny than non-sexist people. Brown & Betz (n.d.) designed an experiment to assess the effects of audience reception of what they consider "meta-homophobic humor," in comparison to the effects of direct homophobic humor (disparagement) on individuals' opinions regarding gay rights. They found that participants ranked both meta and direct humor as equally offensive, yet only those who viewed directly homophobic material recorded decreased support for gay rights. The researchers offer two explanations for this finding: Perhaps because of stereotype activation, meta-homophobic humor carries a more long-term effect that was not measured in this study, or qualitative differences between homophobia and sexist or racist

attitudes in terms of the acceptability of expressing them could cause anti-gay humor to have a greater effect, regardless of one's preexisting attitudes.

Nonetheless, when studying the effects of LGBT representation, it can be helpful to consider what has been revealed by studies of other stigmatized groups in television representation and viewer reception. Though Brown & Betz (n.d.) present somewhat inconsistent results, previous research indicates that meta-disparagement humor can result in adverse effects that actually reinforce stereotypes. Such humor runs the risk of reaffirming homophobic attitudes and is important to consider when evaluating LGBT representation within the sitcom genre, which often relies on humorous content.

Early LGBT Portrayals (1940s-1960s)

LGBT representation, in any form, on television was largely nonexistent until the late 1960s (Alwood, 1996; Netzley, 2010; Hart, 2000). Gross (1994) posits that this invisibility serves as an act of power within a hierarchical society that emphasizes some voices while silencing others:

> Those who are at the bottom of the various power hierarchies will be kept in their place in part through their relative invisibility; this is a form of symbolic annihilation. When groups or perspectives do attain visibility, the manner of that representation will reflect the biases and interests of those elites who define the public agenda. And these elites are mostly white, mostly middle-aged, mostly male, mostly middle and upper-middle class, and (at least in public) entirely heterosexual. (pp. 143)

Representation on television coincides with power and recognition in the real world. Without visibility, social groups may be considered unimportant to society. The earliest representations of LGBT relations were infrequent and largely negative (Netzley, 2010; Capsuto, 2000; Alwood, 1996). In the 1940s and 1950s, "cartoonishly feminine men" were typically mocked and rendered ridiculous to viewers who were either unfamiliar with homosexuality or uncomfortable with the idea of same-sex relations. Early LGBT characters were often depicted as murder

victims or criminals, a trend that persists today in various crime dramas (Netzley, 2010). No recurring LGBT characters existed, and homosexuality as a topic was rarely discussed or referenced.

NBC's *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* was the first television program to feature a recurring LGBT character, an effeminate gay man named Bruce who was the butt of many jokes about both gay men and gay liberation (Alwood, 1996). For nearly a decade, the dominant image of gay men on television was the "limp-wristed effeminate drag queen who walked with a swish and talked in a high-pitched voice" (Alwood, 1996). Becker (2004) connects this treatment to sitcoms of the 1990s and 2000s such as *Friends* and *Seinfeld* that frequently involved storylines of mistaken sexuality, making homosexuality a tangible, visible thing, yet relying on it as a punch line. In these cases, straight characters would be insulted when someone misidentified them as anything other than heterosexual, wanting to avoid at all costs the insinuation of effeminacy that homosexuality implied (Becker, 2004).

In the 1970s, roles for gay characters began to include more positive and multi-dimensional characters. Efforts by the gay liberation movement revealed the range of positions held by gay men in America and to reflect this, networks continued to incorporate gay characters into more redeeming portrayals in shows such as *Barney Miller*, *The Nancy Walker Show,* and *Alice* (Hart, 2003). LGBT characters were also introduced as guest stars in popular shows like *All in the Family* allowing opportunities for heterosexual lead characters to interact with homosexuals and to learn to accept or reject difference (Netzley, 2010). These plotlines would often last only a few episodes, but the tactic placated gay activists who called for more positive LGBT representations on television without creating regular or lead characters that less-accepting audiences would have to watch week after week (Capsuto, 2000).

The AIDS Epidemic and Its Influence on LGBT Characterization

Positive portrayals continued to appear in the early 1980s when NBC introduced the situational comedy *Love, Sidney*, starring Tony Randall, to their primetime lineup. The series intended to tell the story of a man who had recently split with his male lover, but NBC eliminated the character's homosexuality from the plotline, responding that the series was not *directly* related to the made-for-TV movie the program had been based upon (Hart, 2003).

While the portrayal of gay or not-so-gay Sidney was largely sympathetic (Hart, 2003), the evolution of LGBT representation on television would take a long detour in the late 1980s because of increasing awareness of the AIDS epidemic and the media's willingness to label it a gay disease. AIDS storylines swiftly made their way into network television shows, but few were sensitive portrayals. It was hard for networks to commit to having recurring or regular characters with AIDS given that such characters would have short lifespans predetermined for them (Netzhammer & Shamp, 1994). LGBT characters that were already pegged as deviant were now further denounced as a health threat to innocent members of the majority population (Cadwell, 1991). In the late 1980s, several prime-time television shows such as *21 Jump Street, Designing Women*, and *Leg Work* dealt with the issue of AIDS in individual episodes, but all storylines "served to solidify the link between gay men and AIDS either explicitly or implicitly" (Netzhammer & Shamp, 1994). For example, an episode of *21 Jump Street* featured an episode in which a gay man with AIDS hired a detective in order to locate a past lover and tell him to get tested (Hart, 2000). This plotline demonstrates the way that networks framed AIDS and gay men by implicitly suggesting that gay men are both the origin and the perpetuators of AIDS (Hart, 2000; Altman, 1986; Colby & Cook, 1989; Netzhammer & Shamp, 1994).

Another path of LGBT representation during the AIDS crisis was to incorporate short narratives that involved gay men with AIDS to show the sensitivity of heterosexual characters,

without exploring other aspects of the gay character's life (Hart, 2000). This approach was demonstrated in *Beverly Hills, 90210* in the late 1990s. A two-week storyline focused on the budding friendship between lead character Kelly and HIV-positive Jimmy. At first, Kelly fears she might "catch" the infection, but, through interactions with Jimmy, she learns more about the condition and how to be sympathetic to those suffering from HIV/AIDS (Hart, 2000). While this depiction was decidedly different from the stance of blame that other shows chose to take, labeling Jimmy as a *gay* man who contracted HIV as a result of his sexual orientation reinforced the link between AIDS and homosexuality (Altman, 1986; Netzhammer & Shamp, 1994; Hart, 2000). Though Jimmy provided viewers with a sensitive gay storyline that exceeded one episode, the character merely demonstrated the lead heterosexual character's compassion, rather than opening up new opportunities for LGBT representation.

1990s and the Expansion of LGBT Visibility

Though the dominant link between AIDS and homosexuality did not dissolve completely by the 1990s, the decade's representations made serious progress for gay and lesbian individuals (Hart, 2000; Becker, 2004; Alwood, 1996). Shows like *Beverly Hills, 90210*, *Party of Five,* and *Melrose Place* all featured several LGBT storylines in the mid 90s, but many simply labeled characters as gay without delving into details of the individual's sexuality (Hart, 2000). As in various AIDS storylines, often the motivating idea behind these portrayals was to "enable the show's regular characters to confront their own homophobic impulses and then to resurface as the gay characters' heroes" (Hart, 2000, pp. 71). For instance, while *Melrose Place* made great strides introducing the gay supporting character Matt Fielding, the portrayal has been criticized for his homosexuality's being "insignificant to the show's primary storylines," saying that too much of Matt's social life took place off camera (Hart, 2000, pp. 71). Also, the character of Matt

was deemed to be too "straight-acting," a strategy employed perhaps to make homosexuality more palatable to intolerant or undecided viewers who might not be comfortable with more unconventional portrayals. This conundrum would be revisited in the primetime hit *Will & Grace*, as will be discussed later (Hart, 2000; Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002).

While audiences were growing more comfortable with "straight-acting" LGBT characters, implying sexual intimacy, let alone depicting it, was a highly controversial decision for network executives. When promoting his made-for-TV movie *Breaking the Surface*, producer Jim Green was asked to explain why the film displayed violence between two male lovers, but did not show the two men kissing. Green replied: "Oh, come on, what you think? The audience is not gonna watch that. They're gonna tune out. And if we turn off the audience, they're not gonna see the message we want to get out" ("GLAAD dives," 1997, as quoted in Hart, 2000, pp. 67). This theory was tested in 1990, when ABC's hit show *thirtysomething* featured a scene in which two gay characters were shown in bed together. ABC was forced to cut a kissing scene, but still aired the edited episode. After the premiere, ABC lost an estimated $15 million dollars in advertising revenue, as sponsor after sponsor pulled advertising from the ABC program (Becker, 2004). In 1991, NBC was the first network to air an on-screen same sex kiss between two females—bisexual attorney C.J. Lamb and straight attorney Abby Perkins—on an episode of *L.A. Law* with little repercussions and little plot development (Rubenstein, 2005).

In 1997, Ellen DeGeneres and her character Ellen Morgan publicly came out in the sitcom *Ellen*, a move that many consider a groundbreaking moment for the LGBT community and for television as well (Becker, 2004; Hart, 2000). The episode brought immense media attention and high ratings. Liberal-minded, sophisticated viewers were drawn to the program because Ellen's sexuality distinguished the show from others and brought an edginess that they

enjoyed (Becker, 2004). As the first lesbian lead character in prime-time television, Ellen Morgan may have been the first groundbreaking character of the 90s but she certainly wasn't the last. After Ellen's public coming-out moment, gay and lesbian guest stars became more frequent in primetime television. Though *Ellen* was cancelled soon after the public coming out of the character and actress, the program set the stage for a new LGBT-inclusive sitcom to emerge.

Critical Reception of *Will & Grace*

Will & Grace was introduced by NBC in September of 1998, introducing two lead gay characters and, more importantly, granting primetime broadcast television its first gay male lead character (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; "TV," 1999). Since its inception, *Will & Grace* was well received, winning numerous awards including a People's Choice Award as Favorite New Comedy Series, a Golden Globe nomination for Best Comedy Series, an American Comedy Award for Funniest Television Series, two GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Awards for Outstanding TV Comedy Series, Founders Award from the Viewers for Quality Television, and three Emmy Awards for Outstanding Comedy Series, Outstanding Supporting Actress, and Outstanding Supporting Actor (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). The program featured Will Truman, an attractive Manhattan lawyer who appeared very straight acting and, therefore, safe. He is an example of what Connell (1992) refers to as "the very straight gay" or Seidman's (2005) "normal gay." He has a hard time holding on to relationships and is always on the hunt for a monogamous commitment, but is stunted by the lack of similar interest in the gay community. Will's friend Jack McFarland, on the other hand, is a "flamboyantly gay, continually self-employed, self-described dancer/actor/choreographer" who is not ashamed to rely on Will or character Karen Walker to support him financially, and holds an infinite love for celebrity divas (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002, pp. 88).

Jack and Will serve as contrasting images of gay men, an effort applauded by many including GLAAD (Linneman, 2008; GLAAD, 1998). Linneman (2008) applauds NBC and *Will & Grace* for providing "mainstream American media's first real and long-standing attempt at depicting multiple gay identities." The success of *Will & Grace* was not without criticism, however. While *Will & Grace* introduced several interesting and complex LGBT characters, and chose to make sexuality and love large operating themes of the program, some feel that the show relied too heavily on the relationship between Will and his straight friend Grace, treating their relationship as a dysfunctional marriage (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). The show often revolved around ensuring the normalcy of heterosexual relationships—friendships or romance—as opposed to the development of the friendship between Will and Jack and their respective romantic relationships (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). Linneman (2008) takes issue with the feminization of both gay leads, saying:

> A comprehensive content analysis shows that both gay primary characters frequently are feminized by other characters on the show, often in efforts to castigate them. Very few of these feminizing moments occur as a result of the characters acting in effeminate ways, thus emphasizing the immanent femininity of gay men. (pp. 583)

All things considered, unlike shows before it, *Will & Grace* was able to find viewers outside the niche LGBT market and remain a popular sitcom for years, offering visibility of several differing gay characters. The mixture of praise and criticism demonstrates the complexity of not only gay representation but of all televised portrayals of stigmatized social groups.

Previous research indicates that while visibility has varied over time, representations of LGBT individuals have remained limited. Gay representations originated as overtly feminine figures who were mocked severely for their deviation from the normative, masculine, straight male. Modern critiques have continued to reference this mode of stereotyping as one of the more

common presentations of LGBT characterizations, such as Jack McFarlane from *Will & Grace*, whose camp has been read by some as a return to this form of stereotypical portrayal (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). Past LGBT representations were also used to demonstrate the building compassion of heterosexual characters. Many of these characterizations featured LGBT individuals with AIDS, further reinforcing the damaging link between gay individuals and the deficiency (Netzhammer & Shamp, 1994). Significant progress in LGBT representation was made in the 90s, however, with the dual coming out of Ellen DeGeneres and her character Ellen Morgan on the sitcom *Ellen* and the success of the series *Will & Grace*—introducing viewers to the first lead lesbian and gay characters in primetime television. Still, even the programs that were lauded for their progressive portrayals were not without criticism: For example, researchers have found that the characterizations on *Will & Grace* registered as either "too gay" or "too straight" (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002).

Current television programming features several LGBT characters that appear to exhibit further improvement in the possibilities for LGBT representation. *Modern Family* features gay couple Mitchell Pritchett and Cameron Tucker. The two have been together for five years, remain unmarried, and have adopted daughter Lily from Vietnam together. Mitchell is a successful lawyer who is often seen as uptight, while Cam is a stay-at-home dad who is better known for his theatrics—he is a retired music teacher and professional clown. As the show's title suggests, the program emphasizes modern, unconventional notions of what it means to be a family, by showing the interactions between the show's three lead couples and the reactions these couples receive in public spaces. Rarely have there been successful long-term gay couples that are lead characters within the sitcom genre; often boyfriends are short-term or the storylines

are left unexplored. For this reason and the surface popularity of the series, and Mitch and Cam in particular, *Modern Family* was selected for further analysis.

 Happy Endings can be seen as a modern take on the popular series *Friends.* Max is joined by his college friends—Brad, Jane, Alex, Penny and Dave—in a series that follows these thirty-something adults in their dating and professional exploits. *Happy Endings* was selected for this analysis because in a dramatic contrast with past gay representations that have feminized gay characters, Max, the show's gay character, is depicted as a "guy's guy"—he drinks beer, plays video games, watches sports, and disregards fashion in favor of comfort.

Methods

In order to explore televised LGBT portrayals in sitcoms, an extensive qualitative textual analysis of the two ABC primetime sitcoms (*Modern Family* and *Happy Endings)* was conducted. This research analyzed the two series in order to assess if and how gay representation is different, given the current moment, as well as recent poll results that indicate an increased acceptance of gay rights. Consideration of the sitcom genre will also assist in revealing dominant themes and behaviors in the two programs.

Performing a textual analysis allowed the researcher to let the texts guide the analysis rather than imposing predetermined qualifications. In this way, analyzing the texts in-situ offered the researcher the best opportunity to fully delve into the media texts. The researcher analyzed the first two seasons of *Modern Family* (48 episodes) as well as the first season of *Happy Endings* (13 episodes). This viewing included every episode of both series up through the 2010-2011 broadcast season. Each episode was viewed three times. The researcher looked not only at the gay representation, but also how each program depicted its entire cast, as well as more general show structures and plot elements to better understand the programs' intents.

Television series from FOX, the broadcast network with the most inclusive LGBT primetime lineup of the 2011-2012 season, were also considered (GLAAD, 2011-2012). The popular program *Glee* was certainly a frontrunner for this analysis; however, ambiguity about its genre classification (drama or comedy), as well as its length (60 minutes as opposed to 30 minutes) would have led the analysis away from primetime sitcoms. While *Glee* was not analyzed in this textual analysis, the program would make a remarkable study in and of itself for its inclusion of gay, lesbian, and bisexual regular characters as well as its focus on LGBT teenagers as opposed to older characters. Other programs in FOX's lineup that featured LGBT

representation tended to be animated (*The Simpsons, Family Guy, The Cleveland Show,* etc.) and this would represent an entirely different area of analysis.

This textual analysis began with a careful viewing of episodes of each series with the intent to discover the latent meanings that underlie the LGBT portrayals in each show. Some questions of interest for the researcher were:

1. Where and how does the LGBT character/couple fit into the series' overall narrative?
2. Are LGBT characters the focus of storylines that are not a direct byproduct of their sexuality?
3. Are any characters portrayed in roles/ with personality traits that are interesting or different from what has been done in the past?

During this qualitative analysis, the researcher allowed the texts to guide her to define categories of explanation. Both overviews of the transformation and depiction of each show's LGBT characters and couples are provided, as well as more specific descriptions of individual characters and situations for each program to outline in more detail how these portrayals are operating.

Textual Analysis

Erasing Binary Categorization

Complex, Multi-dimensional Characterization

All three leading gay characters from *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* are not regularly emasculated or feminized, nor do the shows overcompensate for past feminizations of gay characters by creating essentially macho representations. Instead, both shows create multi-dimensional characters that, just like their straight counterparts, exhibit personalities that are constantly developing. For example, as soon as one thinks Cam is simply Mitch's feminine and dramatic "wife," *Modern Family* presents us with scenes of Cam being handy around the house or starting fights at the gas pump, or discussing his college football playing days. This is important, as representations of gay men in the past have been repeatedly criticized for being either one-dimensionally gay—feminine, flamboyant, campy—or straight—rejecting the gay scene, with a rarely-discussed romantic life. By demonstrating that such a fusion of masculine and feminine traits occurs within all of the show's characters, gay and straight, the sitcoms show not only that gay individuals are complex, but also that gay individuals and straight individuals are equally complex.

In the Season one episode of *Modern Family* titled "Fizbo," the viewer learns that Cam is trained as a professional clown, and that he wants to dress up for Luke's (Mitch's nephew) birthday party. Mitch is embarrassed by Cam's theatrics and tells him he can't show up to Luke's party as Fizbo the clown, but Cam can't resist. On the way to the party Cam (dressed as Fizbo) and an embarrassed Mitch stop for gas. While Mitch fills up his gas tank, a car pulls in to the pump behind him and bumps Mitch with his car. Mitch asks for an apology, and when the other gentleman refuses and begins to encroach on Mitch, Fizbo emerges from the car and stands up

for his boyfriend, getting the man to back off and drive away. After seeing Cam's protectiveness, Mitch remembers how much he loves Cam—everything about him—and realizes he shouldn't be so tough on Cam about the traits that Mitch might find weird, like the clowning. But, this is also a moment where the *viewer* sees a new side of Cam—the tough, protective man who is willing to stand up for the people he loves through physical intimidation. This characterization is very different from the Cam viewers are used to seeing: a man who is incredibly sensitive and friendly. However, when this new character trait is juxtaposed with Cam's clown makeup and desire to perform, the Cam that viewers have come to know is not entirely eradicated; rather, the viewer's perception of Cam simply becomes more complete.

By gradually developing these leading gay characters, *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* lead regular viewers who have already chosen to like a given character or have related to him previously to adjust their own perceptions of him. Also, this practice expands the opportunity for viewers who have previously rejected the character to relate to the individual given the new traits presented. As soon as the viewer feels she has figured out each character— who he is, how he behaves, what he believes—new behavior is exhibited or alluded to, causing these perceptions to change. By creating a gay character who is likable and to whom many can relate expands the possibilities for the character to reshape perceptions, which is ultimately one of the larger goals for *Modern Family.*

Mixing the Masculine with the Feminine

Both series create characters who defy categorizations that peg masculine men as straight and feminine men as gay. This is an area where both ABC sitcoms make an explicit commentary on binary thinking through the creation of more complex portrayals. Both programs make concerted efforts to give their leading characters—gay or straight— a combination of traits that are traditionally read as either masculine or feminine. This prevents or at least makes it more

difficult for the viewer to classify any individual character based on their sexuality or gender. For example, Brad of *Happy Endings* is displayed as a straight, married, young professional with an interest in sports and "guy time" playing video games or going to the bar, but he is also portrayed as feminine through his interests in fashion, spas, and romantic comedies. His friend Max is predominantly defined by his more masculine tendencies such as his messiness and love of sports, but Max also behaves in ways traditionally coded as feminine: He is sensitive about his weight, and has a penchant for reality TV shows. It often seems as though straight Brad is much more "feminine" than gay character Max, based on traditional notions of masculine/feminine, which serves to reduce the power of such categorization. In the episode "Quicksand Girlfriend," both characters address this:

> Brad: "Yup, it's like they took the roof off a Tory Burch store and emptied it into this apartment."
>
> Max: "What's Tory Burch?"
>
> Brad: "She's a—she's a designer. It's kinda preppy boho-chic meets uptown—Are you sure you're gay?"
>
> Max: "Are you sure you're not gay?" ("The Quicksand Girlfriend," 11:40)

This moment pokes fun at the stereotypical idea that all gay men love women's fashion. By having straight character Brad demonstrate more expertise on women's fashion (which has traditionally been seen as a feminine domain) than gay character Max, the show disrupts the binary distinction of masculine and feminine. But the complexities in these characters also shatter what these distinctions further perpetuate—the idea that masculine necessitates straight and feminine signifies gay. This erasure of binary thinking enlarges the possibilities for *all*

characters. Brad is simply Brad: a man who loves beer, fashion and spas and just happens to be straight; just as Max loves sports, video games and reality television and happens to be gay.

Explicit Address to the Viewer:

Modern Family and *Happy Endings* reduce binary thinking not only by creating complex, multi-dimensional characters who are impossible to pigeonhole, but also by bringing viewers' own binary thinking to their attention through the shows' directness. When Brad sees that Max has no clue who designer Tory Burch is, he interrupts his own explanation and frankly asks: "Are you sure you're gay?" ("The Quicksand Girlfriend," 11:50), essentially speaking for the viewer by showing his surprise that Max doesn't exhibit the feminine/gay character trait. A similar situation can be seen in Season 1 of *Modern Family* when the viewer learns that Cam played collegiate football:

> Cam: "I collect antique fountain pens, I'm quite adept at Japanese flower arrangement Ikebana, and I was a starting offensive lineman at the University of Illinois… Surprise!!! ("Coal Digger," 2:04)

And then later Mitch reveals something about his own persona in a similar cutaway scene:

> Mitch: "So my interest in football ended as suddenly and dramatically as the climax of West Side Story. I'm a musical-theater fan."
>
> Cam: "Surprise!!!" ("Coal Digger," 9:48)

Both of these scenes are illustrative of *Modern Family*'s efforts to reveal to the viewer moments when she may be making generalizations about the characters, especially in terms of harmful binary distinctions. In the first cutaway when Cam's athleticism is revealed, Cam's utterance of "Surprise!!!" also illustrates the viewer's perception that such a fact is indeed surprising. For Cam to be athletic does not fit with the traditional feminine/gay distinctions with which he would be expected to be categorized. However, the second cutaway scene strongly demonstrates the

program's efforts to not only create complex characterizations, but also to erase binary modes of thinking. An affinity for musical theater is an attribute that would be considered feminine/gay, and yet Cam treats this revelation the same as he did the revelation of his unexpected masculine trait, by saying "Surprise!!!" The similar treatment of these two confessions reminds the viewer who may have already typecast the characters as certain personalities, that these individuals cannot be evaluated based on stereotypical predeterminations. Because of this, *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* not only extend the possibilities for gay characters and straight characters, but also force viewers to rethink their tendency to categorize the individuals based on traditional notions of masculine/straight and feminine/gay.

Characters Exhibit Normalcy

Not only are these characters complex, but they also exhibit a sense of secure normalcy, as most of their issues are personal rather than situational**.** Mitch and Cam have a very stable life: they are financially secure, they have a loving family, they have a beautiful, healthy daughter, and they are in love. This stability demonstrates the idea that not only can a gay couple achieve happiness and find love, but also that familial stability is not necessarily different for straight and gay couples, since everything the couple has achieved could also characterize any loving straight couple. In *Modern Family*, Mitch and Cam are not perfect characters, nor are they the perfect couple, but they are as dysfunctional and laughable and relatable as the straight couples in the show. For example, in the Season 1 episode "Hawaii," Mitch and Cam argue because Mitch wants to sightsee and attend tourist attractions while Cam would much rather spend his Hawaiian vacation lounging by the pool. This mirrors the dispute between Gloria and Jay, as Gloria always wants to go dancing while Jay just wants to watch the game. This lack of differentiation responds to and opposes the idea of the "gay other," as Mitch and Cam exhibit similar stability and similar spats as the show's straight couples. This puts them on an even playing field with

straight couples, not a different scale or different field altogether, showing that men can be both gay and "normal."

When Mitch and Cam do argue, an emphasis is placed on how the couple negotiates its disparity as opposed to how an upsetting event may affect the men or threaten their stable life positions. Scuffles focus on how to better communicate with each other, or prevent offending one another, as opposed to heavier arguments such as money problems or infidelity. This quality is particular to sitcoms as a genre, as will be discussed later. In the episode "Benched," Cam takes a part-time job at a greeting card store since Mitch is between jobs. Cam confides with the viewer in a cutaway scene that he misses being a stay-at-home dad, but that this is Mitch's time to relax and not have to work. In a separate cutaway, Mitch tells the viewer that he can't stand being home, but that this is Cam's time to be out in the world. In sum, ensuring that their partner is content and enjoying their time away from their usual duties remains the couple's primary concern. This illustrates their efforts to retain the personal stability the two share in their relationship—something that all of *Modern Family'*s couples must undergo. Showing that Mitch and Cam argue and negotiate within their relationship, as all couples do, downplays the couple's difference. This situation also works to further demonstrate the falseness of binary categorization, as not all men want to be out in the workforce just like not all men are cut out to be stay-at-home dads, though some fall into both categories.

Gay Rights Struggle Is Not Ignored
The potential problem one faces when presenting gay characters in such a stable way is to question whether or not this stability disregards the struggles associated with gaining such standing. It is certainly positive to see a gay couple demonstrate financial and romantic success on primetime television, but if the show completely overlooks the difficulties one must encounter in order to achieve such a successful life, then the program would be misleading and dangerous

in an entirely new way. Such criticism was often applied to *The Cosby Show*, for painting too perfect of a life for a Black family, while completely ignoring race as a factor in society (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* each demonstrate how their gay characters have struggled or continue to struggle based on anxieties concerning their sexuality, but these efforts are very limited (an idea that will be expounded upon later). Mitch's complicated relationship with his father Jay (which will be discussed later in more detail) is one avenue that *Modern Family* uses to acknowledge the struggle for gay individuals, since Jay is noticeably uncomfortable about his son's sexuality at times throughout the first two seasons. For example, Mitch tells the viewer in a cutaway scene that despite the fact that Mitch and Cam have been together for five years, Jay is still not completely at ease with the relationship:

> "My dad, uh, my dad still isn't completely comfortable with *this* [gestures at Cam and him sitting close together]. He still does this thing. It's been five years now, and he still does this thing where he announces himself before walking into any room we're in just to make sure he doesn't have to ever see us kiss." ("Pilot," 17:15)
>
> [Followed by montage of Jay knocking on doors incessantly with hand over his eyes]

In addition to allusions to Mitch's coming-out process, the viewer sees in this scene that Mitch is bothered by his father's lack of total comfort with and acceptance of his son's sexuality. Moments like these illustrate what gaining Jay's acceptance means to Mitch. The viewer realizes that despite Mitch and Cam's stability and successes, they still struggle to gain full acceptance even from their own family.

While Max of *Happy Endings* can be critiqued for his lack of aspiration and his laziness, he illustrates the trope of the adult in his early 30s who just hasn't grown up. His lack of maturity is not linked to his sexuality; in fact, it actually humanizes him and makes him more relatable. Past depictions of gay characters, in efforts to display a more likable person, overcompensated for the stereotypical characterizations of the past by creating strikingly attractive, highly successful individuals with winning personalities. In other words, they created what could be termed the "perfect gay." The character Will of *Will & Grace* is an excellent example of this type of portrayal. Besides their incredible physical appearances and highly regarded careers, these characters rarely discussed their sexuality, especially not in blunt terms. They represent what Connell (1992) considers "the very straight gay" or Seidman's (2005) "normal gay." Max is not, nor does he attempt to be the "perfect gay." Max is simply a guy who lives in the real world, who is single and unemployed, but owns an apartment, has a loyal group of friends, and a loving, accepting family. This characterization is much more relatable than the perfection demonstrated by other representations. Conversations with his friends frequently center on Max's chubbiness – as opposed to the perfect gay's striking appearance—as well as his dating and sex life, contrasting Connell's (1992) "very straight gay." So while Mitch and Cam can be said to display an established, secure normalcy, Max demonstrates a normalcy of a different kind—a content normalcy, in which one is satisfied with his current situation regardless of how society may categorize this state of being.

However, this satisfaction is contested in the episode "Mein Coming Out," when viewers learn Max is not out to his parents. Max asks all of his female friends if they will be his beard for the night while his parents are in town, but after his friends fall through and make the situation worse, Max comes out to his parents. His parents respond favorably: Max's mother simply shifts

from trying to set him up with single Jewish women to single Jewish men. The choice for *Happy Endings* to include Max's coming out within the series, as opposed to creating a character who was already out to his family, demonstrates the program's efforts to legitimize the struggles associated with coming out, even if the moment occurs in a somewhat comedic setting. If Max, a confident gay man, is nervous to come out to his parents, then it must not be an easy process. This episode also reminds viewers that Max's life is still affected by his sexual orientation, despite how secure he may seem.

Ambiguities Expand Possibilities for Interpretation

<u>Emphasis on Relationships over Sexuality</u>

Perhaps the new direction for gay representation is to frame the narrative as a series of relationships, leaving sexuality as an afterthought to the chief purpose of illustrating a variety of relationships and how they develop and progress. Sexual orientation is not ignored in either of these sitcoms; instead, it often sheds light on how it may affect relationships between two gay characters, two straight characters, or one gay and one straight character. Max of *Happy Endings* is often positioned as the doofus—a lazy, immature slob— but he is also portrayed as an advisor to his group of friends. In this way he is looked upon as wise, and his words and advice are considered legitimate. This is an important advance in gay representation. For a gay male to be legitimized as an advisor to his "lost" straight friends largely in matters of heterosexuality is quite a power reversal. It is the gay male (who in the past would have been formally stigmatized as deviant) guiding the "clean" white male on his quest for heterosexual love. Max is able to, and does, give advice to all of his friends —gay, straight, male, female, black, and white—though, his role as counsel is not about demonstrating expertise. While Max often inhabits this advisor role, he is not reduced to this position. In many situations throughout the first season, he too seeks advice from his friends, on whether or not to come out to his parents and why he hasn't had much success dating. These advisory interactions, then, become less about demonstrating expertise or "serving" the straight characters and more about illustrating a sense of mutual support and understanding between the characters, despite their differences.

Max, Mitch, and Cam are also portrayed in various ways as looking out for their straight friends. All three characters are shown to be emotionally capable of aiding their friends, and are positioned as wise and supportive in this regard. Max is always saving Penny from her desperation, Dave from his depressive ways, and Brad from his occasional ignorance. Mitch and

Cam counsel Jay on his relationship with new wife Gloria, Claire with regard to her spacey husband Phil, and Manny on self-confidence. In one particularly moving scene, Mitch speaks to his stepbrother Manny about accepting and embracing being different, after he learns Manny has been getting teased at school. Mitch says:

> "This is the funny thing about growing up: For years and years everyone's desperately afraid to be different in any way. And then suddenly, almost overnight, everybody wants to be different. And that is where we win." ("Starry Night," 19:22)

Here is an instance where Mitch's sexuality has made him wise. However, though the viewer knows that Mitch's gayness is a big part of this "difference" he speaks about, Mitch does not directly mention it. In this way, Mitch's sexuality and the struggles he may have undergone because of it do not become the focus; instead, Mitch's loving and protective relationship with Manny is emphasized. However, Mitch's sexuality is prioritized and placed at the forefront of many other episodes—in no way is homosexuality erased. Storylines are diverse for gay characters on these shows: While sexuality is often openly discussed, their sexual orientation is not the only element of the character's being that motivates their storylines. They are not simply reduced to representations of their sexuality. Again, as discussed in the context of these characters, this emphasis on building and developing relationships expands the possibilities for gay representation, allowing the narrative to not solely rely on a character's sexuality as the purpose for storylines.

Another way that *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* demonstrate the value in relationships is by placing their gay characters in both gay and straight circles of friends. This is also remarkable to see, since Max, Mitch, and Cam are all shown to be fully functional and

accepted in both straight and gay spaces. They can exist amongst both groups of friends exclusively, or, as shown in "Boys Night," the groups can intermingle. In the episode, Jay joins Mitch and Cam at the bar when they are hanging out with their more feminine gay friends without demonstrating any discomfort. Mitch is incredibly moved by his father's behavior, even opening up at the bar and telling all his friends, Jay included, the first actor he had a crush on. This scene demonstrates that gay and straight circles can combine with little to no repercussions.[1]

Past shows that included gay characters either featured a predominantly gay cast (*Will & Grace,* etc.*)* or one gay character or couple in a straight world (*Melrose Place, Brothers and Sisters,* etc.). In both *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* the gay protagonists are positioned as functional, accepted members of both crowds and their friends' acceptance of their friend/sibling/son's sexuality also serves to integrate the two groups. While this arrangement may not always be realistic, as prejudices do exist that would inhibit such universal acceptance, the overarching message can be observed from Mitch who, after seeing his father's relaxed behavior, says: "…there's always been a part of me that I've kept from him [Jay], and yet here he was laughing with my friends, and, I don't know, maybe the problem was me" ("Boys Night," 14:24). By placing their gay protagonists in both gay and straight circles with few repercussions, both series are demonstrating that there is no need to hide any shred of one's character regardless of his surroundings, and this observation helps characters like Mitch build closer relationships with his family and friends.

Though all three characters can mingle with a variety of social groups, Mitch's relationship with his father Jay illustrates that these relationships are not without struggle. One

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[1] At the bar, Jay gets drunk and arranges a date with one of Mitch's friends, but it doesn't take away from the beauty of the moment when Mitch sees that his dad has become more comfortable with Mitch's sexuality.

recurring storyline in *Modern Family* is Jay's gradual acceptance of his son's lifestyle, despite his initial discomfort. It's interesting that the largest source of opposition that Mitch or Cam faces at any point within the first two seasons comes from Mitch's father. Jay often makes little jabs at Mitch or Cam that fall in line with stereotypical perceptions that equate gay men with women. For example, in the episode "Starry Night," Mitch must change into Gloria's dress because he is sprayed by a skunk in the woods and it's the only change of clothing in Jay's car. Jay looks at his son dressed in a short, designer dress and tells him he looks good and that he'd do good for himself if he was "that type of a gay" ("Starry Night," 16:11). Most comments of this degree are shrugged off on the show. Jay is the one who is made to look foolish. Often when he makes these comments to Mitch, the rest of the family rolls their eyes or walks away from Jay, demonstrating their disapproval for his binary thinking.

However, not all of Jay's comments are merely poorly received jabs about Mitch's femininity. In the episode "Fifteen Percent," Cam runs into Jay and his friends out in town, and when he meets up with Jay to say hello, Jay introduces Cam to his friends as "a friend of my son's" ("Fifteen Percent," 2:03). Cam doesn't let the situation bother him, telling Mitch "your dad didn't mean any harm, he's just being who he is" ("Fifteen Percent," 8:34), but Mitch feels the need to confront his dad, who has never been comfortable with Mitch's lifestyle:

> Mitch: "Dad it's just more than a little insulting. Cam and I have been together for five years. We have a daughter."
>
> Jay: "Look at these guys. They look like they came outta the 1800s…"
>
> Mitch: "No, they're not the ones who are uncomfortable with this. You are. You've never been completely accepting of me and now that I have a family, it's getting a little old."

> Jay: "These guys don't understand the gay thing. Why create an awkward
>
> situation? That's all I'm sayin'" ("Fifteen Percent," 5:19).

Mitch proceeds to tell Jay that his friends would not have acted awkwardly because Mitch could tell one of them was actually gay, manipulating his father's discomfort.[2] This rattles Jay, but he seeks out his friend and tries to get him to come out (though the man turns out to be straight after all). Through this interaction, Mitch, as well as the viewer, sees how much progress Jay has actually made in terms of accepting his son's sexuality. The narrative ends with an embrace between the two men. Mitch's relationship with Jay is complicated—but it serves to discuss homosexuality and the concerns of many. By indicating that Jay, Mitch's own father, is still evolving in terms of his acceptance of his son's sexual preference, *Modern Family* demonstrates that gay men encounter adversity before reaching the kind of stability Mitch and Cam occupy. This addresses the potential critique that *Modern Family* has painted an idealistic world that is post-homophobia, where Mitch and Cam thrive. Instead, Mitch and Jay's rocky relationship demonstrates that even if one is accepted in his professional environment, and finds a steady and caring group of friends, homosexuality can still affect other aspects of an individual's life, even at the close familial level. Still, Mitch and Jay's imperfect relationship is one of the only outlets where the adversity gay men face is truly demonstrated. It is not impossible to envision *Modern Family* maintaining its current characterizations while also doing more to illustrate the often rocky path for gay individuals in a world that is certainly not post-homophobia.

Gay Romance

Though there is still a lot of ground to cover in allowing gay couples the same number of instances of physical affection as straight couples, both shows discuss and develop the love lives

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[2] Turns out, Mitch does not think that Jay's friend is actually gay, but wants to prove a point to his father and does so successfully.

of all three gay characters. Mitch and Cam show their love for each other in their devoted roles

as parents to daughter Lily and also in their ability to communicate and admit fault to each other.

There are also moments of selflessness, such as Mitch's willingness to shave his beard after Cam

says he doesn't like it. While they are not an affectionate couple in ways viewers have come to

expect from televised romance, it is appropriate that their love for each other is depicted in

different ways since it acknowledges that people react to gay love differently than straight

romance. Still, there is something to say about acknowledging difference versus erasing

difference. While both *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* reduce binary distinctions in order to

erase necessary differences in perceptions of gay and straight characterizations, these shows treat

gay and straight romances quite differently, *acknowledging* an inherent difference between

straight and gay couples.

In the first season episode "Airport 2010," Mitch and Phil race back to the airport just in

time to board the plane after retrieving the wallet Mitch had forgotten back at his house. When

Mitch and Phil make it to the airport in time, their significant others are very relieved and the

couples embrace. However, while Claire and Phil share a big kiss in the foreground of the shot,

Mitch and Cam can only be seen embracing in the background. This is a moment that

demonstrates how straight and gay couples are treated differently within the show. By choosing

to portray the two couples in different forms of affection, *Modern Family* is acknowledging

difference, but not in a favorable way. While Mitch and Cam are only allowed to be affectionate

to a certain extent, straight couple Claire and Phil do not have these restrictions.

In the second season episode "The Kiss," *Modern Family* addresses some of these

concerns regarding Mitch and Cam's physical affection. The episode discusses Cam's clinginess

and Mitch's aversion to public affection, culminating in a short kiss between Cam and Mitch.

This is the only kiss the two shared in the first two seasons of the show. Early in the episode

Cam leans in to kiss Mitch while they are shopping for clothing and Mitch turns away. Later at

home, Cam rejects a kiss from Mitch before the two discuss the issue at length:

> Cam: "You're ashamed of who you are, and that's why you're uncomfortable
>
> with PDA, and yes I went there!"
>
> Mitch: "Ok, you can't say 'Yes I went there' when you go there all the time. And,
>
> by the way, I'm the one who makes speeches on airplanes every time someone
>
> looks at us weird. I'm the one who gives my dad hell when he refers to you as 'a
>
> friend.'"
>
> Cam: "That's different. That's confrontation. But do you know what takes real
>
> strength?
>
> Mitch: "Whining?"
>
> Cam: "Affection." ("The Kiss," 4:30)

Here, Mitch and Cam acknowledge the strength it takes to be affectionate in public as a

gay couple, which may serve to explain why the couple's public affection is far more limited as

compared to the program's straight couples. Still, instead of acknowledging this difference in

acceptance of homosexual as opposed to heterosexual public displays of affection as the reason

Mitch and Cam are not publicly affectionate, *Modern Family* sidesteps the issue by attributing

the couple's lack of affection to Mitch's uptightness. In this way, the program addresses the topic

without directly engaging the deeper issue of public acceptance of gay affection.

While it would be progressive to see a gay couple show physical affection without these

restrictions in a program like *Modern Family*, again the question arises—is *Modern Family*

doing too much to erase difference, as opposed to acknowledging the struggles that might arise

from being gay? In the first two seasons, Mitch and Cam can be seen in numerous embraces, caressing each other's arms, and even lying next to each other in bed. The show doesn't desexualize the couple; in fact, straight couple Gloria and Jay rarely exhibit more physical affection than do Mitch and Cam. However, *Modern Family* does portray a more limited range of affection for these couples as compared to straight Phil and Claire who are caught by their children having sex in one episode. And while Gloria and Jay are not shown together in intimate situations, Gloria is repeatedly sexualized based on her appearance. Frequent reminders of Gloria's physical attractiveness serve to sexualize the couple much more than Mitch and Cam, who are rarely seen as sexual beings. Considering the fact that gay men have frequently been characterized as hypersexual in the past, the decision to portray Mitch and Cam in this limited way, without negating the opportunity for the characters to experience romance could be seen as largely positive, but their apparent lack of sexuality seems extreme and perpetuates an aversion to gay sexuality. While *Modern Family* reduces binary distinctions in order to *erase* necessary differences in perceptions of gay and straight representation as it applies to character traits, the show treats gay and straight romances quite differently, *acknowledging* an inherent difference between straight and gay couples. This treatment limits the work the sitcom does in terms of expanding possibilities for characterization as well as complicates its attempt to illustrate the idea that one can be both gay and "normal." These differing depictions of romance also reveal a slight ambivalence within the program's overall message in terms of gay representation, which may reflect the restraints imposed by the sitcom genre as well as societal restrictions, as will be discussed later.

Max from *Happy Endings* remains single throughout Season one of the series, allowing audiences to see many visiting gay characters and their different personalities. Though there is

something to say about the fact that Max is never successful in love, it is never implied that he is unsuccessful because he is gay. Though Max does not outwardly seek a commitment from any of his suitors, this quality is attributed to his status as a man, not as a *gay* man. This can be seen through Max's routine discomfort when discussing relationships with his more romantic friend Dave. After Dave moves into Max's apartment and begins reminiscing about his relationship with his ex-fiancée Alex, Max responds, "Oh God…Ok, look, if we're gonna live here together you can't ever say stuff like that around me," ("Bo Fight," 2:07) aligning himself with the image of the guy's guy who does not want to engage in emotional conversations or seek long-term commitments. Though Max says he isn't looking for any commitment, the viewer occasionally receives hints that he might not realize his real desire for a relationship.[3]

There is one romantic instance where Max falls for a married man, Ian. Surprisingly, this is Max's most successful relationship, though it only lasts one episode. Before Max learns of Ian's heterosexual marriage, the two go on one date. Viewers know that they have spent the night together, though none of their date is shown, since Max walks Ian to work in the morning to save him from his "walk of shame." Max soon realizes that Ian is the owner of a new coffee chain that opened up downtown that Max has been protesting, and realizes the relationship is in trouble. After Max loses Ian, Max's friends help him create a romantic-comedy moment, as Max delivers a speech from the doorway of a food truck to woo Ian back. This moment takes the cheesy-romantic scene viewers have become accustomed to seeing in straight storylines, and inserts two gay men as the participants, demonstrating that the relationship, the attraction, and the feelings can be seen as no different from the type of heterosexual love that is commonly displayed in television and movies. Max's ploy works, and the two share a handshake to represent no ill

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[3] In Season 2 of *Happy Endings*, these hunches are realized. Max begins dating an ex-boyfriend of his named Grant, and realizes how much he enjoys being in a relationship. The two break up mid-season after Max discovers he may want to have kids, only after hearing that Grant has no interest in having a family.

feelings. Ian's marital status is only disclosed in the final minute of the show, and this revelation

is given very little attention. Max's friends ask him how things are going with Ian, and Max

responds, "Eh, not so good. He's married with three kids" ("You've Got Male," 21:25). His

friends relate and say they've been there and move on, not dwelling on Max's failed relationship.

The fact that Max and his friends do not linger on their discussion about Ian is positive. It

establishes that Max's failed relationship has no implications on Max's current state or future

love life. This moment also demonstrates Max's morals: He will not be a cheater or be with a

cheater. Max's morality operates as a step forward from past representations that pegged gay

men as purely hypersexual and promiscuous individuals.

Still, while this situation did not work out, Max could have been publicly embarrassed by

homophobic behavior if Ian had rejected his food truck appeal or if bystanders had reacted

poorly, and yet he is not. And while Max is never shown acting affectionate with any of his

suitors, it is not because of social stigma, or as in Mitch's case, uptightness. Instead, Max is not

physically affectionate with anyone within the first season of *Happy Endings,* because he finds

no one he is interested in. Only once is Max's quest for a date/relationship disrupted by *Max's*

being rejected—this moment features a confident character named Adrian rejecting Max for

"playing games" and not being honest. So while Max remains single throughout Season one of

Happy Endings, it seems to be based on his own desire to live without attachments. He is not

refused the opportunity for romance, as viewers see Max go on several dates with different

gentleman, and yet he is not portrayed as hypersexual or promiscuous, in contrast to past

representations of gay men.

While instances of gay romance could certainly be amplified in *Happy Endings,* the

program does more to erase the stigma of gay affection than does *Modern Family.* Max is not

treated differently than his straight friends in terms of his romantic pursuits. Though he is never successful in love, within the first season, he is able to discuss his dates openly with friends. In fact, in the episode "You've Got Male," Brad and Max address gay sex when Brad asks, "So when guys hook up, do they call each other 'dude'?" (5:09). Additionally, in an earlier episode Brad reacts with interest to Max's gossip when Max says he had "raging sex in a bus terminal" with his date ("Of Mice and Jazz Kwon Do", 4:20).[4] Such frank statements involving gay sex have rarely been observed in broadcast television and certainly have not been seen in *Modern Family.* Along with these frank comments surrounding gay affection, *Happy Endings* also demonstrates a progressive portrayal of gay romance by allowing Max equal opportunities to express love. The best indication of this equal opportunity, as discussed earlier, is the scene in the episode "You've Got Male," where Max delivers a cheesy-romantic speech to his suitor from the doorway of Dave's food truck. Max's friends support Max and persuade him to deliver the speech—indicating that they are completely comfortable with gay romance, and that it is not different from straight romance.

Contradictory Behavior: Undermining Anticipated Homophobia

In *Modern Family,* Mitch, Cam, or the pair is often made to look foolish after anticipating homophobia or acting in a certain way because of this anticipation. In such situations, they predict that some action of theirs will be met with intolerance or homophobia and they react to this by either attempting to act "less gay," or becoming vocally defensive. There are also situations where their perception is discounted, usually in cutaway scenes when one character discusses his own personality, particularly in view of his sexuality—only to be proven wrong, and look foolish in the following scene, which shows the character behaving differently.

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[4] Max uses this conversation to confront Brad about his "gay-sism,"a moment which will be discussed later. Still, it seems important to point out that Max lied to Brad with this statement, and reveals this to Brad after witnessing Brad's intrigue regarding Max's gossip.

This is the narrative element of *Modern Family* that is the most ambiguous and potentially harmful, especially in the situations when Mitch and Cam anticipate homophobia, undermining the characters' concerns and implying they are oversensitive.

This dangerous show element is demonstrated in an introductory scene of the pilot episode. The scene features Mitch and Cam's plane ride home with Lily from Vietnam after the adoption. Mitch observes that the passengers' behavior towards Lily seems to change once they realize she is the daughter of a gay couple (once Cam returns to his seat from the bathroom). He discusses this with Cam and tells him that he's going to say something. Then, he hears a lady saying "Look at that baby with those creampuffs," and interprets it as a homophobic comment on Cam and him ("Pilot," 3:32). Mitch gets up and angrily gives a speech about acceptance and sexuality to the entire cabin, only to find out that daughter Lily had in fact been playing with a large creampuff. *Modern Family* plays this moment for a laugh, but by making such situations comedic, the program actually undermines Mitch and Cam's anticipation of homophobia, turning such an expectation into a joke.

While the situations are funny and no emotional repercussions are ever shown or hinted at within the program, *Modern Family* creates a risky space for flexible interpretations. On one hand, these instances demonstrate that it is ok to poke fun at an exaggerated paranoia or that society should not be so uptight about issues of homosexuality—viewers can laugh at gay characters who are incorrectly anticipating intolerance. At the same time, the show is delegitimizing and/or mocking Mitch and Cam's concerns and subsequent defensive behavior when expecting or perceiving this homophobia. One could form the opinion that since every time Mitch and Cam expect to encounter homophobia they are wrong, that it is actually *foolish* for gay men to expect to be met with homophobia; that one is living in a post-homophobia society.

In a positive way, these instances help to reveal Mitch and Cam's secure standing, since they do not encounter any homophobia or intolerant behavior from strangers or acquaintances in the first two seasons— the only indications of discomfort stem from Jay**.** Still, for Mitch and Cam's intuition to be wrong every time seems unrealistic and turns Mitch and Cam into paranoid individuals in a post-homophobia environment. The only show element that saves viewers from this dangerous interpretation is Jay's discomfort with his son's sexuality. As discussed earlier, by showing that acceptance is more difficult for some than others, whether or not they know someone who is gay, the show indicates that intolerance is a concern. Still, *Modern Family* could do more to sway viewers from the idea that homophobia does not exist. By continually placing Mitch and Cam in situations where their anticipations of intolerance are treated as a punch line, the program is risking dangerous interpretations.

Direct Address to the Viewer

<u>Modern Family and the Cutaway</u>

In their own ways, both programs are very direct in terms of addressing issues of sexuality and involving the viewer in these discussions. *Modern Family* relies on cutaway scenes in which the characters speak directly to the camera, and enlighten the viewer with their opinion on the matter at hand. In these scenes, the viewer learns both their histories (for instance, Mitch and Cam's coming out stories), and how they perceive different situations as they are occurring. Cutaway scenes often interrupt an event within the plot to allow characters to comment on the behavior. This strategy of not only acknowledging the camera but speaking to it as if the camera is a friend makes the viewer feel more involved. The viewer is credited with enough trust for characters to open up, but the viewer is also asked, at times, to evaluate the character's statements, considering that these cutaways are the moments when the characters have the most control over how they present themselves. In terms of Mitch and Cam, these cutaway scenes work towards two goals—they illuminate the history of their relationship (how they met, coming out to their parents, etc.) and also offer an inside look at how the couple communicates. Both of these tasks help create a more detailed character—one who has a past, who struggles but gets past adversity, and who learns from past errors. As mentioned before, many of these moments ask the audience to evaluate not only what is being spoken, but the situations that are being described. For instance, in one such cutaway scene, Mitch discusses his relationship with his father. He says:

> "When I was twelve years old, my father walked into my bedroom and caught me
>
> doing the most embarrassing thing that a boy can do—dancing to Madonna's
>
> "Lucky Star"—and from that moment on, there's always been a part of me that

I've kept from him, and yet here he was laughing with my friends, and, I don't

know, maybe the problem was me." ("Boys' Night," 14:22)

Here's a situation where, regardless of what side the viewer takes, she finds herself dwelling on the situation, trying to figure out what *she* believes—is Mitch being too hard on himself? Does this situation illustrate that people, like Jay, who are not immediately tolerant towards gay people, can always change? Can this be considered a breakthrough in Mitch and Jay's relationship? Or the viewer may find herself wanting to comfort, or conversely, condemn Mitch for this opinion. In this way, *Modern Family* is leaving the interpretation up to the viewer. Cutaways do not always invite the viewer to agree with any particular character; instead, these scenes ask them to consider and reconsider established beliefs within themselves by evaluating the character's comments. *Modern Family* starts a conversation by positioning the viewer as a friend, and, then, after the viewer hears the characters confide in them, the program hopes that the viewer will further consider the discussion's underlying issues and perhaps reconsider any stale beliefs she might hold. It is this positioning of the viewer as a friend that is unique.

Political Speech and Comparisons

Like *Modern Family, Happy Endings* is also a very direct show, but without those soul-revealing cutaway scenes, most of these moments of frankness occur through the characters' speech. Max is frequently referred to—positively and negatively—as being not fully gay, as Penny says, "a straight dude who likes dudes" ("The Quicksand Girlfriend," 6:06). Discussion of his love of sports and video games, his desire to remain unattached, his sloppy appearance and living habits, and his general indifference are frequently cited as evidence to contrast Max from what has traditionally been considered "gay"—feminine, professional, love-desperate. A lot of attention throughout Season one is spent identifying Max as something "other"—something different than the typical gay man. Along with that, viewers may be redefining and expanding

their conceptions of what and who may be considered gay. Still, *Happy Endings* does not use Max to represent a new model of the acceptable gay, nor does the series cast judgment against characters who resemble the more feminine, stereotypical gay men portrayed in past television programs, as will be discussed later.

In the episode "Quicksand Girlfriend," Penny shows her disappointment in Max, telling him that he is "the worst gay husband ever!" ("The Quicksand Girlfriend," 3:04) and berates him for not living up to her expectations of a gay best friend:

> Penny: "I want a gay who will watch house-flipping shows with me and grab my boobs in a platonic way."
>
> Max: "So you want a stereotypically flamboyant, cartoonish *Sex in the City* gay? That's offensive." ("The Quicksand Girlfriend," 6:06).

Instead of simply allowing Max to be a different type of gay representation (compared to past portrayals), *Happy Endings* has the characters directly address Max's difference. The characters acknowledge the stereotype of the feminine, flamboyant gay man and also recognize Max's divergence from that representation. Later in the episode, Max proceeds to introduce Penny to an acquaintance of his, Derek, who perfectly fits her idea of an ideal gay husband, and Penny soon realizes that Derek is too much for her to handle:

> Penny: "I thought that I wanted this offensively stereotypical gay guy, but it's too much… I mean, I feel like it messes with the group dynamic."
>
> Max: "It does, Penn. Because our group already has an offensively stereotypical gay guy. You don't need a gay husband. Because you're *my* gay husband." ("The Quicksand Girlfriend," 17:58)

In this encounter, Max directly introduces the work that both *Happy Endings* and *Modern Family* achieve—reducing binary thinking. By telling Penny that *she* is his gay husband, Max is ultimately saying that anyone can hold any quality, regardless of gender and sexuality. Also, this time spent qualifying Max as the "new-look gay" could be taken as a dig against men who may fit the more traditional description of gay men (feminine, professional, love-desperate), yet, *Happy Endings* counters this by showing that such behavior is completely acceptable through the character of Penny who is very well regarded. Instead, the program demonstrates that such qualities should not *define* gayness.

Just as he challenges Penny on her offensive thinking, Max frequently confronts his friends when they are being insensitive towards gay people. In the episode "Of Mice and Jazz Kwon Do," Max accuses best friend Brad of being a "Gay-sist" since he sets up Max with another man simply because they are both gay—insinuating that all gay men are the same and that all gay men are attracted to each other. The directness associated with Max's character is something new for gay characterization. Max isn't responding to intolerant strangers or acquaintances who say something of poor taste to him on the street; instead, Max confronts his friends—which, in many ways, can be considered more difficult and risky. Though Max's directness is softened by the fact that he is such an immature, lazy character (perhaps having Max be more charismatic or successful would amplify the effect of his directness), Max's directness regarding gay rights forces viewers to engage in thinking exercises not only about gay rights but also about how society treats those whom they consider disadvantaged.

One talking point that surfaces several times within the first season is the discussion between Brad and Max about whether it is more difficult to be black or to be gay. This

conversation seems to compare disadvantages. For example, the episode "Bo Fight" opens with the following discussion:

> Brad: "Aw, come on, bro, being a black guy is way harder than being a gay dude."
>
> Max: "Aw, come on…"
>
> Brad: "Last night I tried to hail a cab in a $1,200 suit. Dude drove right past me and picked up a white guy in a 'Who Farted' a T-shirt."
>
> Max: "Oh, boohoo, you can't get a cab. I can't get married or into heaven!"
>
> Penny: "You don't want to do either of these things."
>
> Max: "It doesn't matter. Look, the president's a black..."
>
> Dave: "Technically, he's more of a tie-dye."
>
> Max: "The point is he'd never get elected if he was riding in cars with boys!"
>
> ("Bo Fight," 0:03)

This conversation is very direct and addresses social class, marriage, religion, and politics. By placing gay rights and gay struggles in the same conversation as civil rights, Max's words might strike a chord in audiences—seeing gay rights as a comparable fight, as equally about human rights, and, perhaps, as the next big rights movement. The decision to script this storyline can also be seen as a huge risk by ABC. It is certainly conceivable that people on both sides (black, gay) might take offense to this comparison, and yet, by positioning these two groups together, and bluntly discussing the various inequalities that still exist, *Happy Endings* undoubtedly demonstrates an effort to use Max and Brad for instructional purposes, in addition to their entertainment value.

Conclusions and Future Research

Overall, findings from this analysis suggest that *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* represent an important improvement in mainstream gay portrayals. These shows expand the possibilities not only for gay characters but for all characters by refusing the hard lines of binary construction for characters of any sexual preference. By denying the rigid distinctions that label feminine as gay and masculine as straight, both shows are able to present likable, complex characters whose sexuality operates merely as a *component* of that individual's characterization. These portrayals stand in significant contrast to previous texts that have reduced gay characters to a single dimension. Not only do gay characters exhibit a blend of traditionally feminine- and masculine-coded traits, but straight characters also demonstrate this complexity. In this way, the programs do more than create new opportunities for gay representation.

Unlike past representations, LGBT characters are given their own independent storylines and are able to interact within both straight and gay circles, as opposed to the practice of using gay characters merely to shed light on the compassion of lead heterosexual characters. Gay characters on both *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* inhabit their own narratives, but are also shown to be integral players in the storylines of heterosexual characters, often in the powerful role of an advisor. This legitimizes the character's advice, and doesn't limit his counsel as appropriate only in gay matters. Instead, it is the gay male, who in the past would have been seen as promiscuous and deviant, giving his straight friends relationship and lifestyle advice as part of a normal life.

In reference to Clark's (1969) stages of development for stigmatized social groups, it appears that *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings'* portrayals would fall in line with both the regulation and respect stages. None of the characters are displayed in overtly stereotypical ways because of the complexity that each (gay and straight) character illustrates, and so the title of

ridicule seems inappropriate. In Clark's (1969) respect stage, roles are not limited or considered stereotypical, but individuals must also exhibit both positive and negative traits and are granted a wide range of character roles. While both programs do demonstrate a wide variety of roles for LGBT representation, the characters (especially Mitch and Cam) are entirely likable. Mitch's job as a lawyer is not enough to demarcate Mitch and Cam as illustrative of Clark's (1969) regulation stage, but their lack of discernibly negative traits that could lead viewers to dislike them is noticeable, making it difficult to consider them fully outside Clark's (1969) regulation stage, in which characters are painted as reputable, upstanding citizens, in contrast to or as an answer for past representations that painted LGBT individuals as deviant and promiscuous. While the absence of negative traits in their gay characters may be strategic in creating likable gay characters for a larger television audience, it also reveals different treatment in the construction of straight and gay characters. Programs may be wary of attributing negative traits to gay characters for fear that such traits could further perpetuate a dislike for gay characters, but if such consideration is necessary, then it seems that gay representation has not yet reached full acceptance in the media or in society.

Nevertheless, since visibility equals power, analyzing media representations of stigmatized groups is very important in understanding social relations in modern society. While extensive research has been conducted on the representations of women and various races within the television genre, research on LGBT representation should be expanded. Though the 2011-2012 broadcast season experienced a sizable drop in LGBT series regulars, gay characters have steadily increased in recent years, and with the success of characters such as Mitch, Cam, and Max whose shows have drawn large audiences, in addition to the popular programs such as *Greys Anatomy* and *Glee* that also feature casts with gay characters, the numbers of LGBT

regulars may continue to rise overall. More research is needed to gauge the progress of these gay portrayals, and especially the effect of this array of complex characterizations on viewers. As Hart (2000) mentions, since sexuality is not something that can be easily observed (such as race or gender), many people may not knowingly encounter LGBT individuals in their lives, thus making televised representations even more important and worthy of further study.

Future analyses should consider the patterns within this research while looking towards a larger set of texts to consider audience reception. While *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* both contribute extensively to gay representation in a favorable way by expanding possibilities for characters and engaging viewers in implicit and explicit political discussion surrounding gay rights, it is possible that the utopian aspect of these programs could result in what could be termed "enlightened homophobia" based on what Jhally & Lewis (1992) consider enlightened racism. The researchers first applied the term to *The Cosby Show,* saying that the series promoted an enlightened racism among white viewers by showing a black family who had achieved middle class success, without acknowledging "the economic disadvantages and deep-rooted racial discrimination that prevent most African Americans from being socially mobile" (Smith, 2008, pp. 397). So, while *The Cosby Show* did, indeed, present a new form of Black representation that on the surface appeared entirely positive (successful job, marriage, and family), the "enlightened racism" thesis posits that such depictions justify the belief that racism is no longer a problem and that ''their success assures us that in the United States everyone, regardless of race or creed, can enjoy material success'' (Jhally & Lewis, 1992, pp. 73). This thinking leads to the harmful belief that all Black individuals who have not achieved Cosby-like success are merely lazy or personally incapable, as opposed to recognizing the difficulty in achieving such success. Enlightened racism has been observed in more contemporary work as well. For example, Smith

(2008) believes that the popular reality program *Run's House* also displays enlightened racism, by presenting an effortlessly successful Black family whose lifestyle demonstrates "class trumping race" (Smith, 2008, pp. 397). Susan J. Douglas has also extended this line of research with her work evaluating gender in television. Douglas (2010) posits that various current television programs present a world where sexism is no longer a concern, resulting in enlightened sexist thinking. In this vein, an "enlightened homophobia" would suggest that homophobia is no longer a problem and that LGBT individuals who are unable to achieve the lifestyles illustrated by Mitch, Cam and Max must be lazy or self-sabotaging. This belief fails to recognize the challenges gay individuals face because of homophobia and how that may hinder their success.

This idea of "enlightened homophobia" is dangerous, yet one plausible interpretation of the message of these ABC programs. While both series do attempt to demonstrate the gay-rights struggle, these efforts are small and contained, and at times, the characters' anticipations of being met with homophobia are actually undermined. These aspects of the programs present a society that is unrealistically utopian: a world in which sexual preference is never a hot-button issue. Normatively speaking, there is room for progress. While it is exciting to watch characters live without encountering much intolerance, it is simply unrealistic. In order for these characters to have reached these levels of stability in the current society, they must have had to overcome adversity. Though poll numbers continue to demonstrate increasing acceptance of the LGBT community, society is far from being as post-homophobic as these shows might indicate.

Perhaps the failure of these series to acknowledge significant issues such as homophobia can be explained by the programs' identification as sitcoms. Mellencamp (1997) argues that the "shifts between narrative and comic spectacle" that are central to the genre of situational

comedies often detract from the actual repression encountered by various social groups (pp.73). This can certainly be observed in *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* as moments that directly engage gay issues are often defused by the sitcoms' reliance on humor. For example, Mitch and Cam are frequently made to look foolish when incorrectly anticipating homophobia. Again, this reinforces the idea of "enlightened homophobia," as characters appear foolish for anticipating discrimination that is nonexistent. These situations are scripted to make the audience laugh at the couple for giving long, unnecessary speeches or altering their behavior for no reason, but in these moments *Modern Family* misses opportunities to inform viewers about present homophobia. The show must make audiences laugh, which can also explain why little effort is made to recognize the struggles that may be associated with homosexuality, such as violence, discrimination, and other relevant social issues: Such ideas may seem too heavy for the sitcom genre.

For meta-homophobic humor (Brown & Betz, n.d.) to be successful, the irony of the joke must be properly understood by both the encoder (production-level) and decoder (reception-level). Viewers bring their preexisting attitudes to the viewing of programs that involve representation of stigmatized groups (Brown & Betz, n.d.). In situations in which Mitch and Cam are undermined because they incorrectly anticipate homophobia and moments when Jay makes insensitive remarks about his son's sexuality, *Modern Family* risks reaffirming viewers' homophobic beliefs. In the case of Jay's remarks, viewers who have preexisting homophobic beliefs may not understand that *Modern Family* intends for its viewers to laugh at Jay for being so wrongfully homophobic, and instead laugh at Jay's unkind words. More research should be done to expand Brown & Betz' (n.d.) findings in order to further understand the effect of disparagement and meta-disparagement humor. However, it seems entirely reasonable to contend

that necessary aspects of *Modern Family* as it exists as a primetime sitcom could trigger homophobic receptions.

Another limitation tied to the series' sitcom status is the reliance on a middle- to upper-class setting in which to feature the characters. Sitcoms have demonstrated a readiness to display new types of characters and roles for members of various social groups, reflecting social events such as women's liberation and the civil rights movement. These sitcoms have changed the dominant images, narratives, and characters viewers were used to seeing on television (Foss, 2008; Gabbadon, 2006; Walsh, Fursich, & Jefferson, 2008; Means Coleman, 2000). Series such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show, All in The Family, The Jeffersons,* and *Taxi* moved their settings from the domestic sphere into the working arena, but television seems to have moved away from such contexts. *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* also fall short in illustrating how gayness intersects with other marginal identities by creating characters whose only oppressed identity is their homosexuality. This critique extends beyond these two sitcoms, as four of the five lead LGBT characters of the 2011-2012 primetime broadcast season were gay white males. This disparity demonstrates the dominance of the white male perspective, even as it applies to the portrayal of stigmatized groups. Both *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* minimally address this disparity by featuring gay characters who are Black. These characters can only be seen as tokens, not as progressive representations of minority members of the LGBT community, as they are never given their own narratives or any prominent place in others' storylines. Cable networks have introduced several series that featured racially diverse casts and also addressed heavier social issues such as violence and discrimination. It is also worth mentioning that many of these series premiered more than five years ago, but also that these shows were created for niche markets, allowing the programs to take more risks. Perhaps, gay representation on network

television can only go so far without losing audiences. Still, it is worth considering if and how these current portrayals, which have been considered largely positive, would be different if the characters were lesbian or transgendered. How might these representations be different if the characters were women or people of color? How different might these narratives look if the lead characters were both gay and working class? It is conceivable that both programs chose to create characters whose sexual preference is their only oppressed identity with the belief that intersectionality might complicate the storytelling and reception of the series. Perhaps, the programs preferred to address homosexuality by itself without intersecting with other identities. Still, this decision to improve LGBT representation solely through the work of white, male, middle-to upper-class characters serves to limit who can and cannot be represented on primetime network sitcoms and demonstrates once again that LGBT representation has not quite reached Clark's (1969) model of respect in society, despite what poll numbers may suggest.

While *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings* perform a necessary, positive intervention in gay representation, the work of these shows is limited because of their refusal to acknowledge the gay rights struggle more fully. The post-homophobia world that these series present could be said to exhibit an "enlightened homophobia" as opposed to acknowledging the difficulty for many LBGT individuals to achieve the stability demonstrated by Mitch, Cam and Max. These programs overcompensate for the characters' gayness by attributing them with otherwise advantaged traits in terms of gender, race and class and, for the most part, avoid any negative character traits in the creation of these personalities. So while these procedures result in creating identifiable and likable gay characters, they also illustrate that LGBT representation is still limited and that full societal acceptance may be in an earlier stage than poll numbers suggest. These programs demonstrate the restraints for both the sitcom genre and network television in

terms of how much progress is possible for gay representation: Network sitcoms must appeal to mainstream audiences and keep them laughing. This requirement might limit a show's ability to address heavier issues such as homophobia or feature casts who are more inclusive. Nonetheless, this research contends that *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings'* gay representations perform largely positive efforts and perhaps are evidence of broader progress for gay representation on television since the breakthroughs of the late '90s.

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