THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN TELEVISION SITUATION COMEDIES: A PILOT STUDY

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Abstract

This work constitutes a pilot study of male/female relationships in television situational comedies. Twenty-five sitcom episodes which aired on major television networks between the years 2000-2011 were evaluated for instances of the perpetuation of patriarchy and the stereotyping of traditional gender roles. The episodes were chosen from three different television shows. The findings indicated that television sitcoms are perpetuating patriarchy and promoting traditional gender role stereotypes; furthermore, the shows do not appear to portray an accurate depiction of real life society. The study has limitations including time constraints, but provides a baseline for further studies on the subject.
We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITION OF TERMS USED

Importance of the Study

Interpersonal communication between men and women has been studied from different perspectives in the arenas of home, business and television. “Every race, culture, civilization, and society on this planet shares two things in common: the presence of both men and women, and the need to communicate between the two” (Vynke, 2006).

We see communication struggles between men and women on television daily. Though there have been many changes in gender roles in the last 50 years, “[c]ultivation studies of gender and family roles continue to show that television contributes to traditional images and aspirations, despite the massive social changes that took place in women’s roles in recent decades” (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 346). Women are taking much more active roles in the public/work sphere than ever before: by 2009, it was “expected that[…] for the first time in history the majority of workers in the U.S. will be women” (Gibbs, Fitzpatrick, Ford, & Van Dyk, 2009, p.24). Even though this shift in the workforce continues to grow, societal organizations and conventions continue to portray male-female roles in ways where the male character attempts to dominate the female character and further the cause of patriarchy.

Television is an incredibly important part of American society and education; therefore, studying the messaging that is integrated into popular television shows is an important way to view how a society perceives male-female relationships. Twenty years ago a study by Berg (1991) supported using television to teach communication theories, since television can provide information about a culture. Berg found that “instructors of courses in interpersonal communication, family communication, conflict resolution, and conversation analysis have used
television programs to provide visually stimulating, interesting exemplars and as data bases for illustrating theoretical constructs and methodological procedures” (Berg, 1991, p. 105). Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan (2008) expanded on Berg’s theory that television is an important teaching tool, utilizing studies of television shows to examine gender roles in network television. The findings of their study dynamically increased the validity of studying television shows to examine male-female societal roles. Lauzen et al. (2008) state that

female characters were more likely to be seen interacting with others in familial and romantic roles. In contrast, male characters were more likely to inhabit work roles exhibiting more agentic goals including ambition and the desire for success. Such portrayals illustrate the ongoing tendency of network television to paint characters in the broadest of gender strokes. (p. 211)

The purpose of this pilot study is to examine gender roles and communication in television situation comedies and to discuss findings of instances of patriarchy, inequality or misrepresentations of gender roles on television.

It is important to view the roles of female and male television characters, since these roles can be considered reflective of the way women are viewed in society. According to Littlejohn and Foss (2005) “[m]edia organizations affect and reflect the cultures of society, and they provide information simultaneously to large heterogeneous audiences” (p. 273); thus, studying the way women are portrayed on television can give us information about how women are perceived in the larger arena of society

The Problem

Hours spent watching television tend to be high in the United States, an average viewer
watching over 150 hours of television per month (Gandossy, 2009). According to cultivation theory, people who view a great deal of television can have their perception of reality skewed by what they are watching. A common symptom is Gerbner’s “mean world syndrome” (cited in Bryant and Zillman, 1986), in which someone who watches a lot of violent television shows will feel that the world is more dangerous than it truly is. This assumption may be expanded to include other media genres and perceptions. Thus, it may be that watching a lot of situation comedies that focus on the relationships between men and women will skew a viewer’s ideas of reality and how men and women do and should interact with one another in romantic relationships.

**Definitions of Terms Used**

1) Male/Man/Men- In this study the words male/man/men refer to both the gender and sex of an individual.

2) Female/Woman/Women- In this study the words female/woman/women refer to both the gender and sex of an individual.

3) Married/Marriage- For this study, a marriage will consist of a male/female partnership. Homosexual or alternative relationships are not included.

4) Household/Domestic Chores- Consist of duties in the home (e.g. laundry, cooking, dishwashing, cleaning, etc.).

5) Gender Roles/Stereotypes- Gender roles and stereotypes of gender roles are defined as the traditional patriarchal male roles and subordinate female roles in American society.
6) Patriarchy- “[h]ypothetical social system in which the father or a male elder has absolute
authority over the family group; by extension, one or more men (as in a council) exert
absolute authority over the community as a whole” (“Patriarchy”, 2011).

7) Cultivation Theory- According to Gerbner, “a shared way of viewing the world” (as cited
in Bryant et al., 1986, p. 17) due to watching television.

8) Egalitarianism- “[a] belief in human equality especially with respect to social, political,
and economic affairs” (“Egalitarianism”, 2011).

9) The terms ‘study’ and ‘pilot study’ will be used interchangeably

Organization of Remaining Chapters

In the following four chapters, information about gender roles, society, and television will be
presented.

- Chapter 2 will review the research literature about society, cultivation theory,
  media and gender roles.
- Chapter 3 will describe the scope and methodology of this study.
- Chapter 4 will detail the results of the study including quantitative data collected
  from the television shows studied, demographic data from the U.S. Census,
  qualitative data analysis, comparative data and examples from the television
  shows that display gender role stereotyping.
• Chapter 5 will summarize the study and examine assumptions, as well as detail the study limitations. Opportunities for further research on the subject of gender roles and stereotyping on television shows will be discussed.

Chapter 2: PHILISOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Philosophical Assumptions

Within the last 50 years, women and the way they have been viewed in American society has changed. Women are now accepted in the workforce and theoretically expected to be able to hold positions that have previously been held exclusively by men. Women have made in-roads into nearly every profession, from practicing medicine to running major corporations. Women are told they can do anything, and be anything they choose to be. However, underneath what Wood (2010) calls this “can-do discourse” is a society that, in spite of so recently experiencing the sexual revolution, maintains a strong patriarchal social structure that continually attempts to retain its power and control. This mindset is still greatly perpetuated through the media, as explored in this pilot study.

It is a commonly-held notion that women and men should seek sexual equality; this equality should extend to both the workplace and the home, and should be reflected in the media. A societal goal, in this researcher’s opinion, should be a more egalitarian system that eliminates status and preconceived notions about the way women are supposed to act, as well as the roles they are supposed to fill.
In the spirit of egalitarianism, then, women and men should be presented in an equal light on television. Television roles should depict women as being involved in both the workplace and in interpersonal roles. Likewise, men should be shown in the domestic sphere, contributing not only willfully but skillfully; this would be more in line with reality. Television should also show a more equal division of household and workplace labor among men and women. However, we currently find that women on television sitcoms are typically portrayed in two basic life patterns: either having jobs outside of the home while performing the majority of household chores, or not having jobs outside of the home at all.

A more egalitarian system that promotes equality between the sexes would show a more level playing field on television, and would thus be a more accurate portrayal of reality. During the search for information on egalitarianism, many references were found that rallied for or against the concept in American society. Less apparent was neutral information presented on the concept. Suffice it to say, there are strong feelings for and against the concept of egalitarianism in this country: this paper takes as its foundation that society should aim for an egalitarian system.

By applying cultivation theory (henceforth referred to as such, or by the abbreviation CT) to the assumption that women continue to be portrayed in the same way they were in the pre-sexual revolution years, it can be argued that these portrayals are affecting viewers’ ideas about gender roles, the reinforcement of patriarchy and the way male-female relationships are considered in real-life situations.

Theoretical Basis
There have been a number of studies illustrating gender roles, both in society and in the roles played by men and women on television. Application of cultivation theory can also help show how people’s perception of reality can possibly be affected by the portrayals of gender roles on television.

**Cultivation Theory**

Many people and groups hold the media responsible for different social issues. These people claim that violence, sex on television and a desensitization of the viewing public are responsible for our current social ills. As mentioned previously, cultivation theory as defined by Gerbner essentially tells us that “television brings about a shared way of viewing the world,” (as cited in Bryant et al., 1986, pp. 17). Simply put, cultivation theory suggests that television is responsible for shaping, or ‘cultivating’ viewers’ conceptions of social reality. The combined effect of massive television exposure by viewers over time subtly shapes the perception of social reality for individuals and, ultimately, for our culture as a whole. (“Cultivation theory”, 2010, para. 2)

Chandler (1995) described CT further and offered additional points, stating that “[c]ultivation theorists argue that television has long-term effects which are small, gradual, indirect but cumulative and significant” (para. 4). Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2001) also support cultivation theory, stating that television creates “a common world view and common stereotypes through a relatively restrictive set of programs, images, and messages” (p. 7).
A component of CT relies on a person’s view of the world being dependent on how much television they watch. According to CT, heavy television viewers are more likely to have their perceptions of reality distorted by this viewing. Appel (2008) stated:

A huge part of our daily media fare consists of fictional narratives that portray the world as a more predictable and just place than it really is. Cultivation theory claims that media content diffuses into our real-world belief system, leading to a linear correlation between television exposure and corresponding beliefs. (p. 67)

**Supporting Literature**

**Gender Roles in Society**

Women in recent years have been told they can do it all. They have been told that they can have successful careers and well-adjusted, productive families, and that it can be done without assistance from a male partner. Wood (2010) articulated it clearly: “the can-do discourse tells young women that they are responsible for balancing career and family and does not encourage them to expect or demand that male partners have significant responsibility for domestic life” (p. 103). Many women may be able to balance this demanding lifestyle, but it is not always without sacrifice.

Often the portrayal of women on television will show women in the workplace. However, duties at home are still seen as women’s tasks: “[g]ains in working outside the home have not been accompanied by substantially alleviated responsibilities within the home” (Scharrer, Kim, Lin, & Liu, 2006, p. 217). Though both men and women are shown in the workplace on
television, male roles are shown a bit differently than females in the same type of scene. Morgan and Shanahan (2010) found that “cultivation studies of gender and family roles continue to show that television contributes to traditional images and aspirations, despite the massive social changes that took place in women’s roles in recent decades” (p. 346).

Tragos (2009) believed gender roles are changing but are creating more of a burden for men and women (p.541). Men are now expected to have an emotional sensibility, while women are being asked to not only adopt Wood’s (2010) can-do discourse, but also to adopt some traditionally masculine characteristics:

Contemporary gender roles have new expectations in which women are both strong and beautiful and men are both strong and sensitive. These emerging definitions may seem progressive, but they have essentially created a double burden for both men and women in that each is expected to maintain traditional roles while also assuming characteristics from the opposite gender. (Tragos, 2009, p. 541)

This burden results in greater expectations being placed on women. As a result, today’s woman is “both strong and beautiful, whereas traditional notions of femininity were solely based on physical appearance or subservient social standing” (Tragos, 2009, p. 542).

West (2009) considers this burden on modern women as well. The assumed roles of women in today’s society cause them to bear the responsibility for keeping households running, maintaining the lines of communication to family and friends, and keeping holidays and traditions alive, but in a way that disguises the labor and effort involved. The linked spheres of
social reproduction, consumption, and femininity are largely interpreted as
denigrating to women. (p. 286)

**Gender Roles as Portrayed on Television**

Many studies have been done on the presence and portrayal of women on television. Elasmar, Hasegawa, & Brain (1999) studied how often women and men spoke in the shows viewed, the ethnicity of the female characters, the hair color, professional achievements and any acts of violence the characters were involved in (pp. 20-34).

Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2001) studied television shows of the 1990s and found “women [in the programs were] less likely to work outside the home and that the world of work on television is designed to tell stories, not necessarily reflect reality” (p. 7).

In a study on gender roles in network television by Lauzen et al. (2008), female television characters were found to be more likely to interact with others in familial and romantic roles. In contrast, male characters were more likely to be involved in work roles, exhibiting more agentic goals: ambition and the desire for success, for example (p. 211). Portraying women in this light is an aspect of patriarchy, and affects viewers’ beliefs about women and gender roles today. Behm-Morowitz and Mastro (2008) claimed that female characters on television are merely responding to what society expects of them:

[I]ndividuals adopt gender characteristics in part by monitoring the rewards and consequences associated with others' behavior. Thus, representation of female characters in the media would be expected to play a role in viewers' perceptions
regarding gender identity, which may ultimately influence attitudes and beliefs about appropriate gender roles. (p. 132)

While gender miscommunication is common among male and female television characters, it seems that expected gender roles also play a part. According to Scollon and Scollon:

[W]omen are concerned with intimacy, connection, and inclusion, [sic] they will tend to focus more attention on the use of language as a way of communicating relationships. Men, on the other hand, because of their focus on independence, status, and exclusion, will favor the informational functioning of language. (cited in Xue, 2010, p. 186)

We see, then, that women and men are presented as wanting entirely different things: women are in need of relationships, and men looking only for information (Xue, 2010).

This comparison of male and female roles and communication can be observed in many different scenarios on television. Whether the female character is shown in the workplace or the home, she will often be portrayed with the traits Scollon and Scollon noted above. Clearly there are a number of sources confirming the different attitudes and perceptions of women, television, gender roles and reality. The next step is to review different television programs and compare findings with studies in order to further elaborate on the portrayal of women on television in recent years.

Research Questions:
The literature review about CT, gender roles, women, and television leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: How are women portrayed on television sitcoms and in society?

RQ2: What roles are the female characters assigned?

RQ3: How do the portrayals have the potential to influence viewers’ ideas about gender roles?

By comparing the way women are portrayed on television sitcoms, it may be possible to get an idea of how women are viewed in society. The purpose of answering the research questions will be to help determine, by using CT, how people’s ideas of patriarchy and gender roles may be affected by television.
Chapter 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope and Methodology

Television sitcoms have been relatively consistent in showing women in primarily domestic roles. Shows such as King of Queens, According to Jim, and Modern Family are a few examples of well-known sitcoms that show women in a primarily domestic light. This portrayal was common 50 years ago, and it does not appear to have changed much. Women in sitcoms are shown in the home, taking care of the children, cooking and doing other domestic chores. However, the reality is that the women of today are heavily present in both the home and work environments—something sitcoms rarely appear to acknowledge.

This pilot study looked at the roles of women in prime-time television situation comedies that aired from the years 2000-2011. Because of the sheer number of television shows this could encompass, the scope of this study was limited to 25 episodes of sitcoms that aired on major U.S. networks (ABC, NBC, CBS and FOX) during these years. To further narrow the scope, the sitcoms were required to include at least one male/female romantic relationship where the characters cohabitate and where the plot lines ultimately center around their relationship and family life. Any episode from a selected series could have been analyzed, but not every broadcast episode was subject to analysis, due to time constraints of the researcher and the stated selection guidelines. Finally, this study did not analyze homosexual relationships or the actions of children unless they were an instrumental part of a scene with adults; nor did this study address scenes featuring only children.
Method

Twenty-five episodes of situation comedies that originally aired on major television networks between the years 2000 and 2011 were examined using a quantitative and qualitative content analysis (Rubin, Rubin, Haridakis, & Piel, 2010) to gauge the recent portrayal of women on sitcoms. A number of factors were recorded: the number of scenes men and women appeared in, the settings of these interactions, as well as who appeared in the scene with them. Additionally, character actions in the scenes, topics of conversation and examples of dialogue and behavior were recorded and compiled. The goal was to determine if television sitcoms portray men and women in traditional gender roles and perpetuate gender stereotypes and patriarchy.

The physical locations the characters occupied, their actions, their discussion topics, the season and episode numbers and the gender of the characters were catalogued to review for information about the interactions and roles of the characters.

Specific examples of dialogue, interaction and behavior were categorized and referenced from select episodes used in the study in order to illustrate examples of traditional gender roles. The findings of the content analysis were then compared to commentary and studies about female gender roles, communication and social norms in order to gain further perspective on the ways women are viewed today in society compared to how they are portrayed on television.

Different studies have approached the “why” behind television female character role portrayal. The choice of content analysis in this study was to determine possible “effects the content has on those who receive the message, that is the audience” (Rubin et al., 2010. p.217).
Cataloging the character behavior, scenes characters appear in and their portrayed relational roles will reveal the underlying messages of gender roles on sitcoms.

As this was a pilot study, only one researcher has rated and catalogued the information found. The reliability of the information and the validity of the study may be affected in the event of additional cataloguing of information by other researchers, different episodes being used in the study and so forth. Ultimately, this pilot provides a starting point for further study on the subject.
Chapter 4: DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS OF THE STUDY, AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine if television situation comedies accurately portray real life and whether or not they might further perpetuate gender stereotypes. Anecdotally, we know that many men in real life involve themselves in household chores beyond those of fixing a broken appliance or changing a light bulb. We also know that women are very present in the work force. Unfortunately, the findings in the pilot appear to confirm that sitcom gender roles are quite opposite from these real-life anecdotes.

Data Analysis

As discussed in the previous chapter, 25 situation comedy episodes were chosen based on when they aired and the primary relationships featured on the shows. Episodes were then analyzed for content in an effort to find situation comedies that centered on romantically involved male/female couples whose behavior confirmed traditional gender roles and displayed aspects of patriarchy.

The episodes were from the following shows: Modern Family, According to Jim and Eight Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter. Seven episodes of Modern Family were viewed; nine episodes of According to Jim and nine episodes of Eight Rules were also viewed.

Results of the Study

The results of this pilot study indicated that an imbalance existed between the number of times males and females appeared in the episodes used for this study. Men were shown 311 times, either in supporting roles where they had actual speaking parts, or as main characters.
Women were shown 252 times in scenes as main characters, or in supporting roles with speaking parts.

Specific examples of characters perpetuating patriarchy could be found in a number of the shows reviewed for this pilot study. An example from the show According to Jim (season 8, episode 11), called “The Daddy Way,” shows stay-at-home mom character Cheryl (played by Courtney Thorne-Smith) needing a few hours to herself because she stays at home with her twin infants all day. She sets up a “daddy and me” play group for Jim (her husband and father to the children) and other men who are husbands of the women in her “mommy and me” group without telling her husband. Jim’s response is that when Cheryl sleeps and takes showers, that is her ‘alone time’. Cheryl pleads, “My job never stops,” referencing her taking care of the children. Her husband responds with “Please, please, please. I’d love to trade places with you just once. Dammit.” Cheryl responds by leaving, and her husband shows his frustration with himself for making such a mistake.

In another scene from the same episode, Jim and a supporting character are discussing their wives and how they cannot tell their respective partners they have fun. In Jim’s words, “[the women] want us to be miserable just like them.” The other character tells Jim that such an idea is crazy; Jim replies “That’s women.” Jim goes on to imply that men lie, and that is just the way they are. Jim then coaches his friend on how to lie to his wife about being miserable. The episode ends with the husbands getting in trouble for exploiting their competitive nature by setting up a race between their children. Eventually the wives join in as their own egos about the skills of their children come into play.
All of these examples have things in common. They portray men as inept fathers who feel that it is okay to lie to your spouse as long as you do not get caught. It is shown that it is acceptable to exploit children, and that women are crazy, irrational and complaining martyrs that live to serve the needs of their husbands and children. The examples show completely false situations that exaggerate men and women into caricature-like portrayals of unreasonable and disrespectful individuals. They take stereotypical behavior (which, by definition, is inaccurate) and show it to be normal in everyday life.

An episode of Eight Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter displays similar characteristics. In the episode “Career Woman,” the character of Kate is offered a promotion and more hours at work. Her family, for the most part, seems to behave as though they are okay with the idea. Kate eventually decides not to take the promotion because she is experiencing guilt about being away from her family so much and missing out on things. She also finds out that one of her teenage daughters is upset about her working so much. Kate’s primary responsibility on the show was to manage her children and family life. The character was expected to do this even while working outside of the home. This expectation is somewhat unrealistic today. While Kate’s husband on the show took an active role in parenting the children, when it came down to it, the children wanted their mom and felt abandoned by her.

In an episode of According to Jim (“The Money”), Cheryl decides to loan her brother some money for a down payment on a condo. When Jim finds out that she was looking for savings he had already spent, they get into a disagreement. At the peak of the argument, Jim says, “I make the money. I bring it home. It’s my money.” His wife responds by having a garage
sale of all of her stuff that she had from before they were married. Jim sees her selling her things and tries to patch things up between them by patronizing her.

The above examples are all instances where patriarchy and inequality exist within relationships shown on television situation comedies. Of the three shows used in this pilot study, According to Jim seemed to have the most examples of traditional gender roles and inequality.

Comparing the number of times men and women were featured on the shows to information about the number of men and women in this country, it appears that the shows do not accurately portray the male to female ratio. According to demographic data, women outnumber men in the United States. Census data estimates that in 2008 there were approximately 4.21 million more women than men in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau). This difference does not seem to show in the results of this study. If the shows reviewed for this study accurately displayed the number of men to women on-screen compared to the number of men and women in this country, women would have been featured more often in the shows. This was not the case.

Of the four main male/female romantic relationships in the three shows, every male character held a job outside of the home. The main male characters were shown at work or were shown working from home nine times. Only one out of four female main characters was shown to be employed outside of the home, the character of Kate in Eight Simple Rules. Ironically, she is a nurse in the labor and delivery department of a hospital, which is a career traditionally held by women. No other female main characters worked from the home or outside it.
Surprisingly, the disparity in employment does not extend to the minor roles in these particular situation comedies. The minor female characters found in the episodes are employed outside the home as doctors, physical therapists, restaurateurs or in other such professional careers. Male supporting characters also have jobs: doctor, physical therapist, yoga instructor, and contractor or architect; they are clearly shown working in these professions.

In today's society, domestic chores are still typically viewed as being largely the responsibility of the woman of a household. However, men often do assume a measure of responsibility for the housework and child care in a family. This imbalance concerning the cooperative sharing of domestic responsibilities is exaggerated in TV land. On the shows viewed for this study, men were shown doing domestic chores only three times. Women were shown doing domestic chores 43 times.

Other facets of the data indicated how often the men and women in the programs were shown “parenting” the children on the show, and the physical spaces the characters occupied or where the scenes on the show took place (for instance: were the adult male characters found in scenes in the kitchen? If so, what were their actions during the scene?).

Both the male and female characters were shown interacting with their children. Both the male and female characters handled everything from cheering the children on at sporting events, supporting their decisions, talking with them about difficult issues, to discipline.

Men and women were shown in many rooms of the homes: kitchens, bedrooms and living rooms. Other locations included doctor’s offices, the workplace, stores, restaurants and other places we would expect average middle-class people to frequent. These physical locations
within and outside of the homes were originally catalogued in the effort to determine whether or not the characters were shown in different rooms based on gender. However, characters were generally shown in various rooms interacting with one another regardless of gender: locations did not appear to be more or less one character’s domain based on this factor.

However, in the episodes used in the study of the show According to Jim, the main male character, Jim, was shown having band practice in the garage, and his wife was only shown in the garage to put away food in the freezer or to have a garage sale. This was the only egregious display of a specific space operating as a predominately male or female space.

There were also behaviors, character roles and actions that were observed in the episodes that perpetuated gender role stereotypes. In many episodes, especially on According to Jim, the female adult character would be shown doing housework while the male adult character would be shown drinking coffee, reading the paper, and so on.

In the show Modern Family, the character Jay is shown reading a newspaper in a lawn chair at his stepson’s soccer game while Jay’s younger and much more attractive wife, Gloria, cheers on her child. In that same episode, the adult male character, Phil, who is married to Claire, is shown eating breakfast and essentially getting in her way and making a nuisance of himself. At the same time, Claire is hurrying to get the kids off to school, make breakfast and clean the kitchen. At one point during the opening scene, Phil leaves the refrigerator door open: Claire runs into it and responds with a frustrated “oh, come on” under her breath.

What these examples show is the perpetuation of male and female role-stereotypes: women support the children, clean and cook, and men read the paper, drink coffee and are shown
as either disconnected from the family structure or as getting in the way. The “male nuisance” is also becoming a prevalent character in today’s situation comedies, along with the smart female character that is shown holding the family together.

Discussion

What has this study shown? The results of this study appear to indicate that situation comedies on television in the last 11 years have been further perpetuating gender stereotypes. Women are shown doing more domestic chores and working outside of the home less often than men are in the shows. Depending on the television series and the episodes chosen for review, these results varied. While different genres of television show may depict women and men in a different light, it appears that sitcoms, at least, are guilty of perpetuating gender stereotypes. While this pilot study did indeed demonstrate that women were featured in primarily domestic roles, the study is limited.
Chapter 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

This work has several limitations. Due to time constraints, the categories for observation and the number of raters was limited, leaving room for error as well as a eliminating the potential for another perspective on the interactions of the characters. This also affects reliability and validity. With more time and more raters, more episodes of the shows could be viewed and analyzed for inter-rater reliability. Also, different series could be viewed which might alter the findings and disprove the case for traditional gender roles being perpetuated to any great extent.

Because of the huge volume of shows that fit the criteria to be a part of this study, the small selection is in itself a limitation. There is such an incredible volume of episodes that to review them would not be possible due to time. Other data such as primary locations on the sets the characters occupy could also be studied for perpetuation of gender roles: for instance, if a character uses a specific space in the home for primarily their own purposes, as in the case of Jim and his garage on According to Jim.

Further Study or Recommendations

This study serves as a starting point or pilot to support future studies. Further studies could be done with other television shows, with more episodes viewed, data collected by more than one researcher at the same time and at different times. The researchers’ perspectives on gender roles affect the data also. It is possible to have researchers or volunteers collect the data and draw very different conclusions from each insofar as their perceptions of what the characters are doing and how their actions might perpetuate gender stereotypes. Inter-rater reliability would
help with possible bias.

Conclusions

This pilot study shows that there is a perpetuation of traditional gender roles on situation comedies on television and that there is an opportunity for further study. This study would benefit from expansion to include more episodes, by having the information be coded by more than one researcher, or through a reorganization which might focus on all the episodes of a certain show or the examination of one specific male/female relationship. There appear to be many opportunities that can be explored through further evaluation of the situation comedies that have been on television in the last 11 years.

Another opportunity to expand the study would be to ask different individuals their perceptions of the shows and to evaluate whether heavy television viewers (i.e., people who watch four or more hours per day) believe the shows are a portrayal of real life. If that data can be gathered, Gerbner’s cultivation theory could be applied to situation comedies: people’s views of the real world would be affected, a variation of “mean world syndrome”.

This study also shows that the responsible, feisty female character is still a television cliché. She cleans, cooks, and keeps the family unit functioning. She may or may not have a job outside the home, but her ultimate job is portrayed as being to manage her family. The data collected also indicates inequality among the sexes on television sitcoms. Women and men are not shown as equally contributing in the workforce, or contributing skillfully to household chores. The data from this study shows a lack of gender equality and does not adequately or accurately portray the roles of society’s women (or men, for that matter).
This study shows that men and women on television are portrayed as different in their contributions to society and family life, but the differences and the ways they contribute are not accurate in relation to reality. More women work outside the home in reality than on the television shows reviewed for this study. And finally, there are proportionally more women than men in the real world than are featured on the television shows used in this study.

This pilot study confirms the adage “don’t believe everything you see on TV.” The shows are written by people playing to the most average or below-average consumer in the market, and the shows that make it to mainstream television are created by people with their own agendas regarding messaging. Further exploration of these facets of the situation will have to remain a different study for another time.
REFERENCES


