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**AMERICAN FAMILY TV SITCOMS
THE EARLY YEARS TO THE PRESENT
Fathers, Mothers, and Children—Shifting Focus and Authority**

In approaching domestic sitcoms, we might usefully employ the chiasmus raised by Clifford Geertz in his essay, “Culture, Mind, Brain/Brain, Mind, Culture” wherein he presents the double consideration of “the mental nature of culture, the cultural nature of mind” [204]. Applying this mirror image viewpoint to television, we may consider the degree of cultural influence upon television and conversely, the influence of television in shaping culture. The shifting roles of family members within American society and the ways in which those roles are depicted on television provides one area for exploring this concept.

In first thoughts on this topic, we might ponder the father figure of the 1950s and 1960s as the somewhat stern and almost infallible Ward Cleaver, flanked by the somewhat gentler demeanors of Jim Anderson of *Father Knows Best* or Andy Griffith of *The Andy Griffith Show*, but father figures no less forceful in their assurance about the right way to handle the events faced by their families. The fathers’ roles in *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* give fathers the primary voice in the household. June Cleaver may gently ask Ward whether he was a little strict with Beaver in a previous scene, but she rarely makes the initial suggestion about how to handle any particular situation with the boys. Bob Anderson puts on a comfortable sweater each evening and listens to the adventures of his family, a family that has been waiting for him to arrive and comment on the family members’ school and social activities. Both of these sitcoms often employ the famous line, “Wait until your father gets home,” when decisions or punishments are pending.

This view of the father as the wise and knowledgeable authority in the household dissolves in the 1970s with the proliferation of Norman Lear comedies. Archie Bunker’s arrogant self-assurance of infallibility is undercut by the

knowledge the audience has of him through his actions. Archie, far removed from the wise and knowing fathers of the 1950s and 1960s, displays his lack of wisdom and his low level of education by mangling common words and by spouting bigoted remarks. Unlike the cultured fathers of the earlier decades, Archie represents blue collar rather than white-collar workers. The supposedly “perfect” family of the sitcoms following the upsurge of television sets in America during the 1950s and 1960s was being replaced by the colorful language and outrageousness of another type of “typical” family.

In the mid-1970s, Michael Novak noted in his essay, “Television Shapes the Soul,” that television both “affects our way of perceiving and approaching reality” and “inflicts a class bias on the world of our perceptions—the bias of a relatively small and special social class” (9). This shift from a world constituted of fathers who spoke standard English and held white collar jobs takes place during the maturation of a first generation of television watchers who, like writer Gary Soto, watched a world which appeared, for some, to be apart from their reality. In Soto’s autobiographical work *Living Up the Street*, he describes how he believed he might be able to enter the world of *Ozzie and Harriet* or *The Donna Reed Show* if he could convince his brother and sister to dress for dinner or at least wear shoes to the table for the evening meal (*Living* 29-31). He explains how as a sweaty, dirty, poor kid, he watched a man at the park who reminded him of the television fathers he had seen. Soto states,

I took it all in: His polished shoes, creased pants, the shirt, and his watch that glinted as he turned the page of his newspaper. I had seen fathers like him before on *The Donna Reed Show* or *Father Knows Best*, and I was pleased that he was here at our playground because I felt that we were being trusted, that nearby, just beyond our block, the rich people lived and were welcoming. [13]

Soto’s reality at home was a very different one from the one he saw pictured on the television screen. Instead, he came home to this scene:

After Father died, after two years and many months, my mother remarried. The man who showed up with boxes of clothes sat in our only good chair, drank and looked at a television screen with a flickering line through its middle. He never laughed at Jackie Gleason’s bug-eyed jokes, Red Skelton’s hobo walk or Lucille Ball’s bosom bulging a hundred chicken eggs. He just looked, crushed beer cans, and moved the box fan in his direction. [Summer 104-105]

Soto’s viewing of families unlike his own led to feelings of bitterness and exclusion. Television, and the genre of domestic sitcoms, in a sense grew up with the first generation of childhood viewers, not to depict scenes so grim as Soto recalls from his childhood, but certainly to the realization that not all fathers sell insurance or hold professional jobs.

However, even in the 1950s and 1960s, not all fathers were presented as necessarily infallible or even as the most dominant figure in the household. Certainly Lucille Ball did not allow Desi Arnaz to upstage her as the focus of *I Love Lucy*, and in the family-of-four sitcom *The Donna Reed Show*, Donna Reed came through as a problem-solving, self-assured woman in the role of Donna Stone, the wife of a pediatrician. Ozzie Nelson, unlike Ward Cleaver and Jim Anderson, was as likely to listen to bad advice from his best friend as to give good advice of his own.

Early television images of the father in control, suggesting a moral highroad, fairness, and healthy attitudes toward the obstacles encountered in one's daily life are eventually supplanted by fathers such as Archie Bunker and George Jefferson who unabashedly reveal their desires in politically incorrect terms, flaunting their arrogance and ignorance. Wives referred to as Dingbat and Weezie are not treated with the courtesy and respect June Cleaver, Donna Reed, Harriet Nelson, and Margaret Anderson could expect. Occasionally we may see Ward joking with June in a manner designed to establish his superiority in verbal play, but this is mostly in the spirit of gentle teasing and expected banter between spouses, although feminists of a later decade might have objected to his slightly superior tone of voice and the implication, only mildly protested by June at best, that a woman's place was to defer to the man of the house. Nevertheless, June Cleaver would never have been given a demeaning nickname by her husband.

As outward respect toward the wife appeared to weaken in the Norman Lear comedies of the 1970s, audiences clearly recognized the goodness and strength of Edith Bunker and Louise Jefferson. Later programs such as *The Cosby Show* give us two strong parents, but a father who is definitely interested in keeping his wife happy. For example, in one episode, Cliff Huxtable is upset when his five- or six-year-old daughter Rudy tricks him into agreeing with her and going against her mother's wishes concerning what she is to wear. After Rudy wears the out-of-season summer dress on a winter day, Claire Huxtable firmly announces to her daughter, "Go change your dress, and you must not ever defy me again." Rudy later asks her father if he likes the dress she likes best, but he laughs and tells her that she can't trick him into going against her mother's wishes because he doesn't want to get into trouble. Good father that he is, he does promise to help Rudy pick out a stunning winter outfit to wear to a birthday party.

The Cosby Show recognizes professionally successful African American families without the struggle of upwardly mobile scrambling such as George Jefferson's. Cliff Huxtable is a physician and his wife an attorney. He is a funny, gentle, wise father reminiscent of the fathers in the 1950s and 1960s sit-

coms, but with more humor directed as much toward himself as toward his family of four children or his wife.

With the self-deprecation of the father and his respect, bordering on fear, of the mother, indicated in *The Cosby Show*, sitcoms move even further in such a direction with *Everybody Loves Raymond*. In describing his character on a talk show, Ray Romano explains that Raymond is just “a kind of goofy guy”. We see an illustration of what he means in an episode where he agrees to help out around the house by going to the grocery store. His wife, mother, father, and brother all inform him that he does not know how to buy the right kind of tissues, with each family member complaining about a different aspect of the bargain brand Raymond has acquired in quantity. While lovable as well as goofy, Raymond is not the dependable, wise father of *Leave It to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*. Although Ward Cleaver may gently tease June about differences between men and women, Raymond upsets Deborah by openly making fun of her cooking at work. When Deborah finds out, she is angry and hurt, and she confronts him. He is fearful of her reaction and does apologize, but in private, he really doesn’t see why he can’t have fun with his friends at her expense as long as he doesn’t get caught.

The tendency for the father of the sitcoms from the 1990s to 2002, to be somewhat fearfully respectful of the wife also appears in *Malcolm in the Middle*. In one episode, the parents have promised Dewey, the youngest brother, a puppy if he succeeds in keeping a goldfish alive. Following their horror that he actually is keeping the fish alive, the mother gives the dad an order that he must do something about the fish. The dad feels he must try to obey that order, but finds he is not really up to the task of destroying the fish by flushing, vacuuming, or poisoning. He is afraid to tell the mom he did not succeed, but when he does, the parents mutually agree to switch the live fish for a dead one. While admitting that they don’t like being so devious, they nevertheless try to trick their son.

This kind of solution to a family problem would not have appeared in *Leave It to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, or *The Andy Griffith Show* (unless a non-family member of sometimes questionable judgment such as Eddie Haskell or Barney Fife instigated it). In *Malcolm in the Middle*, both parents work together to come up with a way to avoid buying a puppy, both dislike their method, but agree to work together even if such a drastic measure is their best solution. Yet in the same episode, we see that these parents have nevertheless taught their children some higher values. The older son, Reese, refuses to steal money from the fast food store where he works, even though the manager encourages him to do so. We later discover the manager intended to frame Reese for theft.

Ward and June also work through dilemmas together, but in *Malcolm in the Middle*, generally if there is someone in charge of the working through, the mom makes that call, whereas Ward is more likely to do so in *Leave It to Beaver*. However, in one episode with Andy, the alcoholic, Ward wants to give the man a chance to work and prove he is sober, but June is quite vocal about having such an influence around the boys. Euphemisms and veiled comments create a greater problem when Andy asks Beaver to find some brandy for him. Beaver later explains to his parents that their hiding the problem kept him from knowing how to handle it. (Of course, Beaver's language is more in the nature of "Gee Dad, with so many you-know-whats and everything being so secret, how could I know what was going on?") Ward is the parent who discusses this with Beaver, and in this instance, agrees that Beaver would have managed the situation better if he had understood more about the nature of alcoholism.

Although in *Malcolm in the Middle* and *Leave It to Beaver*, the parents sometimes work together to address family issues, the more dominant partner in the 1960s sitcom is most often the father while the contemporary programs tend to shift that power toward the mother. Contemporary father characters, such as *Home Improvement's* Tim Allen, *The Simpsons'* Homer Simpson, and *Yes, Dear's* Greg Warner, lean toward the Ozzie Nelson prototype, a lovable fellow, but not necessarily always coming up with the best solution. Contemporary mothers have traded June Cleaver's and Donna Reed's pearls and frilly aprons for jeans and sweaters or suitable business attire and moved toward further voicing of their opinions as Donna Reed suggested women might do.

Clear examples of these stronger, or at any rate, less submissive, roles for women are described in episodes from *Malcolm in the Middle* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. One of the early episodes of *Malcolm in the Middle* depicts the harried mom answering the door to the school counselor without bothering to put on a blouse. At the woman's shocked look, the mom realizes her oversight, but reacts with sharp words instead of embarrassment or apology, stating, "They're just boobs, Lady. You see 'em every morning when you look in the mirror." An episode may begin with Mom yelling and complaining as she throws something on the breakfast table. In *Leave It to Beaver*, Wally often wants to know whether the dad, or maybe mom and dad, will yell at the kids, and while Ward comes close to yelling, June never raises her voice.

A 2002 episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond* provides another example of the take-charge mother. Raymond, given the chore of helping sell Girl Scout cookies with his daughter, develops a rivalry with the troop leader and ends up in a physical scuffle with her, resulting in her pinning him to the sidewalk.

Deborah arrives on the scene and rescues him, yelling at the troop leader and letting her know that she will have to hurt her if she ever hits her husband again. This is hardly a scene to be played by Harriet Nelson, June Cleaver, Margaret Anderson, or even the more self-assured Donna Reed.

A discussion of forceful women should, of course, include Roseanne, whose brash attitudes are at least a match for the fairly self-confident husband, Dan. But while depicting an outrageous, outspoken woman whom one sitcom website gives credit for making the term “sucks” part of our children’s everyday language, the writers for *Roseanne* also present a couple who show genuine physical affection, with hand-holding and occasional kisses and discussions of what might occur in the bedroom. Similarly, *The Simpsons* often ends with an affectionate kiss between Marge and Homer even if there have been instances of the couple’s having been disgruntled with each other. In the episode in which Marge succeeds in banning sugar from Springfield, Homer’s despair is turned to admiration for his wife’s efforts (after the sugar ban has been lifted, of course), but he voices admiration for his wife nevertheless. While the family comedies of the 1950s and 1960s certainly show us parents who have strong bonds, little physical contact or physical affection appears on screen. An actual married couple, Ozzie and Harriet Nelson are an exception, seen holding hands in publicity photos, and insisting in their contract that the network allow them to have a double bed, the only couple’s shared sleeping arrangements until *The Brady Bunch* appeared in 1969.

Not only have the roles of fathers and mothers shifted in sitcoms of the last fifty years, but the place that children have occupied in the early sitcoms is more prominent than in some of the contemporary programming. In *Leave it to Beaver*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Father Knows Best*, children and their activities are the focal points for the storylines. However, with *All in the Family* and *The Jeffersons*, the children are grown. In *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Yes, Dear*, there are children and the children sometimes come into the storylines, but these children are almost invisible, appearing much less often on screen than the adults. In the case of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, the interaction is mostly with Raymond’s parents and brother, even in an episode where Ray’s father is very concerned about his granddaughter’s having overheard an argument he had with a grocery store employee. The daughter does appear in a brief scene with her grandfather, but her onscreen time does not match the amount of time devoted to her in the plot line. In *Yes, Dear*, the two couples who live in close proximity take most of the on-screen time even when a particular plot focuses one of the children. In one episode, a discussion ensues among the adults about the value of all children at a school activity fair receiving ribbons, whether or not they win their events. The child’s

appearance is close to a cameo although what he has experienced at school and its effect upon him is the core of the plot. In an early episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Ray Romano explains that while the couple has kids, the show isn't about the kids. Apparently *Yes, Dear*—a program with the premise of interaction between two young married couples with children—is not actually about the children either.

Shifts in the roles of fathers, mothers, and the changing emphasis on children in television programming reflect changing demographics. In Reynolds Farley's *The New American Reality: Who We Are, How We Got Here, Where We Are Going*, we are presented with a sociologist's view of the shift from nonworking to working mothers, the recognition of minorities through civil rights work, delaying of marriage and childbirth, and more single-parent families. Women's more outspoken and dominant roles in television sitcoms can be traced in the changing roles of women in the workplace and the home. More sitcoms with African American families from *Good Times* and *Sanford and Son* to *The Cosby Show*, *Sister, Sister*, *The Hughleys* and *My Wife and Kids* indicate some movement toward the inclusion of minorities. These programs have recently been joined by *George Lopez*, introducing further diversity and acknowledgement of ethnic groups.

However, the family sitcom rarely shows the changing demographics on single parent homes. Earlier shows such as *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* bowed to the single parent home when a parent had been widowed, and *One Day at a Time* was an attempt to give the single divorced mom her due, but intact families are still the norm for family sitcoms, whether with live actors or animated characters or even in parodies of families such as *Married with Children*, the edginess of *Malcolm in the Middle*, or reality television with *The Osbournes*.

In conjunction with this trend to retain the intact family in spite of changing national demographics, the storylines are often not so different in sitcoms decades apart. Parents still care about teaching their children to be honest, kind, caring, careful with substances such as tobacco and alcohol. In one *Leave It to Beaver* episode, June is extremely concerned that Wally is seriously dating a girl whose older sister is married. June fears that seeing a young married couple will encourage Wally to marry too soon. However, as he realizes how difficult it is to succeed in a young marriage, the contact actually discourages any such action on his part. In *Malcolm in the Middle*, Mom creates a scene when she learns of Malcolm's junior high romance. She fears for her genius child's grades. While the grades do slip for a few days, the romance is short-lived, and life goes on. The mother's fears in each of these very different sitcoms are after all very similar. While *Leave It to Beaver* would never

have had an episode begin with the parents in the bathroom together, the mom lounging in the bathtub and the dad shaving his chest before doing an exuberant little dance in celebration of his belly button, as one episode of *Malcolm in the Middle* began, both programs present episodes in which values connected with childrearing are recognizable and familiar.

In July and October 2002, *The New York Times* ran articles noting the resurgence of the family sitcom with the speculation that uncertain economic and political factors cause Americans to turn to the comfort of family humor (Carter; Stanley). The 1950s and 1960s would never have given us a discussion of the father's considering a vasectomy or the grandmother's inadvertently creating a sculpture that resembled female genitals as in episodes of the *Everybody Loves Raymond* 2002 season, but the basic hopes and dreams of Americans as depicted in sitcoms of previous decades still remain relatively unchanged in the continued presentation of intact television families and those families' concerns with the conveying of traditional values.

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