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## **A HALF CENTURY OF CLASS AND GENDER in American TV Domestic Sitcoms**

Over a half-century of television, domestic situation comedies have reinforced images of the middle class as better than the working class. Similar inequalities have been portrayed for men versus women, black versus white, old versus young, and for other status hierarchies. Already embedded in the larger culture, these stereotypes are used to signify character types that advance dramatic goals. Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of network television and the persistence over five decades have contributed immeasurably to reproducing these same stereotypes.

Women, for example, have been cast as main characters only where the subjects of romance or family are salient; they have been absent from rational discussions in scripts [Gerbner, 1972]. Women's presence thus signals certain themes. Similarly, traits culturally associated with a lower status, applied to a person of higher status devalues that person. Men are devalued by characterizing them as feminine. Such status inversion can then effectively confirm other lower statuses held by the person. Female, black and lower-class adults have been devalued by characterizing them as child-like. Child-like attributions undercut their adult status, confirming their lower status as female, black or lower-class.

Scott (1988) has argued that class is symbolically coded in gender terms, so that gender becomes a means of establishing class status. That is, when a person has two contradictory status positions, such as black man or white woman, the higher status can be undercut to resolve the contradiction in favor of the lower status. De-masculinizing working-class men—i.e. applying descriptors which contradict the culturally accepted definition of masculine—devalues them not only as men but also uses gender to affirm their subordinate class status. Men may be de-masculinized by describing them as women or as boys, making them “feminine” or child-like [Baron, 1989].

This paper investigates how valuations of class on television have been constructed by manipulating gender and age traits. A wealth of studies document television images of women [Olson & Douglas, 1997; Steenland, 1995; Ferguson, 1990]; some have documented images of men [Hanke, 1990; Cantor, 1990; Craig, 1992]. An older research tradition has tabulated occupational frequencies [Smythe, 1954; DeFleur, 1964; Seggar & Wheeler, 1973; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977; Greenberg, 1980].

Few studies however have examined the pattern of images across many series and over several seasons, what we might call the historical tapestry of television culture. [Thomas, 1982; Lipsitz, 1986; Butsch, 1992]. Such analysis is needed to reveal persistent images. Character types which recur time and again over years have a special importance in the culture as stock images—the country bumpkin, the dizzy blonde—used to construct a culture’s tales and even to type each other in everyday life [Klapp, 1962; Schutz, 1967]. Also few studies have examined the intersection of gender and class [Steeves & Smith, 1987]. Feminist scholars are finding this an important aspect of our cultural discourse [Ferguson, 1990]. Such analysis adds depth to our understanding of the traditional types in our culture’s tales.

Butsch (1992) and Butsch & Glennon (1980, 1982, 1983) surveyed four decades of domestic situation comedies from the beginning of network television in 1946 to 1989 and found persistent patterns throughout. This paper extends the earlier work to the 1999-2000 season and emphasizes the gender-class intersection. It concentrates on how gender has been used to construct contrasting images of the working class and middle class.

### ***Persistent cultural types***

The significance of imagery depends upon its pervasiveness and persistence. Pervasive and persistent images crystallize as cultural types and form the mainstream culture, the context within which exceptions, alternative and oppositional images, may appear and to which they must refer. Character types which recur across series and across time, and contrasts between types, which may only be evident when we look at the panorama of series taken together, are of especial importance.

The paper therefore focuses on the most pervasive medium, prime-time television, and on that perennial prime time genre, the domestic situation comedy. Five decades of television families have provided a wealth of imagery of class in which men and women, adults and children are pictured in comparisons and contrasts. Literally hundreds of family series have been broadcast, different characters but repeated types and themes, an electronic

tradition of oft-told tales. Domestic situation comedy series have been the mainstay of prime-time programming, and their format does not dictate any particular class. Occupation and thus the class portrayed is not an artifact of the genre as it is of police, lawyer or medical drama series. Domestic situation comedies are defined as half-hour prime-time nationally distributed series in which the main characters are members of a family and in which the major portion of action is among family members usually in the home. Excluded are series featuring singles, multiple families and households, and series not set in the twentieth century.

A list of all domestic situation comedy series was compiled from Brooks and Marsh (1999) and the annual *TV GUIDE Fall Preview* issues and each was categorized as portraying a working-class, middle-class, or upper-class family. The occupation of the head of household was used to distinguish middle from working-class families. If sources described the head as independently wealthy, that overrode occupation as the indicator of class. The occupational distinction between middle-class and working-class occupations is primarily that between mental and manual labor, an artificial—few occupations are strictly one or the other—but status-laden distinction woven through many American institutions [Braverman, 1974, 377-380]. This distinction is used to justify educational tracking, the organization of work and even class-based definitions of masculinity. Thus examining the imagery of class has broad implications for understanding our culture.

The most successful of these series—defined as those having five or more first-run seasons, the length preferred in the syndication market, or, for those series introduced less than five years ago, ranked in the top twenty of the annual Nielsen ratings—were selected from the list for further analysis of characterization. It is these series and characterizations which have become sedimented in the national culture and conversation, shows which most Americans know something about even if they haven't seen them. This analysis was based upon information gathered from viewing episodes, reading scripts at the Annenberg Library of the University of Pennsylvania, and descriptions of episodes in weekly *TV Guide* schedules as well as newspaper and magazine reviews of the programs.

### ***Working-class scarcity, middle-class affluence***

While not absent, working-class families appeared infrequently through the four and half decades from the beginning of network broadcasts in 1946 to the 1989-1990 season. Of 262 domestic situation comedy series, only 4% featured a blue collar employee as head of house, including series which appeared

only briefly before cancellation. Adding clerical and service workers, the numbers of working-class series still constituted only 14% of all series. In the 1990s, 16 additional working-class series appeared, albeit briefly, bringing the representation of the working class for the entire period 1946-2000 to 14% of 315 domestic situation comedies with heads of house portrayed as working-class, i.e. holding occupations as blue-collar, clerical or unskilled or semi-skilled service workers. Blue-collar families were most under-represented: only 8% (25 series) compared to 45% of actual American families in 1970 in the middle of the five decades.

There were three periods in which the numbers of new working-class series peaked: in the mid-1950s, in the early 1970s and in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Each of these peaks occurred during transitional periods for network television: the first during the initial years of television when networks were borrowing heavily from radio—*I Remember Mama* and *The Life of Riley* were radio shows before television—and exploring the potential of this new medium; the second in the early 1970s when Norman Lear produced *All in the Family*, *Good Times* and *Sanford and Sons* as part of CBS's effort to shift from an older rural audience to a younger urban audience in response to declining ratings with undesirable demographics; the most recent revival (*Roseanne*, *The Simpsons*, and several less successful series) has come at a time of intense competition from new networks, cable and internet. Working-class families, in other words, were given a try when “normal” fare wasn't established or sustaining ratings. But even in these peak years working-class shows remained a minority among domestic situation comedies.

By contrast, over two thirds (68%) of domestic situation comedy series presented middle-class families, representing the majority of series except almost every season. Middle-class families tended to be more than usually affluent and successful, further accenting the difference from working-class families. Glamorous, prestigious professions predominated over more mundane ones: e.g. 9 doctors to each nurse as a head of household, 4 professors to each school teacher, 10 lawyers to each accountant. And within a given profession characters were presented as great successes or young with much promise. Dick Van Dyke was a writer for a TV show; *Bachelor Father* was a lawyer living in Beverly Hills; *Life with Father* featured a Wall Street banker; *Halls of Ivy* an Ivy League president. The father of *Family Affair* was not just an engineer but president of his engineering firm. These shows pushed the upper limits of “middle-classness” without being described as independently wealthy.

Many television families had servants, another indicator of affluence. In shows introduced in the 1950s and 1960s it was common for a middle-class

television family to have a maid or handyman. The high school principal father of *The Stu Erwin Show* employed a handyman. *Bachelor Father*, *Father of the Bride*, *Hazel*, *Karen*, and *Green Acres* all featured lawyers with maid, houseboy or handyman. The new realism of the 1970s and 1980s muted some of this affluence. Servants in these decades appeared almost exclusively in wealthy families or as child-care in single-parent homes—although *The Brady Bunch* had a maid on an architect's income.

In the 1950s and 1960s working wives appeared not as indicators of economic necessity but as professional successes in their own right. The wives in *Mr. Adams and Eve*, *Peter Loves Mary*, and *Mona McClusky* were Broadway or movie stars. Jean Kerr, the nationally syndicated newspaper columnist, was portrayed as the wife in *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*. The wives in several series had given up careers to become housewives. Mary Tyler Moore played a wife in the *Dick Van Dyke Show* who had given up her career as a dancer. Mothers who were single parents were not shown struggling to make ends meet but typically pursuing successful and interesting careers: in *The Eve Arden Show* as an author and lecturer; in *The Doris Day Show* as a magazine reporter; in *The Partridge Family* as leading her family singing group.

Working wives or mothers appeared much more frequently in the 1980s and 1990s than in previous decades, but still often pursued successful careers. Angela in *Who's the Boss* was an advertising executive, Claire Huxtable of *The Cosby Show* a lawyer, in *The Ellen Burstyn Show* a writer/college professor. In other words, the domestic situation comedy population has been persistently and overwhelmingly middle-class, predominantly successful professionals, with some managers, and a smattering of wealthy and manual workers. A fictional world in which success is so pervasive makes success the expected norm. When success is confined predominantly to the middle-class series, and failure to the working-class series, the failing working-class men are thereby labeled deviants and responsible for their own failure.

### **Working-class stereotypes**

Numbers indicate the scarcity of the working class. But they did appear. In fact, a remarkable percentage of blue collar series became television classics (*The Honeymooners*, *The Flintstones*, *All in the Family*, *The Simpsons*) and have created a vivid cultural type of the working-class man. That imagery persistently devalued the working-class male, as an inept bumbler and even a buffoon. Situation comedy is built around a humorous "situation" which is resolved during the half hour. In working-class series the character typically caught in the situation, usually of his own making, was the man. Usually his

wife had to help him out of the situation. The devaluation of the working-class male operates primarily by inverting gender statuses in working-class series while sustaining them in middle-class series. Humor was built around some variant of working-class man's stereotypic ineptitude, immaturity, stupidity, lack of good sense or emotional outburst, traits that have been culturally defined as feminine or child-like. This character type of the urban working-class male has supplanted the country bumpkin in our panoply of cultural types. While television did not invent the type, it certainly has cemented its position in our culture.

The characterization is accentuated by contrasts to the wives and children in these working-class series, as well as by contrasts to the middle-class men in other series. Typically working-class wives and often the children were portrayed as more intelligent, rational, sensible, responsible, mature than their husbands. Mother, not father, typically knew best. The children were often smarter than their fathers and their successes contrasted to their fathers' failures. At best father was benign but inferior, at worst an embarrassment. The working-class man could not fulfill his "superior" status as adult male.

On the other hand in middle-class series the middle-class men fulfill their manly roles competently. They are typically intelligent, rational, mature and responsible as the culture expects a man to be and as the working-class wives are. The middle-class wives too are typically sensible, mature and responsible in their supportive roles as wives and mothers. Middle-class husband and wife formed a team of what Glennon and Butsch (1982) called super-parents. Occasionally a middle-class series was built around a fool as the source of humor. In these cases however, the fool was almost always the wife, some variant of the "dizzy blonde," rather than the husband. This devaluation is consistent with the lower status of women; it avoids undercutting the middle-class status of the family, which the culture defines in terms of the husband as head of house.

### ***The 1950s and 1960s***

This formula was established for television in the 1950s, when these gender stereotypes were even stronger and more stark. Working-class male heads of house were consistently portrayed as dumb but lovable, i.e. they cared about their families but were bumbling, incompetent and often immature, not figures of respect, in contrast to their more sensible wives. Ralph Kramden of *The Honeymooners*, Chester Riley of *The Life of Riley*, and Lars Hansen of *I Remember Mama* were created in this mold.

Ralph Kramden was obsessed with success and modest affluence, at which he constantly schemed but invariably failed. He wanted to succeed as a husband by buying his wife, Alice the simple comforts, a television or a nicer apartment. He tried get-rich-quick schemes, such as marketing what he thought was Alice's homemade sauce, only to learn it was dog food. Alice always warned him, later quipped "I told you so," and Ralph was always repentant. He occasionally tried more conventional means such as applying for a promotion, or making a list of good and bad points for a self-improvement program—means Alice approved of, but which also got nowhere. Ralph's friend Ed Norton was true to the type as well, even dumber than Ralph whom he followed as a loyal sidekick.

Alice's logic and sarcasm invariably bested Ralph in arguments that typically ended by him saying, in angry frustration, "Just you wait Alice, one of these days, pow, right in the kisser." She recognized the foolishness of his schemes, and sometimes got him out of the messes he'd gotten them into. Chester A. Riley, the father in *The Life of Riley* was much like Ralph, without the tension and anger of *The Honeymooners*. Chester too was continually concocting schemes for his family. He attempted to fix a school election so his daughter would win, but succeeded only in embarrassing her. His incessant failures were expressed in his closing line for each episode, "What a revoltin' development this is!" Chester's friend and fellow worker, Gillis, was something of an exception to the type. Gillis was a self-assured, cocky wheeler-dealer who is continually explaining the ways of the world to Chester, often incorrectly. He once convinced Chester mistakenly that the company was planning to fire him, so that Chester considered quitting before he was fired. But Gillis' cockiness made him less attractive than the generous and well intentioned Chester. He was not bumbling, but not lovable either.

Chester's wife, Peg and the children all showed more sense than Chester. Peg was tolerant of Chester's fiascos and helped him—sometimes enlisting the children, teenager Babs and adolescent Junior, in the effort as well—to save face. The children were Chester's intellectual superiors. While Chester tripped over the English language, Junior headed for college. *I Remember Mama* was one of the few working-class series in which a working-class family was taken seriously. It was a sentimental reminiscence of family life in the 1910s. No one was the butt of humor. Yet Lars the father in this Norwegian immigrant family was an "earnest bumbler" in the words of the show's scriptwriter [Time, 1951]. Lars tried to discipline the children but frequently Mama had to conspire to help him save face. The children went to Mama for advice.

The only working-class domestic situation comedy of the 1960s, *The Flintstones* was a cartoon version of *The Life of Riley* and *The Honeymooners*. The anger and money problems of *The Honeymooners* were absent, but Fred Flintstone's loudmouth brashness is reminiscent of Ralph Kramden. Like Ralph, Fred was the leader and his friend, Barney the sidekick, although Barney was not as dumb as Ed Norton and more cautious. Fred's wife, Wilma exhibited much of the motherly tolerance of Fred's shenanigans as Peg did of Chester Riley's. When Fred persuaded Barney to play hookey from work to attend a ball game, Wilma and Barney's wife Betty caught them and for their punishment the "boys" had to take the wives to the opera. Typically Wilma was aware of Fred's surreptitious schemes from the beginning and provided both a safety net for him when he failed as well as a punishment, much as a mother would for a child. *The Flintstones* carried the inversion of adult and child status to an extreme.

### **The 1970s**

When *The Flintstones* left the air in 1966 no working-class family series appeared until *All in the Family* in January 1971. In the 1970s, Norman Lear and MTM Productions began to modify situation comedy [Feuer, 1987; Taylor, 1989], but nevertheless retained the essential qualities of these portrayals. Characters were less one-dimensional than during the 1950s and more mediating themes appeared. Norman Lear, who produced *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, and *Good Times*, introduced real life problems such as money, racism and abortion that were non-existent in 1950s shows.

But the gender inversion of working-class males persisted. Archie of *All in the Family* and Fred Sanford of *Sanford and Son* were reminiscent of Ralph Kramden and Chester Riley; James of *Good Times* was more like Lars of *I Remember Mama*. In *All in the Family* producer Norman Lear intentionally created a character whose prejudices would be revealed as illogical and senseless. By making Archie a ridiculous figure, Lear hoped that viewers would see how stupid their own prejudices were and change their attitudes. Archie's malapropisms made him the butt of humor, just as Chester Riley's did in the 1950s. Archie also engaged in hair-brained schemes like Ralph Kramden's and Chester Riley's. Archie too was a well-intentioned, loving husband and father who simply was too inept to succeed.

Edith was not as evidently superior to Archie as the earlier wives were. She was much more hesitant in her criticism of Archie, and she only occasionally stood up to him. But she tried in her timid way to advise him against his hair-brained schemes. The foil for Archie was Mike, his son-in-law. Mike,



while from a working-class Polish family clearly represented the middle class. He went to college and became a college instructor. Middle-class taste and values were embodied in him. He was the college liberal to Archie's silent majority; the high-brow to Archie's low-brow. In one episode Archie changed the television channel from a Beethoven concert which Mike was watching to midget wrestling. Mike's response was "You want to watch midgets? [...] What am I doing? I'm arguing culture with a man who buys a wallet and keeps the picture of Fay Wray in it." Mike was the spokesperson for the values Lear hoped to promote.

*Sanford and Son* was a black version of *All in the Family*. Widower Fred Sanford was as bigoted and ignorant as Archie. His foil was his son, Lamont. Like Mike of *All in the Family*, Lamont was oriented to improvement and middle-class manners. He was continually embarrassed by his father's blatant violations of middle-class decorum. *Good Times* was a black version of *I Remember Mama*. Like Mama, the mother Florida was the mainstay of the family. The father James was often unemployed and hot-tempered as well. James, like Lars of *I Remember Mama*, was not a buffoon but nevertheless unable to fulfill his role as breadwinner and father-figure which the children could look up to.

The role of fool fell to teenage J. J., the oldest son. J. J. was the one with endless get-rich-quick schemes. However, two things distinguished him from the working-class men. He was not a man but a teenager, and he was not a failure. He succeeded as a painter and was popular with girls. His success in fact contrasted to his father's inadequacies. Rather than a fool, he was an irreverent jokester; his irreverence became an attraction to some viewers in the 1970s. The other children, Thelma and Michael were model children headed out of poverty into the middle class. Thelma attended college and hoped to become a doctor. She broke off an engagement with an auto mechanic with whom she had little in common; the high brow entertainment she liked, he found boring. Michael was very bright and talked about as a future president.

### **The 1980s**

In the 1980s there was more variation in themes and character, yet the character types still persisted. While *Roseanne* modified the image, *The Simpsons* was an 1980s recreation of *The Flintstones* that continued to represent the working class through the 1990s, and *Married with Children* was a ruder version of *The Honeymooners*. Homer, the father in *The Simpsons*, barely brings home the bacon. The children's "college fund" has only \$88.50 in it. They can't afford a new TV until Homer receives double his money back for guaranteed family

therapy that fails to work for them. He causes a nuclear accident while waving to his son touring the nuclear power plant where he works. When he succeeds it is mostly in spite of himself.

*The Simpsons* repeats the tradition's negative contrasts between father and mother, father and children. Marge, the wife, reminiscent of Edith Bunker, is somewhat more levelheaded than Homer. The kids are embarrassingly smarter than their father. Second-grader Lisa betters her dad at Scrabble; Bart consistently beats him in a boxing video game. Both better him in arguments, with him resorting to shouting at the kids. *Married with Children* portrays a family of uniformly unlikable people. The show is a spoof of the typical TV family, excising the familial warmth that typified the middle-class series. The contrast is not between family members, but to the wholesomeness of other TV families. Gender is not inverted. Instead class is used directly, spoofing the affluent and successful middle class with a low income failure. The father Al Bundy, a shoe salesman, is dumb, but not lovable as in the traditional working-class type. The show is an endless stream of put-downs: Al's wife, Peg regularly complains of his lack of money and sexual inadequacy. Peg's friend describes him as having no skills and no brain. In one episode Al says life did not pass him by but sat on his head. Peg and her daughter Kelly are also depicted as dumb. Peg can't remember what channel her favorite TV show is on. Kelly does not know what it means when the neighbor calls her a simpleton. The son, Bud is the only one with any intelligence and he's an oversexed adolescent.

*Family Matters* features a black policeman as father, who typically bungles his efforts. He gets lost taking a shortcut, then gives the wrong directions to rescuers; he says all the wrong things when he tries to impress his boss. But he's not quite a buffoon and the children are respectful of him. In advising and discipline the parents are a team. Yet consistent with the tradition of working-class wives, Harriet the wife is the more sensible person in the family. An exception to the working-class character type is the father, Dan Conners of *Roseanne*, who is not merely well meaning and loving but also sensible. His children respect him. In one episode Dan is the voice of wisdom when he advises Roseanne not to engage in a power struggle with teenage Becky. Whereas Lisa and Bart Simpson are disappointed in Homer, the Conners' children listen with rapt attention to their parents' stories of the 1960s and are taken in by pranks the parents pull. Dan and Roseanne are content with their working-class manners. They could use more money, but they're not conflicted about behaving "properly" and don't aspire to cultural upward mobility.

### **The 1990s**

More working-class series appeared in the 1990s than in any other decade. Of 53 new domestic sitcoms from 1990 to 1999, 16 featured working-class families. Other shows for which the occupation is not blue collar or is not specified are set in working-class locales. The occupation of Hank of *King of the Hill* (1998) is unspecified, but the setting suggest a blue collar suburb. *The Tor-kelsons* appears working-class from the occupation of the single mother as a nanny, but the setting is not clear from descriptions. Eleven series featured black families, indicating another trend toward more representation of subordinate groups. None however achieved the classic level of *The Flintstones* or *Archie Bunker*. Even though relatively recent, their names are not memorable: *Dinosaurs*, *Roc*, *Thea*, *Joe's Life*, *Bless This House*, *That's Life*, *King of Queens*, *Costello*, *Jesse*. *Grace Under Fire* is the only one that lasted long enough to be classified as a hit.

Yet the working-class stereotypes persisted. The *Dinosaurs's* father is a Jurassic Archie Bunker. In *Joe's Life* the father is unemployed and takes care of the kids while the mom supports the family. The 1998 series, *King of Queens*, was called a Ralph Kramden remake, with a wife that was a little too bright. *Bless This House* (1995) featured a macho postal worker and feisty wife and also was described as *The Honeymooners* with kids. In 1991 *Roc* featured a not too bright black garbageman with a stereotypic macho attitude and a more educated nurse as wife. In *Grace Under Fire* (1993) the father was an unreliable drunken "good for nothing" who abandoned the family. In the new *Cosby* show (1996), the husband is an unemployed airport worker while his wife co-owns a flower shop and his daughter is a lawyer. *Costello* (1998) was criticized for its crude stereotypes of working-class men. Strong, working wives and mothers ran their families and in some shows, overshadowed their husbands. *Jesse*, *Thea* and *Grace*, among others, were single mothers who exhibited strength and good character that put their men to shame. Many 1990s shows featured dysfunctional families, but the more serious dysfunctions were blue collar. Alcoholism, spouse abuse, child abandonment or put up for adoption appeared in working-class shows like *Grace*. Divorce and quirky personalities were more typical of middle-class shows [James, 1995].

So, while there were more shows featuring working-class people in the 1990s, the men continued to be stereotyped as not too bright, immature, and contrasted to their more capable and responsible wives or adult female relatives. With few exceptions the working-class male leads were failures in their masculine role. They were portrayed with traits stereotypically applied to women or children. They were in other words de-masculinized. Undercutting their status as men in turn confirmed their lower status as working-class, and

resolved the contradictory statuses of adult white male on the one hand and working-class on the other. *Plus a change, plus c'est la même chose.*

***Middle-class: from superdad to several-dad types***

The image of the working class contrasts sharply to television's middle-class families. There have been over thirty middle-class series which survived five or more seasons on prime time. There has been more variation of formula among these series than among the working-class series. However the majority reversed the pattern of working-class series. Middle-class fathers were rarely portrayed as buffoons. By characterizing them successfully fulfilling their roles as fathers and husbands gender confirmed class status. Status hierarchies remained intact. When a middle-class series rarely used the fool as a source of humor, it was usually the wife; the husband was the mature, sensible one. In most cases the middle-class fool of a wife did not get involved in crazy schemes, but simply was there to offer punch lines indicating how dumb and lacking in common sense she was.

But in many middle-class series the parents were a superb team. Both were intelligent, sensible and mature. They, especially the father, were calm and affable, in stark contrast to the hysteria which typified the slapstick comedy of the working-class series. In these series the situation was typically a problem involving one of the children. The parents, seldom perplexed, guide the child through a solution, providing a moral lesson along the way. The parents were calm and rational in the face of all problems. Childishness was confined to children. In the 1950s and 1960s the parents were invariably right and reasonable, almost serene as they watched amused with their children's antics and struggles. Like gods they descend to help. Through the 1970s and 1980s the parents became increasingly fallible, making mistakes, getting upset—but not to the hysterical degree of the working-class series. They allow their children to speak to them much more as equals than those in the earlier series. Yet they remain unflappable and ultimately retain their roles as guides and models to their children. They co-opt the high ground by admitting their mistakes and summarizing the moral lesson for their children, and the audience.

***The 1950s***

While the classic working-class buffoon was being aired in the 1950s the middle class was represented by such successful series as *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, *The Stu Erwin Show*, *I Love Lucy*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *The Danny Thomas Show*, *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver* and

*December Bride*. *Father Knows Best* is of course the archetype of its title, the completely self-assured and successful father, admired by his wife and children, the ideal of 1950s middle-class masculinity. Father Jim Anderson was always calm, reasonable, and ready with the answers. When the children forgot his birthday, his wife Margaret got upset. Jim, unfazed, admonished her for getting angry. This calm, rational unemotional approach in which the parent has all the answers is typical of these super-parents series.

The parents in *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *The Danny Thomas Show* and *Leave it to Beaver* were similarly in charge. Ozzie Nelson, who wrote the scripts for *Ozzie and Harriet*, expressed his own concepts of family and childrearing in the show, portraying himself and Harriet as relaxed, but also making clear the morality that was expected [Joslyn & Pendleton, 1973]. Episodes depicted the boys learning, with their parents' guidance, to be respectful and considerate of others. The alternate title to *The Danny Thomas Show*, *Make Room for Daddy*, made clear who was important in this family. In *Leave it to Beaver*, the parents, while sometimes surprised by their little boy, had things well in hand.

*I Love Lucy*—and her various reincarnations, *Here's Lucy*, etc.—was the singular example of the woman as buffoon, with the husband as the mature, sensible and patient one. Lucy reversed the gender roles of *Riley* and *The Honeymooners*. Gracie Allen of *The Burns and Allen Show* was the prototype of the dizzy blonde, interjecting inane statements in her husband, George's conversation. In *December Bride* the mother-in-law played the scatterbrain. One of the rare exceptions to the rule, *The Stu Erwin Show* was a middle-class version of the bumbling father, a high school principal who couldn't do anything right at home. The show at one point was titled *Trouble with Father*. So, while the fool was a common character in these 1950s middle-class series, it usually was a woman.

### **The 1960s**

In the working-class vacuum of the 1960s the middle class reigned with *The Donna Reed Show*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Petticoat Junction*, *Bewitched*, *Green Acres*, *My Three Sons* and *Family Affair*. *The Donna Reed Show*, *My Three Sons* and *Family Affair* were classic super-parent series. In each the parents were calm and rational. Donna Reed was the 1960s equivalent to the super-parents on *Father Knows Best*. It was nicknamed "Mother Knows Best," but the father, a pediatrician, was not ineffectual; he merely let his wife take primary care of the children. The same traditional division of labor was a continuing theme in *My Three Sons*, the difficulty an all male household had with domestic matters.

Steve, the widowed father, an engineer, however clearly is more than an adequate in helping his sons grow up, despite minor mishaps at home. His success as a man is further attested by a continual stream of women attracted to him while he is engrossed in his fatherly role. *Family Affair* revived the *Bachelor Father* formula, a prosperous bachelor who inherits children and becomes a devoted father. *The Dick Van Dyke Show* had no children, but it too reinforced traditional gender roles; the wife Laura typically asked the questions or posed the problem and husband Dick provided the answer.

*Petticoat Junction* and *Green Acres* were part of a rural nostalgia period of 1960s television. Both were set in the same rural town and shared characters. *Petticoat Junction* featured three teen-age daughters in feminine petticoats. *Green Acres* featured a stereotypic “dumb blonde” wife, ala Gracie Allen, opposite a successful husband who gave up his Manhattan law practice life to be a gentleman farmer. In *Bewitched*, Samantha, the wife was a competent witch often tempted to use her powers to get her way or help her husband’s career, but wanted to abandon witchcraft to please her husband, Darrin. Darrin was sometimes befuddled by the supernatural shenanigans, but depicted as a competent advertising executive.

### **The 1970s**

When Archie Bunker and Fred Sanford expounded their wisdom for the 1970s the spokespersons for the middle class were *The Brady Bunch*, *Happy Days*, *The Jeffersons*, *The Bob Newhart Show*, *Maude* and *One Day at a Time*. All but *One Day at a Time*—a single mother with two teen-age girls who doesn’t have all the answers—feature a husband. This was the one period when the proportions of domestic situation comedies featuring professional heads of house significantly dropped. The changed nature of situation comedy also is evident in these series, which exhibit a new irreverence toward professionals. *Happy Days* and *The Brady Bunch* followed tradition, but others diverged. *The Bob Newhart Show* featured a psychologist who hesitated, had self-doubts, and often was caught in his own words. His office mate, a dentist was a schemer; and his neighbor, Howard a divorced airplane pilot and a buffoon. *Maude* was an outspoken feminist woman whose demands continually exasperated her husband Walter. While Walter was a match for Maude, his friend Arthur, an MD was a bit of a buffoon. George Jefferson, the husband in *The Jeffersons* who owned a dry cleaning chain, had features of the classic working-class buffoon, loud mouth, endless schemes, although he was not portrayed as dumb—or lovable. His attitude is “explained” by the show in terms of his “background.” He was only recently affluent and thus had not acquired the manners of the

middle class. Not coincidentally he was black. In none of these series that deviated from the calm, competent middle-class man, however were there any young children to witness their limitations, as there were in several working-class series.

*The Brady Bunch* maintained the super-parent tradition of *Father Knows Best*. The parents, Mike and Carol had the answers to all of their children's questions. When vacationing at the Grand Canyon they explained the canyon and the traditions of the local Hopi tribe as if they were trained guides. They consistently approached problems calmly and rationally, even in an episode in which one of the children is lost. In another episode where the other children vote to exclude Peter, the middle boy from a singing group in hopes of a recording contract, mom calmly reasons why people are more important than money. In *Happy Days* the father, Howard Cunningham, was the reasonable and sensible father, while the mother, Marion, added a touch of the dizzy woman as contrast. Fonzie, a working-class rebel whom the kids admired and women found irresistible, typically supported the father's moral authority.

### **The 1980s**

The successful middle-class series of the 1980s represent a minor revival of the super-parent tradition: *Benson*, *Gimme a Break*, *Newhart*, *Family Ties*, *Kate & Allie*, *Who's the Boss*, *The Hogan Family*, *Cosby Show*, *Growing Pains*, *Wonder Years*, and *Empty Nest*. The classic middle-class father appears in *Cosby*, *Hogan*, *Family Ties*, *Growing Pains*. *The Cosby Show* is a throwback to the 1950s; while Heathcliff Huxtable jokes around with his children he also makes it clear who's the boss. *Growing Pains*, *Family Ties* and to a lesser degree, *The Hogan Family* feature more fallible parents. In one episode of *Growing Pains* the parents insist that their daughter plead guilty to a charge of resisting arrest to avoid a trial. The daughter says that's not honest and refuses. The judge respects her and let's her off. The parents however regain the high ground by approving her behavior and summarizing the lesson.

The operating theme of *Who's the Boss* is the gender reversal between Angela, the mother as the boss and Tony as the housekeeper. But, as the title suggests, Angela, the head of the house, is inadequate as the boss. Here we have a double message. Tony, portrayed as ethnic blue collar in origin, is a wiser parent and better housekeeper than the middle-class advertising executive, Angela. This class reversal however is veiled by a simultaneous gender reversal. Angela is a failure as housewife, while Tony succeeds. Even Harry of *Empty Nest*, who becomes flustered dealing with his own personal problems, still provides sound advice to his grown daughters.

While these fathers exhibit foibles and flaws absent in Jim Anderson, they are nonetheless fathers who know best. They dispense words of wisdom to help the children through the dilemmas of growing up. Other series diverge from tradition. The father in *Wonder Years*, Jack, whose occupation is unidentified but who wears a suit, tie and briefcase to work, is singularly uninvolved in his family. He's not a buffoon and he's not de-masculinized. He simply is tuned out; his advice to the kids is "do what your mother said." *Gimme a Break* and *Benson* present middle-class fathers who are bettered at parenting by their black servants. *Gimme a Break's* widower is a competent police captain but ineffective father; his black maid bails him out when he gets himself into a domestic jam. *Benson*, who began as a black butler, regularly rescues his boss who is a buffoon as governor and father. *Benson* was successively promoted to budget director, lieutenant governor and in the last episode was a candidate for governor.

### **The 1990s**

Unlike working-class characters of the 1990s who continued to be true to stereotype, middle-class series came in all forms and sizes. One show featured a fired soap opera actor ex-husband, another a con-artist who moves in with his successful lawyer sister, another a hyper party planner on her third husband, and another a suspended pro athlete moves in with his professor brother. There were four black middle-class families and one mixed race couple.

But there continued to be plenty of warm and fuzzy middle-class families, including shows with off-beat parents. *Harts of the Wests*, *Something Wilder*, *Tony Danza Show*, *Gregory Hines Show* featured wholesome families. *The American Dreamer* was a single father who gives up the big time as TV correspondent to move to a small town and quiet life to raise his kids. *7th Heaven* was a *Father Knows Best* revival. *Something So Right* was called the *Brady Bunch* with taboos; and *Cleghorne* was called a dysfunctional *Family Ties*; and *Parent-hood* was likened to *Thirtysomething*. Some may have been quirky, sassy and a bit dysfunctional, but these families were still warm and comforting inside, with competent parents.

The biggest hits of the 1990s were all middle-class series, *Home Improvement*, *Mad About You*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. The men in these are not fathers who know best, but nor are they buffoons like those of working-class series. Tim of *Home Improvement* is star of his own successful TV show. At home, unlike the *Brady Bunch*, the focus is on the antics of the father rather than the children. But his antics involve his asserting his own independence and macho masculinity, rather than making a fool of himself. *Mad About You*



is about the little annoyances and knots of relationships. It has been described as *Seinfeld* for young marrieds. Both partners are professionals with promising careers; both work together to sort out their differences; both are mature and intelligent adults. *Everybody Loves Raymond* is a little closer to the working-class form: Raymond's brother is a policeman, jealous of Raymond and his parents' exhibit some of the manners of a stereotypic ethnic New Yorker. Raymond is a sportswriter, but clueless in dealing with his wife and helpless in confronting the interference of his parents. He is perennially perplexed about relationships. Yet clueless is not buffoon, and Raymond is professionally successful and is not bested by his children, as in many working-class series. So, while the 1990s has continued the trend to show middle-class people as imperfect and show a wide variety of types, the variety itself avoided the stereotyping in working-class series.

### **Conclusion**

While there have been variations and exceptions across five and half decades of television the stock character of the ineffectual, even buffoonish working-class man has persisted as the dominant image. In the prime-time tapestry he is contrasted to consistently competent working-class wives and children and middle-class fathers, a composite image in which working-class men are demasculinized and their gender status is inverted. The persistence of the working-class male stereotype is contrasted to the changes in depictions of middle-class families. While they too were stereotypically perfect in the 1950s and 1960s, from the 1970s on the depictions of middle-class progressively broadened to include a wide range of character types and situations, supplanting any stereotypic imagery with variety.

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