LYING IN FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS AS PORTRAYED IN DOMESTIC SITCOMS SINCE THE RECESSION: AN EXAMINATION OF FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ECONOMIC CLASS

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ABSTRACT

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Through the fusion of media/cultural studies scholarship, interpersonal communication research, and triangulated method, this dissertation draws connections between our social and cultural interpretation of the American family, the discursive possibilities of humorous mediated representations, and the influence and implications of lying on familial relationships. The concept of the American family is as much a social and cultural identity as gender, class, and ethnicity; yet its construction has been typically ignored by cultural studies research. This dissertation addresses that deficiency by examining representations of the American family on Disney-owned situation comedies. These representations are analyzed through past interpersonal research and typologies on lying to determine how the motivation for lying and the relationship between the liar and the recipient of the lie impacts the portrayal of family structure and class status. This dissertation considers to what extent the idyllic and deviant portrayals of the American family marginalize and symbolically annihilate any family conceptualization that is not a nuclear, middle-class family and consider how these media depictions (re)flect and (re)present the broader cultural shifts surrounding the meaning of the American family. Finally, this research concludes by considering how the lie factors into the narrative of the episode and the overall perception of the familial characters. Using a triangulated approach toward textual analysis, including content analysis and narrative analysis, this dissertation draws connections between quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a more complex and holistic investigation of American situation comedies. Across the sample of 84 episodes, 589 lies were
recorded, or an average of 7 lies per episode. The findings of this dissertation also uncover two additional categories that warrant further exploration: “self-serving lies” and “punishment by lying.” Another key finding observed that family members who lie to outside characters for financial gain are rewarded, while those who lie to develop or sustain a relationship were punished. Overall, the results concluded that when considering the motivations for lying and relational impact from lies told, family structure provided less of a distinction than class status. The findings further contribute to uncovering which family structures or class statuses are potentially idealized and which are marginalized.
Dedicated to Barbara –

No matter the distance, you are always in my heart!

Nothing I have achieved would be possible or worthwhile without you!
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disney-Owned Sitcoms Since the Recession</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Dissertation</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE AMERICAN FAMILY</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representations of the Nuclear Family in the Media</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American Family and Class in Media Representation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. THE CULTURAL INFLUENCE OF SITCOMS</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining the Sitcom Genre</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Sitcoms</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Historical Overview of the Representation of Families on Sitcoms</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s: The Golden Age of Television</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s: Gimmicks Invade the Traditional Family</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s: Socially Relevant Sitcoms &amp; Cultural Shifts</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s: Backlash from Social Relevance</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s: Conventional Sitcom Meets Satire</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Sitcoms Since the Recession</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 Domestic Sitcoms</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2012 Domestic Sitcoms</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013 Domestic Sitcoms</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. DECEPTION AND LYING</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Definitions of Deception and Lying</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lying in Real Life Contexts ................................. 53
Parent-Child Relationships ............................. 54
Sibling Relationships ................................. 55
Motivation for Lying ........................................... 56
Previous Typologies for the Motivation for Lying ........................................ 56
Children and Parental Motivations for Lying .................................. 58
Responses to Lying ........................................... 60
Connections Between Lying and Familial Relationships .................. 61
Lying in Media Representation ........................... 63
Research Questions ........................................ 66

CHAPTER V. METHODOLOGY ........................................ 69
Triangulation .................................................. 69
Textual Analysis ............................................. 71
Content Analysis ........................................... 73
Coding .......................................................... 75
Data Analysis Techniques ................................. 78
Narrative Analysis ......................................... 79
Equilibrium Formula ....................................... 81
Concluding Methodological Thoughts .................. 82

CHAPTER VI. FREQUENCY OF RELATIONSHIPS AND MOTIVATIONS FOR LYING 83
Relationship Between Liar and Recipient ............... 83
Motivations for Lying ......................................... 85
Self-Preservation ............................................ 86
Prosocial Lying ................................................................. 87
Self-Serving Lies ............................................................. 88
Punishment by Lying ......................................................... 89
Family Structure................................................................. 92
Nuclear Family Structure ................................................... 93
Stepparent Family Structure .............................................. 95
Single Parent Family Structure .......................................... 97
Same-Sex Parent Family Structure ...................................... 98
Class Status ......................................................................... 99
Upper Middle-Class Status ............................................... 100
Middle-Class Status .......................................................... 102
Working-Class Characters .................................................. 104
Concluding Discussion ...................................................... 105

CHAPTER VII. RESOLUTIONS FOR LYING WITHIN DOMESTIC SITCOM

NARRATIVES ................................................................. 107
Modern Family (2009-present) ............................................ 107
Episode #2: “The Bicycle Thief” .......................................... 107
Episode #12: “Not In My House” ........................................ 110
Episode #17: “Truth Be Told” .............................................. 112
The Middle (2009-present) ................................................ 115
Episode #7: “The Scratch” .................................................. 115
Episode #9: “Siblings” ....................................................... 117
Episode #19: “The Final Four” ........................................... 119
Good Luck Charlie (2010-2014) ................................................................. 122
  Episode #5: “Dance Off” ....................................................................... 122
  Episode #7: “Butt Dialing Duncans” ..................................................... 125
  Episode #12: “Kit and Kaboodle” ......................................................... 126
Suburgatory (2011-2014) .......................................................................... 128
  Episode #2: “The Barbecue” ................................................................. 128
  Episode #8: “Thanksgiving” ................................................................. 129
  Episode #9: “The Nutcracker” ............................................................. 130
Dog with a Blog (2012-present) ............................................................... 132
  Episode #5: “World of Woofcraft” ....................................................... 132
  Episode #7: “The Parrot Trap” ............................................................. 132
  Episode #14: “Crimes of the Art” ......................................................... 134
The Goldbergs (2013-present) ................................................................. 136
  Episode #3: “Mini Murray” ................................................................. 136
  Episode #7: “Call Me When You Get There” ....................................... 138
  Episode #19: “The President’s Fitness Test” ......................................... 142
Trophy Wife (2013-2014) ......................................................................... 145
  Episode #2: “Cold File” ...................................................................... 145
  Episode #3: “The Social Network” ...................................................... 147
  Episode #18: “Couples Therapy” ......................................................... 148
Familial Relationships ............................................................................. 150
  Spousal/Romantic Partner Relationship ............................................. 151
  Parent/Child Relationship ................................................................... 152
# LIST OF FIGURES/TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure/Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Relationship Between Liar and Recipient</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Motivations for Lying</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Nuclear Family</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Stepparent Family</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Single Parent Family</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Same-Sex Parent Family</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Upper Middle-Class Family</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Middle-Class Family</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Working-Class Family</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

While domestic situation comedies, a televisual comedic genre that focuses on family structures and concentrates primarily on families’ problems and situations, have been central to television history in the U.S. (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 2010), cultural studies research has mainly overlooked analyzing the family as a social and cultural construct within this media (re)presentation. This research seeks to bridge the gap between media studies, cultural studies, and interpersonal communication studies to ultimately analyze the social, cultural, and political influence of the representation of family in domestic sitcoms.

Situated within the scholarship of cultural studies (see, for instance, Giroux, 2009; Grossberg, 1997; Hall, 1981; Kellner, 2009; Rojek, 2009) and media studies and television research (see, for instance, Ang, 1996; Bacon-Smith, 1991; Bryant, 2000; Butsch, 2009; Couldry, 2003; Douglas, 2010; Douglas, 2003; Fiske, 1996; Gitlin, 2009; Gross, 2002; Haggins, 2009; Jenkins, 2005; Jhally, 2011; Katz, 2003; Kraidy, 2010; McRobbie, 2009; Mills, 2008; Morley, 1980; Mukerji & Schudson; Staiger, 2005; Taylor, 1989), this dissertation draws connections between our social and cultural interpretation of American families and the influence and implications of lying on familial relationships. This research draws these areas together in the spirit of Kellner’s (2009) argument that cultural and media studies approaches can be utilized to introduce innovative ways of thinking about, critiquing, and transforming society. Culture is analogous, opposing, resisting, and complying all at the same time. The role of culture, argued Giroux (2009), is an “educational site where identities are being continually transformed, power is enacted, and learning assumes a political dynamic as it becomes not only
the condition for the acquisition of agency but also the sphere for imagining oppositional social change” (p. 89).

Multi-contextual tensions are displayed through mediated representations. Because media texts are the sites of both (re)flection and (re)presentation, their value in interpreting commonly held cultural values is crucial. It is the perceived “natural” cultural narratives in media texts that emphasize a taken-for-granted belief (Ingraham, 2010). Through analysis and critique, one can start to expose the underlying ideologies within texts. Stuart Hall (1981) affirmed “the double movement of containment and resistance” inherent in mediated representations of class, ethnicity, and gender (see, also, Pfeil, 1990; Rojek, 2009). Stuart Hall (1981) suggested there is:

A continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms. There are points of resistance; there are also moments of supersession. This is the dialectic of cultural struggle. (p. 233).

As a result, media content and its imbedded ideologies can be a premier site for discussing identity construction because of both its inclusion and marginalization of cultural identities.

Ideology is a systematic set of beliefs that help shape our interpretations of society, the world around us, and our place in it (Williams, 2003). If the majority of society assumes that a belief is natural, it is considered ideological (Kellner, 2011). Althusser’s (1971) interpretation of ideology assumes there is no accurate reality, but instead, proposes that societies have subjective rules of reality. In America, media representations play a vital role in the subjective interpretations of reality. There are “naturalized codes” that appear to be naturally constructed
LYING IN FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS

within, but actually operate to reinforce hegemony (Hall, 1980). Yet ideology is also “not a
static set of ideas through which we view the world but a dynamic social practice, constantly in
process, constantly reproducing itself in the ordinary workings of [ideological state] apparatuses”
(Fiske, 1996, p. 118). Fiske’s view of ideology aligns similarly with Gramsci’s in that Gramsci’s
(1971) conceptualization emphasizes the role of the individual and demonstrates that society can
resist dominant ideologies if one starts to question the naturalness of the cultural idea. Through
the identification and understanding of these ideologies as subjective strategic constructions and
not common sense assumptions, people can begin a discourse about broader social and cultural
concerns. Analyzing cultural artifacts, such as media texts, “attempts to put into crisis those
organizing ideologies which naturalize or universalize particular sets of power relations
implicated in the production of exploitation and oppression” (Ingraham, 2010, p. 360).

Critiquing media representations can give insight into our cultural values and what is judged as
natural and normal, as opposed to what is deemed deviant and aberrant within our social order.
This research will deconstruct some of the meanings behind the (re)presentation of the American
family, while considering how media texts remain powerful ideological, social, and political
influences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

While scholars have examined gender, ethnicity, class, morality, and various other
identity constructions within culture (see, for instance, Crozier, 2008; Jontes, 2010; Krijnen &
Meijer, 2005; Marx & Engels, 1976; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo,
2009; McRobbie, 2009; Owen, 2007; Srinivasan, 2006; Wilson, 2001) the ideology behind the
American family has been overlooked. While family structure and familial relationships may be
considered common knowledge and natural in American society, they are just as socially
constructed and politically charged as other ideological constructions in American culture. The
concept of the American family is as much a social and cultural identity as gender, class, and ethnicity; yet its construction has been typically ignored by cultural studies research. Holtzman (2000) noted that “ideology works best when it operates at a less than conscious level – that is, when our socialization has been so thorough that we do not identify our positions as ideology but rather, see them as the articulation of ‘truth’” (p. 34). This appears to be the case with the concept of family in American culture. Ideologies “legitimize an existing social condition with justifications derived from the status quo and repress the possibility of historical alternatives” (Leeder, 2004, p. 53). While idealized images of the American family have been depicted in past representations (see, for instance, Cantor & Cantor, 1991; Douglas, 2003; Taylor, 1989), this study considers to what extent those idyllic and deviant portrayals of the American family marginalize and symbolically annihilate any family conceptualization that is not a nuclear, middle-class family. Consequently, this dissertation addresses the lack of previous research on the American family as an ideological construction by considering to what extent representations of the American family continue to marginalize some kinds of families.

**Disney-Owned Sitcoms Since the Recession**

Because of the cultural influence of the Disney corporation as a powerful cultural industry, this project focuses on Disney-owned cultural products, specifically the domestic sitcoms that air on ABC and Disney Channel. When Disney acquired ABC in 1996, it made the company one of the largest entertainment companies in the world (Stein, 2011). Today, Disney is second only to Time Warner as the largest media firm in the world (Belkhyr, 2012). The acquisition of ABC allowed Disney to become even more influential in television production, since it now owned one of the four major networks on television.
Disney also used the acquirement of ABC to start to develop its own original programming for the Disney Channel network. Disney Channel was originally a premium cable channel with subscribers. The channel showed child-oriented shows, classic Disney cartoons, live action films, and Disney theme park updates (Stein, 2011). However, in more recent years, Disney Channel has been used as a launching pad for not only sitcoms, but also tween and teenage pop stars. Thus, “it has imprinted the Disney brand onto the consciousness of millions of children and teens” (Stein, 2011, pp. 99-100). The worldwide influence of the Disney Corporation is evident within its business practices. As Mjøs (2010) pointed out that while European broadcasters must diversify its programming and merchandising, Disney has the opportunity to sell its American cultural products all around the world. This fact speaks to the global influence that Disney’s cultural products have. Moreover, European programming must wait for a television series to be finished before the producers can consider development or licensing deals for consumer products. Once again, Disney does not need to follow those standards, giving them an advantage. Consequently, the worldwide influence of the Disney corporation cannot be ignored.

There is little doubt that the Disney Corporation can be viewed then as a cultural industry, a term first conceptualized by Horkheimer and Adorno (1972). A cultural industry manufactures cultural products, such as media representations, purely for profit, while ignoring creative or alternative cultural entities that does not associate with its overall image or production techniques (Adorno, 1991). Because Disney products have a reputation for being “family-friendly,” parents often interpret Disney movies as “safe” programming for their children, since they contain less violence and sex than many other forms of media, such as comedy satires, dramas, and reality television shows. In 2004, Disney Channel was still in second place in
children’s programming demographics (White & Preston, 2005), so the corporation then chose to target specific families that could be “united by common sets of values, interests, [and] beliefs” (White & Preston, 2005, p. 241). Disney Channel products, then, could be associated with American values (Inge, 2004). As previous authors have acknowledged, “Disneyfication” occurs when Disney stories and characters become Americanized and adopt American values (Giroux, 1999; Wasko, 2001). Artz (2011) argued that Disney themes embrace the same themes of other capitalist enterprises, including social inequality. White and Preston (2005) also found similar themes of individualism in which Disney texts promoted “hard work and honesty, presenting these as the essence of what it means to be a good person” (p. 249). White and Preston (2005) observed that Disney Channel sitcoms, movies, and advertisements present children who are unique and original; they can be self-expressive in the safe place that Disney Channel has created for them. “Children are encouraged to see themselves as members of families…Family members may experience conflict, but when things really matter they are mutually supportive, encouraging, and nurturing” (White & Preston, 2005, p. 250).

However, the Disney Corporation can utilize that branding to potentially further marginalize alternative family structures. As Johnson (1996) argued, it is important to consider how the conditions of production, texts, readings, and lived cultures all act as a “circuit of culture.” In other words, how does the Disney Corporation, which is branded as family-friendly programming, contribute to the representation of the American family? Disney products, as Belkhyr (2012) argued, are “cultural products, [that] more than any others, reflect the cultural values of their producers and the social conditions under which they are produced” (p. 704).

Because the Disney Corporation now owns major broadcasting stations, such as ABC, and cable
networks, such as Disney Channel, the cultural values and depictions of the American family within its cultural products cannot be ignored (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003).

Critics have long warned that Disney’s cultural products, which reach a wide variety of mediums, perpetuate cultural stereotypes of gender, race, and sexuality (Gillam & Wooden, 2008). Therefore, this project investigates the ideologies about family that are imbedded in the mediated representations that this powerful conglomerate produces. Disney cultural products, as Giroux (1999) argued, are considerably more widespread than just American households. In 1999, it was estimated that 395 million viewers have seen a Disney television show in their lifetime (Giroux, 1999). Disney products have the power “to shape national identity, gender roles, and childhood values” (Giroux, 1999, p. 10). Past research on Disney products examined gender stereotypes (Beres, 1999; Dundes, 2001; Gillam & Wooden, 2008), and racial and ethnic stereotypes (Artz, 2011; Gooding-Williams, 1995; Palmer, 2000). However, to date, only one study has examined Disney’s interpretation of the American family and that research focused only on Disney feature-length animation films (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003). While family relationships and values tend to be major premises in Disney movies (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003), researchers have ignored the cultural norms about the family that other Disney-owned media products, such as family sitcoms, convey. The interpretations made from Disney-owned sitcoms can infer what this “family-friendly” corporation is depicting about the American family in post-recession media.

Consequently, the following Disney-owned television sitcoms have been chosen for analysis: The Middle (2009-present), Modern Family (2009-present), Good Luck Charlie (2010-2014), Suburgatory (2011-2014), Dog with a Blog (2012-present), The Goldbergs (2013-present), and Trophy Wife (2013-2014). By focusing on the first season of each of these
domestic sitcoms, this research can investigate the representation of the American family across a time span of six years. Moreover, given the branding of Disney products as “family-friendly”, what does this major conglomeration convey about families on its domestic sitcoms? By examining the first season of each of these sitcoms, this research will gain a broader understanding of the interpretation of family that Disney cultural products contain.

Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation begins with a discussion of the social and cultural significance of the “American family.” Chapter two considers how ideas and perceptions of the American family are in flux with broader cultural shifts and to what extent media representations (re)flect and (re)present those adaptations. While idealized depictions of the nuclear family were prevalent in the 1950s, it questions if they remain the preferred family structure in society and media representations.

Chapter three conveys that the study of humorous media texts is often marginalized in its own right because of its assumption that it is a less serious genre. Yet, it is crucial to investigate humor as a cultural entity, one that is representative of the dominant ideologies within a given culture. Because humor demonstrates a relationship between the media text and its audience, these particular texts are vital for analysis to understand the social and cultural underlying ideologies in media representation. Moreover, this chapter justifies why the use of situation comedies, particularly domestic sitcoms, are vital to the study of the representation of the American family. Sitcom representations warrant further study not to evaluate specific shows or characters, but in an effort to understand what society views as conventional and customary. Domestic sitcoms, a sub-categorization of situation comedy, concentrate almost exclusively on
the family and its problems. The narrative of each episode focuses on a disruption to the family harmony that must be quickly solved before the next episode. Some notable examples of domestic sitcoms include *Father Knows Best, Leave it to Beaver, Bewitched, The Andy Griffith Show, The Dick Van Dyke Show, The Jeffersons, The Cosby Show, Family Ties, Full House*, and *Step by Step*. These shows differ from other types of comedies, such as workplace comedies (see, for instance, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show, M*A*S*H, Cheers, Night Court, The Drew Carey Show, Scrubs, The Office, 30 Rock*, and *Parks and Recreation*), or comedies based on a group of friends acting as a pseudo-family (see, for instance, *Three’s Company, Laverne and Shirley, Perfect Strangers, Friends, How I Met Your Mother, The Big Bang Theory*, and *Girls*). Because domestic sitcoms focus almost exclusively on the family unit to what extent they sustain or challenge cultural values about the family necessitates investigation. Sitcoms that have aired on ABC or Disney Channel since the recession in 2008, and that began after a lull in domestic sitcom production, are included for study. These sitcoms include *Modern Family, The Middle, Good Luck Charlie, Suburgatory, Dog with a Blog, The Goldbergs*, and *Trophy Wife*. Thus, this dissertation focuses exclusively on the cultural impact of the Disney Corporation and the relevance of its family sitcoms. The cultural values about the American family that are integrated into its domestic sitcoms warrant a closer examination.

Next, this research also incorporates familial communication through the inclusion of an analysis of the relational benefits and costs of lying in chapter four. By including this interpersonal communicative approach to media analysis, this dissertation hopes to blend these fields as a way to examine how verbal deception in sitcoms affects the representation of family. This chapter begins with a clear conceptualization of deception and lying and the importance of studying lying, a common aspect of daily life that can account for 22-25% of social interactions
Next, it demonstrates the lack of research being done on lying and humorous media texts. Previous studies have examined communicative behaviors on television sitcoms (see, for instance, Comstock & Strzyzweski, 1990; Douglas, & Olson, 1995; Honeycutt, Wellman, & Larson, 1997; Larson, 1991; Skill & Wallace, 1990), but very few communication studies examined lying within media content. More specifically only two studies (see Leslie, 1992; Mazur & Kalbfleisch, 2003) have considered how lying in mediated representation reflects the depictions of the American family. These studies present two typologies for studying lying in media texts, but a more in-depth typology is needed. Despite the lack of research about lying in media texts, past communication scholars have found interesting connections between motivations for lying and the impact that deception can have on real life familial relationships.

Ultimately, through the connection to these scholars, this research investigates to what extent the lying portrayed on family sitcoms is indicative of further deviance of family representations who are not nuclear, middle-class families. Therefore, the research questions that this project considers involve not only the frequency of lying and the implications of the act, but to what extent lying is a primary feature of the narrative of each episode. The relationship between the liar and the recipient of the lie, as well as the motivation for telling the lie are also considered.

Chapter five discusses the methodology for this project and the justifications for the decisions made surrounding the method of research. Through a triangulated method of study, this dissertation assesses the social and cultural influence of the (re)presentation of the American family in sitcoms. Using Denzin’s (2012) call for triangulation methodology to be used for social transformation, this research utilizes triangulation to begin to understand the multifaceted meanings of the American family in mediated representation. Through the use of two forms of textual analysis – content analysis and narrative analysis – this research draws on the strengths of
both methods to produce a more multifaceted interpretation of the media texts and their ideological influence. By selecting a triangulated approach to research, this study does not mean to suggest that multiple methods can verify and confirm results. Instead, this method was chosen because of the underlying objective to uncover and interpret multiple ways of perceiving media’s (re)reflection and (re)presentation of the American family.

Chapter six focuses on the findings obtained from the first two research questions that inquire if there are any themes that are revealed about the familial relationships of the liar and the recipient of the lie, as well as the motivation for the act of lying. The frequency of lying in these categories are then used to specifically determine to what extent the relationship between the family members and the motivation for lying impact the overall impression of the familial characters. Finally, this chapter also addresses how family structure and class status are depicted when compared to the overall results surrounding the relationships of the characters and their motivation for lying. This chapter ultimately questions to what extent family structure and class status affect the depictions of the family on these domestic sitcoms.

The final research question is addressed in chapter seven, along with the enduring relational factors of whether or not there was a resolution to the lies told by the characters. This chapter considers how the act of lying disrupts or contributes to the narrative of each specific episode in the sample. It also considers how the familial characters reconcile their relationship or if other relational aspects and familial values marginalize the act of lying. Finally, this chapter also addresses to what extent does a resolution, or lack of resolution, further contribute to the interpretation of the family structure and class status.

Chapter eight is the final chapter in this dissertation and discusses the overall conclusions and the social and cultural implications of these mediated representations of the American
family. Given the desire to include a sociohistorical framework of domestic sitcoms since the recession in 2008, what broader implications do these mediated examples convey about the American perception of the family? This chapter considers the themes that emerged from the previous chapters and situates them within an American society that is still struggling to recover from the recession of 2008.
Chapter II: Critical Approaches to the American Family

Hammer and Kellner (2009) have suggested a critical media/cultural studies perspective “adopts a critical approach that interprets culture within society and situates the study of culture within the field of contemporary social theory and political struggle” (p. xxxvi). Because of its ambiguous meaning and the social and political ramifications of its influence, the conceptualization of the American family warrants a multifaceted approach. While it has been emphasized as a relational and communicative practice (see Jorgenson, 1989), the American family has been overlooked by research as a cultural construction (Schneider, 1968; Skolnick, 1995).

A key objective of this dissertation research is to analyze mainstream mediated representations that depict ideological themes about the American family. Yet, what does it mean to examine the "American family?" While the concept of the American family has no clear definition and its meaning is in flux, it still frequently refers to a nuclear family structure (The Changing American Family, 2001). Sociologists agree that the nuclear family has become a cultural symbol, deeply rooted in Western culture, rather than a social categorization (Schneider, 1968; Skolnick, 1995). Murdock (1949) coined the phrase “nuclear family” as a married man and woman living with their offspring. However, he also noted in American culture “the nuclear family was the type of family recognized to the exclusion of all others” (The Changing American Family, 2001).

Even though family structures have changed in real life and mediated images in the last sixty years, society still does not have a clear explanation of what the term American family means. Communication scholars have attempted to define families by form, functions, and
interactions (Segrin & Flora, 2011). When analyzing a family by form, researchers consider who is “in” the family and how they are connected (whether through marriage, biological, adoption, etc). This type of research is considered strongly objective, because there is clear criteria in establishing these judgments (Segrin & Flora, 2011). The term “nuclear family” fits within the structural definition of analyzing family by form. Traditionally, many family communication scholars define a nuclear family as “consisting of two heterosexual parents and one or more children” (Segrin & Flora, 2011, p. 4). When two parents remarry and their families merge, the new family is often referred to as a stepfamily or a blended family. DeFrain and Olson (1999) provide an operational definition of the stepfamily as a family in which “one or both of the married adults have children from a previous union with primary residence in the household” (p. 318). Moreover, as DeFrain and Olson (1999) argue, the term stepfamily is favored over “blended family” because a blended family “fosters unrealistic expectations that the new family will quickly and easily blend together into a harmonious family” (p. 318). Single parent families consist of only one parent with at least one or more children (DeGenova & Rice, 2002).

While this is just one approach to studying the family, sociologists agree that the nuclear family is a cultural symbol, developed by Western society, that has a deeply powerful influence on social research and public policy (Schneider, 1968; Skolnick, 1995). Since 2008, Americans have experienced a recession that has caused increases in numerous social and political concerns. As Americans are struggling with growing debt and dissatisfaction with those in power in the government (Cox, et al., 2011), many political figures within the government consistently advocate returning to a nuclear family structure with a father and a mother (Maillard, 2012). These politicians argue that the only “true” American family is seen in this image, and a multitude of America’s problems can be solved by embracing the ideology that the
American family has two heterosexual parents (Maillard, 2012). While there is a vague meaning of the American family, non-nuclear family structures are quickly becoming a scapegoat for many social problems in American society. As Maillard (2012) argued, family values “identifies an enemy… that allows citizens to channel frustration about the state of today’s world” (para. 2). This political implication leads to the viewpoint that non-traditional families are the cause of crime, violence, teenage pregnancy, illegal drug use, poverty levels, and any other societal problems. By using the concept that those who do not conform to the idealized version of the American family as scapegoats, politicians can ignore the broader, systematic structures that are actually the cause of many of these contemporary problems. This ideology also suppresses any ideas of class or gender inequality, because it emphasizes one clear symbolic example of what the notion of “family” should embrace. This symbolically annihilates alternative family structures, such as single parent, stepparent, and same-sex parent structures. Those who do not adopt these norms are considered responsible for current societal problems, as opposed to those in power who actually make the political decisions. Thus, those in powerful positions can conceal growing unemployment and a declining economy behind anyone who is deviant from the mainstream interpretation of the nuclear, middle-class family. As Wood (2006) wrote,

"Family" is ideologically charged. That is, cultural ideas, values, beliefs, structures, and practices shape our understandings of what family is and is not, and how families function. The often unrecognized and unchallenged ideology that informs understandings of family in Western culture marks the starting point of critical feminist theories of family, which interrogate values inherent in and reproduced by conventional views of family and explore how alternative perspectives and the ideologies that inform them
might reframe understandings of family and aspects of family life that are
deemed significant (p. 198).

This research will take a critical approach to media’s (re)presentation and the underlying
ideologies about family to gain a broader understanding of the cultural values surrounding
the idea of the American family.

**Representations of the Nuclear Family in the Media**

Even though there are varieties of the American family in real life, media images still
perpetuate the idea that the nuclear family is preferred. During the 1950s, the notion of the
American family featured two heterosexual parents and their children. These television shows
depicted a hard-working father, a stay-at-home mother, and their loving children. This
interpretation was repeatedly depicted in media representations, particularly family sitcoms, such
as *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. Television sitcoms such as these presented an
idealized myth that the nuclear family was the preferred social and cultural model (Coontz,
1992). A nuclear family structure created recognizable roles for each member of the family to
aspire toward. With their harmonious families and no problem that could not be solved in less
than thirty minutes, the characters in these 1950s sitcoms implied that the nuclear family was the
preferred family structure. Blended or stepparent families, single parent families, and other
family structures were rarely endorsed during this time (Taylor, 1989). Thus, the nuclear family
was reinforced as the idealized family structure.

Because there is an emphasis placed on the nuclear family structure, it is somewhat
expected that research by Cantor and Cantor (1991) discovered that single parents on television
typically remarry. They observed “given the high value placed on marriage and the nuclear
group, it is not surprising that many single parents are shown to marry, remarry, or look for
lovers in these television shows” (Cantor & Cantor, 1991, p. 31). Sitcoms such as *The Brady
Bunch* and *Step by Step* symbolize these findings in that the family is depicted as improved with
the addition of stepparents and step-siblings to the family unit. They concluded that in media
representation, single parents perpetually search for a mate to remarry in order to complete the
nuclear family structure. Once again, these media representations reinforce the ideology of the
nuclear family.

Current television sitcoms such as *The Middle* (2009-present) and *Good Luck Charlie*
(2010-2014) continue to depict the images that a preferred family is a nuclear family. Airing on
ABC and the Disney Channel, both family sitcoms present nuclear family structure
representations. While alternative family structures occasionally appear in current television
representations, such as *Modern Family* (2009-present), which features two same-sex fathers
raising a baby, *Raising Hope* (2010-2014), which features a single father raising his daughter,
and *Trophy Wife* (2013-2014), which depicts a blended family with multiple stepparents, the
nuclear family with two heterosexual parents remains a constant in American culture. Moreover,
it remains the preferred structure, because when alternative family structures are presented, they
are depicted as different, and therefore, inferior. This representation of family structure is not so
different from Stuart Hall’s (2010) observation of the contestation of the marginality, in that a
“positive” counter-position of black representation was always presented in order to further
marginalize those who do not fit into this idealized imagery. Yet, it is their differences that are
the main focus of the discourse and thus, can generate the most meaning. As Cloud (2004)
observed, representations of Afghan people were depicted through binary oppositions of self and
Other. One representation is clearly preferable and the other is depicted as inferior. The representation of the American family functions under a similar constraint in that the nuclear family is championed both in news media and in fictional media content. The nuclear family becomes the “self” within American culture, while any other family structure represents the “other.” When present in comparison with other forms of family structure, the nuclear family representation is often valued and well-regarded. This often leads to a symbolic alienation of other forms of representation. Symbolic alienation is the way in which media representations tend to marginalize, belittle, or exclude certain characters (Williams, 2003). Therefore, traditional familial roles may be packaged as a “new” family, but still may be a visual reminder of a conventional nuclear family ideology. “The traditional nuclear family continues to be featured in idealized terms. Whether family life is presented as liberating or confining, family shows present traditional values as correct and desirable” (Cantor & Cantor, 1991, p. 34). Because of media images, single parents, same-sex parents, polygamists, and other family structures are often interpreted as deviant and lacking in society today. However, by utilizing an intersectional approach to this research, this dissertation hopes to illuminate more of the complexities of the representation of family structure beyond these binary restrictions. As multifaceted as culture and familial values are, classifying them into only two binary categories ignores the complexities within them. Thus, through a broad overview of sitcom episodes, as well as a more detailed investigation of specific examples, this research seeks to develop a more in-depth study that two binary categories can provide.
The American Family and Class in Media Representation

While non-nuclear families have faced symbolic annihilation through the marginalization or disparagement of characters on sitcoms, working-class families have faced similar stereotypes. Working-class families appeared in the earliest television sitcoms. Yet by the end of the 1950s, television sitcoms changed to emphasize families with an upper-middle-class lifestyle. Television families were depicted as having an abundance of money and a comfortable financial lifestyle in order to persuade real life families that these images were attainable. Television promoted consumerism disguised as “traditional” values of functionalism and success. Taylor (1989) argued that television programs during the early years of television showed audiences “how to become perfect consumers and, by extension, perfect families” (p. 26). In other words, these carefully selected mediated images were never actually reflecting the American family, but instead were representing what advertisers sought. Rather, they were advertising a distorted version of the American Dream. Douglas (2003) remarked that poverty actually increased after the war and the economy was not as stable as it appeared on television. Yet, these images presented a perfect interpretation of the American Dream that further promoted consumerism. This ideological construction benefited businesses and advertisers foremost, and television’s portrayal of the family was shaped by this consumerist ideology.

In American society, the working-class is in the majority, but that is definitely not the case in mediated representation. According to Kendall (2011), about 30% of the U.S. population consists of the working-class, who hold blue-collar jobs as factory workers, salespeople, clerks, and service-sector workers. Yet when working-class families appear on television, they are significantly in the minority. An analysis of 262 domestic sitcoms revealed that 70% of the families are middle-class (Butsch, 1992). Middle-class jobs include “lower-level management,
semiprofessionals, and nonretail sales workers” who average approximately $70,000 in annual household income (Kendall, 2011, p. 15). Television shows also depict the upper middle-class perspective of “business owners, lawyers, doctors… and others who earn far above the national average” (Kendall, 2011, p. 15). Overall, working-class sitcoms have always been in the minority on television and limited to 10% of television portrayals (Butsch, 2011). In order to receive any representation, the working-class typically embraces the myth of the American Dream. While this idea appeals to television advertisers, it also marginalizes the struggles of real life working-class families (Leistyna, 2009). Viewers, despite their own working-class perspectives, may identify with the societal views of the wealthy, such as agreeing that cutting taxes for everyone is best, rather than enforcing higher taxes on the wealthiest percentage of Americans. They may also criticize social programs that assist the underprivileged and may see that the working-class, such as themselves, as merely people needing a hand-out. Kendall (2011) calls these representations “middle-class-values framing” in which “core values held by people in the middle-class should be the norm for this country and that these values remain largely intact over time despite economic, political, and cultural changes” (p. 18). Television representations imply that the working-class is a failure and a middle-class lifestyle is an obtainable goal. “The message that people in the working-class are responsible for their fate is a quintessential middle-class idea that ignores the structural conditions that shape social class” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 220). Thus, working-class characters are often framed as greedy, white-trash, buffoons, slobs, unemployed or have a poor work ethic, and even criminals (Kendall, 2011).

In particular, sitcoms perpetuate class-loaded stereotypes that imply that the individual working-class characters are to blame for their own lack of professional advancement (Kendall, 2011). Sitcoms often perpetuate the idea that personal failure is the cause of lack of professional
growth and this ideology is replicated in working-class characters who fail on sitcoms because of their own self-imposed deficiencies (Leistyna, 2009). Therefore, anyone who works hard enough can be successful at his or her job; if they are not, it is because of that individual’s personal flaw, such as laziness, poor work ethic, or lack of dedication or intelligence. This dominant ideology reinforces the American Dream, which emphasizes that anyone who works hard enough can be successful. If you aren't, there is something wrong with you. This concludes that class boundaries are adaptable and ignores broader social forces of structural inequality that marginalize the working class, particularly women. As McRobbie (2009) attested, popular culture now frames female individualism as a choice by claiming that feminism and equality have been achieved, and that structural barriers no longer restrict the individual from success. In this way, these representations frame that personal failure, and not systematic oppression, is the cause of working-class character’s lives. In other words, representations suggest that these characters are not marginalized because of broader social forces, but because of their own individual failures, such as poor work ethic, laziness, and dysfunctional parenting skills (Leistyna, 2009).

However, this type of class marginalization is nothing exclusive to American sitcom storylines, and cultural studies research has focused on it previously. Through a sociohistorical framework, Banville (2011) argued that sitcoms abide by the cultural examples set forth by earlier literature and music examples and simply continue the repression of class distinctions. Lower-class stereotypes are also the source of humor for American blue collar comedy tours (Hauhart, 2008). British sitcoms also “find the lower middle-class laughable and find them acceptable only when they or characters claiming to represent them express an appropriate kind of deference and humbleness” (Banville, 2011, p. 32). British sitcoms have a history of also
marginalized lower-class statuses through television comedy (Banville, 2011; Lockyer, 2010). Thus, humor at the marginalized or deviant individual serves as the one consistent in previous research on class stereotypes.

As Kendall (2011) argued, “framing is an important way in which the media emphasize some ideological perspectives and manipulate salience by directing people’s attention to certain ideas while ignoring others” (p. 5). Consequently, there are persuasive patterns about the representation of the American family and class status that continue to permeate television content. Whether they are economically or culturally motivated, these mediated representations are constructed to emphasize specific cultural values and family ideals, while marginalizing others.

Using the previous research on the American family structure and class representation, this dissertation investigates to what extent the nuclear family and the middle-class family are still the preferred ideological symbols as found by previous researchers. The cultural and social significance surrounding the ambivalence of the American family warrants more in-depth research about how mediated representations selectively contribute to the discourse about one's perception of the American family. The way in which television representations reinforce myths and stereotypes about what social constructions are preferred necessitates this type of research. In order to further discuss the social construction of our interpretations from media content, we must analyze to what extent the media emphasize particular ideological perspectives about the American family, while silencing others (Kendall, 2011).
CHAPTER III: THE CULTURAL INFLUENCE OF SITCOMS

The study of humorous media texts is crucial, because humor is a cultural entity, representative of the dominant ideologies within a culture (Mills, 2008). Because humor demonstrates a relationship between the media text and its audience, these particular texts are vital for analysis to understand the social and cultural underlying ideologies in media representation. Humor could be a preeminent genre where innovative interpretations of society can be analyzed, explored, discussed, and scrutinized. Because humor is a cultural entity, it can start the conversation about how differences in the representation of the American family highlight or marginalize social inequalities in a post-recession America.

While the study of humor in media texts can be applicable to a variety of mediums, this analysis specifically focuses on American television situation comedies, or sitcoms. Within television studies, sitcoms have demonstrated that they are a long-lasting genre which is flexible enough to adapt to remain an entertainment format (Hamamoto, 1989). From the early years of television, sitcoms were a primary feature. In the 1950s, advertisers and sponsors were able to promote their products on the shows, and situation comedies quickly became the most popular genre on television networks (McQueen, 2009). This chapter conceptualizes what defines a sitcom and the genre conventions surrounding them; the distinction between sitcoms and the sub-genre of domestic sitcoms are also considered. Next, a historical overview of the cultural relevance of sitcoms since their creation is established. After that, a more detailed description of each of the shows analyzed in this study is presented. The chapter concludes by presenting the research questions for this dissertation.
Defining the Sitcom Genre

A sitcom is defined as a half-hour series that features recurrent characters, a similar setting, and a narrative that is typically contained within one episode (Mills, 2008). Overall, a sitcom creates recognizable situations for the characters that, no matter what the problems, always contains simplistic resolutions. Sitcoms in the 1950s, such as *I Love Lucy*, utilized a multi-camera set-up and often recorded in front of a live studio audience. However, sitcoms that air today utilize a mix of this traditional method and a single-camera method. A single-camera method follows the characters closely and can discontinue the plot to reveal a character’s true thoughts or a humorous antidote (Wilson, 2010).

While sitcoms’ overall goal is humor, the genre has also been associated with reflecting or challenging cultural values. As Mills wrote,

The sitcom is commonly seen as a form with less social significance than 'factual' television and 'serious' fiction. In terms of representation, however, the genre has been read as a useful reflection of general social attitudes, with the growth and reduction of certain character types over time mirroring broader attitudes within society (p. 102).

Mills (2008) further criticized that research which only focused on the sitcom’s humor without considering the narrative within which that humor resonates, was incomplete. He argued, “while a specific joke may rest on stereotypes and may be told by a character who supports such stereotypes, the narrative within a specific episode, or that stretched across the series as a whole, may suggest a very different reading” (Mills, 2008, p. 107). The final research question
addresses that deficiency by considering how the narrative of the plot lines affects the representation of the family on the sampled sitcoms.

Therefore, researchers can examine sitcom representations not to evaluate specific shows or characters, but in an effort to understand what society views as normal. “In these ways, [the] sitcom becomes not only representative of a culture’s identity and ideology, it also becomes one of the ways in which that culture defines and understands itself” (Mills, 2008, p. 9). Using comedy, media content can influence what can be laughed at and what should be excluded. Mills (2008) observed that comedy serves a complex function as both entertainment and yet a genre that can be open to interpretation by its audience. As Fiske (1996) observed, “the television text can only be popular if it is open enough to admit a range of negotiated readings through which various social groups can find meaningful articulations of their own relationships to the dominant ideology” (p. 126).

The sitcom is often viewed as less serious and factual than dramas or reality television. However, it is for that very reason that sitcoms can also provide more subversive representation. “Comedy in American culture in general and in television sitcoms in particular is a major forum for reflecting and shaping cultural ideals; it is a testing ground for social formations from the simplest performance of mannerisms to the situation that gives the comedy its premise” (Landay, 2005, p. 91). As Morreale (2003) argued, the sitcom offers a space for audiences to identify with situations and experiment with the resolutions to frequent problems. Jenkins (2005) wrote: “Jokes may fuel such social transformations because they force us to confront the contradictions in our own thinking” (para. 16). Subversive possibilities that encourage discourse can be achieved under the pretext of humor. Yet, Hamamoto (1989) cautioned, “To a greater degree than perhaps any other popular art, the situation comedy has offered oppositional ideas, depicted
oppression and struggle, and reflected a critical consciousness that stops just short of political mobilization” (p. 2).

Previous sitcom research, particularly situated within media/cultural studies, has examined an array of topics including feminist possibilities (see, for instance, Bore, 2010; Crozier, 2008; Douglas, 1994; Dow, 1996; Gerhard, 2005; Mellencamp, 1997; Merril, 1988; Spangler, 2003), the connections among television, culture, and democratic ideology (see, for instance, Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Gilbert, 1997; Hamamoto, 1989; Jenkins, 2005; Morley, 1992; Morris, 1999), and popular culture and memory (see, for instance, Spigel & Jenkins, 1991). However, conceptualizing the American family as a social and cultural construction has been lacking within this type of research. While communication scholars have considered genre classifications, such as identifying domestic sitcoms as a sub-genre of situation comedies, cultural studies research has not addressed the family as a cultural creation and how those depictions challenge or reinforce social interpretations of the American family.

**Domestic Sitcoms**

Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, domestic sitcoms were introduced as a sub-category of situation comedy. While they still feature a recurring cast and a situation that needs to be resolved, domestic sitcoms tend to focus only on the family unit. “Family is the one experience to which virtually all viewers can relate. It evokes symbols and images advertisers like. And its plot possibilities are endless” (Kutulas, 2005, p. 49). Campbell, Martin, and Fabos (2010) also noted that because audiences see an aspect of themselves and their family in domestic sitcoms, “viewers identify more closely with the major characters in domestic comedies than with those in a sitcom” (p. 228).
Each week, the harmony of the family is threatened, but that disruption is typically resolved within the episode. “Sitcoms, like all serials, employ a ‘classical’ narrative structure that involves the disruption of a stable situation and its resolution within each episode” (McQueen, 2009, p. 57). While other sitcoms occasionally have storylines that will bridge multiple episodes, the domestic sitcom is unique in that a resolution is characteristically found within the same episode. Therefore, it is important to analyze sitcoms as a genre and how the disruption and resolution are represented each week in a formulaic manner.

Rather than concentrating on broader cultural and social problems that could be addressed, domestic sitcoms focus on the characters as part of the family. The achievement of the family’s needs and wishes take precedence over those of the community or worldwide (Hamamoto, 1989). Thus, the disruption in the narrative comes from a family problem and often contains a simplistic situation (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 2010). Overall, the problems and conflicts presented emphasize the family unit. The parents and/or the children confront the problem and then work together or individually to solve it (Cantor & Cantor, 1991). By the end of the episode, everything is magically solved and all characters are happy again. This instills a sense of well-being that the characters will return the next week with no significant changes.

Yet, the solutions presented only solve that episode’s individual disruption. It is a minimal closure to an immediate problem, rather than addressing any broader, systemic social problems. By focusing on the family in these comedies, the audience's concentration is on the family and their individual problems and not broader social hierarchies (Mills, 2008). Thus, domestic sitcoms exercise the authority that personal, individual concerns are more important than larger, social concerns. Moreover, these personal concerns are easily resolved typically within one episode, indicating that there are no problems that do not have easy solutions.
(Morreale, 2003). Attallah (2003) argued that the subjects a sitcom concentrate on are the difference between a domestic comedy, and a “socially relevant” one. A domestic comedy will solve the family’s immediate problems in that episode, without continuing to address broader issues over several episodes. A “socially relevant” sitcom may present a political or social taboo over a few episodes; these ideas ultimately can challenge the status quo. Morreale (2003) argued that sitcoms “are often ideologically progressive, ‘smuggling in’ challenging ideas and images under the guise of humor” (p. xii). In other words, the amount of weight given to a particular issue helps determine which type of situation comedy it may be. When the family is the primary focus on a domestic sitcom, socially relevant topics are not addressed or are given less weight than the family’s problems. Mills (2008) noted “this focus on the domestic and the individual has been one of the reasons for the criticism of sitcom’s failure to comically interrogate and undermine dominant ideologies. Sitcom has been a reflection of social changes, rather than an intervention into them” (p. 45). Given the focus of this dissertation on how the sitcom reproduces or defies conventional notions about the American family, it also concentrates on the absence of research on the domestic sitcom as a cultural entity about the social interpretation of the American family. As demonstrated in this review, past research has argued that the family is the focus of domestic sitcoms, without attesting to the broader implications. However, conceptualizing what the American family constitutes within these mediated representations is an in-depth social and cultural topic that can be addressed within domestic sitcoms.

**A Historical Overview of the Representation of Families on Sitcoms**

In particular, this dissertation focuses on sitcoms that have aired since the recession began in the United States in 2008. As previously observed, those in power conceptualize the
social and cultural ideas of what the American family looks like. What can these mediated representations reveal about our post-recession interpretations of the American family? An analysis of a text, Ang (1996) emphasized, “must be combined with an analysis of its social conditions of existence” (p. 20). Thus, this research frames its findings within a sociohistorical framework to further uncover the social context that these mediated representations are situated within. As Morreale (2003) argued, “By viewing sitcoms from a historical perspective, we are better able to witness the terrain upon which subject positions are offered, negotiated, and consented to (or not). The result is a snapshot of the evolution of the genre, which enables us to see shifting ideological positions as meaning is negotiated in the construction of social reality” (pp. xii-xiii). Thus, through a sociohistorical framework, this dissertation investigates what themes and patterns are prevalent in sitcoms since the recession in 2008. Surely, the representation of family in these sitcoms can (re)flect or, at the very least, give us some interpretation of the cultural values that are most prevalent to the creators of American cultural artifacts during this timeframe. In a post-recession America, this dissertation questions if television producers and sitcom writers still feature nuclear, middle-class families as the idealized image and if those who do not conform to those ideals are portrayed as the cause of social problems.

1950s: The Golden Age of Television

Before one can analyze sitcoms that have aired since 2008, a historical overview of the genre and family representations that have come before is warranted. Television’s episodic series, which heavily featured the family since its inception, is no less formulaic than radio programs, novels, or poems that were created before them (Taylor, 1989). As Taylor (1989)
wrote, “Domesticity was thus, from the beginning, integrated into the structures and forms of network television” (p. 15). Television is not the only form to be built on previous cultural frameworks; thus, incorporating those frameworks and considering to what extent these programs revealed about the time frame in which they were created and viewed is crucial.

As television was starting to become a popular form of media, the domestic sitcom rose to popularity during the 1950s. Shows such as *Leave It to Beaver, Father Knows Best,* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* provided “least objectionable programming” to a family who wanted to watch television together (Taylor, 1989). However, these idyllic family images erased any social or cultural tensions during the time. Instead, families demonstrated “how, in short, to become perfect consumers and, by extension, perfect families” (Taylor, 1989, p. 26). Working-class struggles to pay for food and rent, gender inequality as men returned from WWII, ethnic discrimination, and other social anxieties were readily disregarded. As Butsch (2005) observed, these families simply did not struggle. This formulaic design each week provided families as oversimplified stereotypes that were “content about their place in the family and the world” (Butsch, 2005, p. 115). Taylor (1989) called this area the “wisdom of post-New Deal capitalism: the end of ideology, a liberal-conservative dream of a harmonious society in which the conditions for social conflict would disappear because there would be plenty of everything to go around” (p. 26). Underlying tensions about these idealized representations were dismissed, as happy smiling families returned to the television screen each week to reassure Americans that everything was okay. Families on television moved to the suburbs, where domesticity was the symbol of middle-class status.

Yet, critics have heavily criticized these familial representations as less situated in reality and more a creation of advertisers’ desires. At first glance, marriage and birth rates were higher
and divorce rates were lower during the 1950s (Coontz, 1992). Economic improvements after
the war also made homeownership rise and working-class families were able to move into
middle-class status. As Coontz (1992) explains:

By the mid-1950s, nearly 60 percent of the population had what was
labeled a middle-class income level ($3,000 and $10,000 in constant
dollars), compared to only 31 percent in the ‘prosperous twenties’, before
the Great Depression. By 1960, thirty-one million of the nation’s forty-
four million families owned their own home, 87 percent had a television,
and 75 percent possessed a car. The number of people with discretionary
income doubled during the 1950s (pp. 24-25).

Thus, the images of happy, smiling families appeared to represent the same cultural realities
for society in the 1950s. Yet historians cite that many real life families did not resemble the
television depictions presented (see, for instance, Coontz, 1992; Douglas, 2003; Taylor,
1989). If real life families did resemble television families, the most common causes for
their success were saving during the war, buying power after the war as businesses thrived,
and middle-class wages thrived (Coontz, 1992). “During the 1950s, real wages increased by
more than they had in the entire previous half century” (Coontz, 1992, p. 29). In contrast,
many families could not take part in this economic boom. Throughout the 1950s, 25% of
Americans were poor and there were no food stamps or housing programs to assist them
(Coontz, 1992). In addition, unlike the almost exclusively white families shown on
television at the time, Mexican immigrants came to the United States, African-American
populations rose in southern states, and the Puerto Rican population was greater in New York
than in San Juan (Coontz, 1992). These families faced poverty rates that were readily ignored by television representations. In fact, family researchers have not been able to determine any time period where real life families are able to achieve the idealized images that television presented (Stafford & Dainton, 1994). “Nostalgia for a lost family tradition that in fact never existed prejudices understanding of the conditions of families in contemporary society” (Hareven, 1982, p. 460).

When working-class families appeared on sitcoms in the 1950s, they typically conformed to an inferior stereotype: an ineffectual, bungling, immature, and lazy buffoon. The working-class wife and even their children are smarter than the working-class man. Thus, the working-class man was depicted as the fool, even within his own family. Shows such as The Honeymooners, The Life of Riley, and I Remember Mama presented men who were incapable of leading their families. Because of these perceived failures, these working-class men could not ascribe to be like their middle-class counterparts. Through his analysis of 1950s working-class men, Sheehan (2010) described the “ideal” of masculinity in 1950s society:

He possessed virtue, an economic and social independence that servants, slaves, women, and children lacked…He was at once individualistic – cultivating his own economic and social status – and self-sacrificing – serving the interests of the republic and his dependents (p. 565).

Characters such as Ralph Kramden from The Honeymooners were also presented as cautionary tales who became an ideological sign of “the frustrated, lonely failure” (Sheehan, 2010, p. 566). Because Kramden could not fulfill his role as provider for his wife, he, and not the “demands of postwar consumer republicanism”, is inferior (Sheehan, 2010, p. 577). Alice Kramden, Ralph’s
wife, also started a trend in sitcoms in which a woman could take the “winning side” of an argument only when her husband was portrayed as foolish (Senzani, 2010). In working-class families, gender roles are portrayed as inverted. Shows with working-class families present the ideals of feminism, while maintaining underlying patriarchal tones. The wife is portrayed as smarter than her husband, yet conforms and forgives his idiotic behavior (Walsh, Fürsich, & Jefferson, 2008).

In contrast, middle-class families during the 1950s were portrayed as “superparents” (Butsch, 2005). These parents were smart, sophisticated, and could solve any family member’s problem. There was no problem without a resolution and most solutions included a moral lesson for the children. If any character was depicted as a fool, it was often the wife. Unlike working-class portrayals in which the man is portrayed as foolish, the lower status of the fool was relegated to the wife or the children in middle-class households.

Consequently, many real life families did not resemble the television depictions being presented. Instead, the mediated representations of the American family in the 1950s “significantly distorted family life and family relations so that the post-war family is often falsely remembered in ways that associate a specific and invariant family structure with a wide range of unrealistically positive outcomes, including high relational satisfaction, family stability, and individual and family achievement” (Douglas, 2003, p. 68). Douglas (2003) further argued that the misrepresentations of the 1950s television family have harbored a sense of inadequacy in modern real life families. Even sixty years ago, media representations did not necessarily reflect social ideas, but instead valued the idealized images of the American family. As Taylor (1989) argued, “The Nelsons and Cleavers were advertising and
embodying the American dream, portraying the middle-class family as an essential building block of a benign social order” (p. 17).

**1960s: Gimmicks Invade the Traditional Family**

As the 1960s began, domestic sitcoms retained many of the traditional images and conventions that had been a staple of the 1950s. Shows such as *The Dick Van Dyke Show, The Beverly Hillbillies, The Flintstones, My Three Sons, The Andy Griffith Show, Dennis the Menace*, and *The Donna Reed Show* continued to portray moral and honest families in the suburbs, striving to live the American Dream. However, for the first time since its inception, networks started to face competition among each other (Taylor, 1989). This competition led to network executives searching for the latest gimmick to differentiate their network from the other major networks. With the desire for higher ratings and to win time slots, networks turned to other niche approaches to the domestic sitcom. For example, *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters* provided an early example of critiquing the traditional image of the nuclear family as it had been portrayed during the 1950s. As Morowitz (2007) wrote, “Their very existence challenged the definition of ‘average’, questioning the notion of what constituted a typical American family at a moment of great social and cultural transformation” (p. 35). While still portraying nuclear families with multiple children, who live in the suburbs, *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family* utilized the grotesque as a way of questioning “normalcy” in American families (Morowitz, 2007). Using the monster culture and satire and parody, these shows provided some early examples of how domestic sitcoms could provide subversive possibilities while still confirming to genre conventions.
In addition, supernatural domestic sitcoms such as *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched* also found success during the 1960s. While still operating with the sitcom genre conventions of featuring a loving family, *Bewitched* also provided the opportunity to prevent an alternative depiction of housewife ecstasy. The main character, Samantha, attempts to dismiss her old life and heritage as a witch and conform to “normalcy” in domestic bliss with her husband, Darin. Darin strongly disapproves of anything atypical to the domestic, mortal world that he knows. Therefore, under first consideration, this domestic sitcom appears to convey further heteronormative assumptions that networks during the 1960s would consider “less objectionable.” However, as Fairfield-Artman, Lippard, and Sansom (2005) argued because the show was concealed within taboo topics of witchcraft, *Bewitched* could also draw connections between Samantha’s desire to be an idyllic wife for her husband and the performative elements that the witchcraft scenes provided. Samantha engages in a performance as a domestic housewife, while she struggles to find her sense of self and power within the household. The social conventions of gender inequality can be addressed through the guide of supernatural forces. For the first time, the role of housewife on television was depicted as a multi-faceted, fluid identity. Situated within familial values during the time period, *Bewitched* also provided the opportunity to present abnormal behavior in which women could challenge the domestic bliss that was so profoundly ingrained in 1950s and many other 1960s domestic sitcoms.

The first domestic sitcom to also breach into the realm of workplace comedies was *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Rob Petrie (portrayed by Dick Van Dyke) spent time both with his coworkers and his family at home. As Taylor (1989) noted: “*The Dick Van Dyke Show* was one of the first series to push the domestic sitcom into the public sphere by entering the
world of work and setting up a work-family. It also transposed the 1950s dream of middle-class prosperity and harmony into the more sophisticated urban key of the 1960s” (p. 31). Yet, the sitcom still emphasized happy bliss in its domestic scenes within the home. Despite social and cultural revolutions that were occurring, television’s representation of the family still remained confined within these perceived genre conventions. The family unit was essential, not the counterculture of revolutionists that challenged norms of sexuality, education, clothing, music, and drugs. Civil disobedience flourished in real life during the 1960s, but not for the families on domestic sitcoms.

1970s: Socially Relevant Sitcoms & Cultural Shifts

Perhaps the 1970s have provided one of the greatest cultural shifts for the American sitcom. For the first time since its inception, the representation of the American family shifted away from consensual to challenging. Taylor (1989) explains the shift:

Although the episodic series, framed in the imagery of family, remained the dominant television genre, both comedy and drama moved away from the consensual mood of the 1950s and 1960s toward a more abrasive style and more open confrontation with contemporary social issues. The turn toward “relevance,” as the trend was called among network executives, grew out of a complex interplay between, on the one hand, emergent social and cultural trends and, on the other, more immediate pressures for change in ratings and programming strategies within the industry itself (p. 44).
For the first time, networks turned away from attracting a broad audience and instead considered how much an audience member earned and how much of those earnings were disposable income. By targeting specific audience groups, or what would become known as demographics, networks could narrow mass audiences by income, age, and other variables that would ensure the greatest profits for advertisers (Taylor, 1989).

This led networks to consider scheduling programs in even more strategic ways. Rather than considering the widest audience possible, audiences were considered based on how much they might be willing to spend. Networks, thus, began targeting the youth demographic and the “youth culture” (Taylor, 1989). Since the younger generation was enthralled with rebellion and social conflict, these themes started to emerge in television sitcoms as well. For perhaps the first time, the sitcom genre could depict multiple distinct perspectives that could be targeted toward specific viewers (Taylor, 1989).

This appearance of socially relevant sitcoms have provided networks and television studies researchers with a new subgenre within the situation comedy. While it does conform to some of the conventions of a traditional sitcom, such as its time frame of 30 minutes, its objective to provide humor to audiences, and its ability to create recognizable characters and situations, the socially relevant sitcom is different in one very key area: its narrative. Rather than focusing on the family’s problems and domestic or workplace agendas, the socially relevant sitcom centers its narrative within the social order and then subsequently disrupts it (Attallah, 2003). While it resembles traditional sitcoms, the relevant sitcom is unique precisely because it operates within the conventions of the genre, while producing an equilibrium that is disrupted (Attallah, 2003). The happy, smiling families at the end of an episode are a rarity in favor of addressing issues that do not have such simplistic resolutions.
As Attallah argued, “Families find themselves living in the world of the present without magical solutions and, to some extent, without the aid of peaceful and laughing love” (p. 108-109).

Perhaps the most famous and well-known example of a socially relevant sitcom from the 1970s is *All in the Family*. Premiering in 1971, the pilot episode had been passed over by other networks because it was considered too controversial for mainstream broadcast. However, the president of entertainment at CBS, Bob Wood, viewed the show as an opportunity to attract a more youthful audience to the network. With this demographic in mind, Wood green-lit the series and the character Archie Bunker was created. Progressive ideas were debated between this working-class bigot and the progressive members of his family, his daughter and son-in-law. The show quickly ascended to number one in the ratings, where it remained for five years (Taylor, 1989). The show also led to several successful spinoffs including *Maude*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*.

Following the success of *All in the Family*, CBS also created *M*A*S*H*, a complex sitcom about the repercussions of the Vietnam War. The perceived wackiness of the show was designed to attract younger views, and the show remained a hit until its cancellation in 1980 (Taylor, 1989).

These shows were a stark departure from the domestic sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s, precisely because of the narratives of each episode. Rather than focusing on the immediate family or pseudo-family workplace, these socially relevant sitcoms provided the ideal opportunity to operate within the sitcom genre, while also considering broader social and cultural concerns. Instead of promoting domesticity and the possibilities of the American Dream, these shows emphasized social disruption and change. Simplistic
resolutions were gone in favor of significant and fundamental change, at least for as much as television representation can allow.

As the decade continued, however, there was yet another shift in the type of sitcoms found on television. While many sitcoms attempted to replicate successful television themes, in the late 1970s, ABC network took the opposite approach. When the National Association of Broadcasters established “Family Hour” from 8:00 to 9:00 pm nightly, shows that unequivocally avoided violence and sex were aired during this time period. Thus, the socially relevant sitcoms were typically identified as unacceptable during this time and quickly diminished in popularity. In an effort to remove itself from last place status in the ratings at the time, ABC capitalized on the “Family Hour” by airing nostalgic themed sitcoms, such as *Happy Days, Laverne and Shirley*, and *Three’s Company*. As Taylor (1989) argued “Taken together, these series seemed to be announcing the death of the counterculture, ‘normalizing’ youth by stripping away its oppositional edge and integrating young people into families” (p. 54). Thus, socially relevant sitcoms appeared to be more of a cycle within the genre, than a mainstay (Taylor, 1989).

**1980s: Backlash from Social Relevance**

While the 1970s have provided a backdrop for socially relevant sitcoms, the 1980s saw a stark reverse back to the conventional family values approach to network television. Since the 1970s still utilized the family as a genre convention, the conservative culture of the 1980s resulted in a backlash against the new “troubled” families that did not embrace the same familial values found in 1950s representation. Sitcoms in the early part of the decade concentrated on alternative family structures that still promoted conventional familial values (Cantor, 1991).
Sitcoms then declined in popularity and television critics thought the genre could die off all together. However, the mid-1980s saw a resurgence in sitcoms with shows such as *The Cosby Show, Family Ties, Cheers, Diff’rent Strokes,* and *Who’s the Boss.* While these shows conformed more to sitcom conventions that had come before in both the domestic and workplace realms, there were also popular shows that deviated from these conventions. *Kate and Allie* featured two divorced women, who decide to move into the same home to raise their children together. *Who’s the Boss* depicted a gender role-reversal, in which Tony was the housekeeper and remained in the home and Angela went to work and financially supported the family. Even alternative family structures, such as *My Two Dads,* a show about an orphaned girl raised by her mother’s two male friends, and *Webster* and *Diff’rent Strokes,* shows about mixed-race families, found success during the mid- or late 1980s. Yet, while the overall façade of family structure was altered during this time, the deeper meaning of family unity remained. Taylor (1989) cited that during an episode of *Who’s the Boss,* the mother clarifies what a family is by saying, “‘a family means people who share each others’ lives and care about each other.’” While this definition may encompass the variety of domestic arrangements…its blandness is designed to offend no one” (p. 23). Social problems were once again removed, in favor of focusing on the family’s immediate concerns. As Taylor (1989 observed, “Here the television narrative hedges its bets by nodding in the direction of radical changes in family form and structure without taking them seriously” (p. 159). As Staiger (2000) argued, “While the low-key humor and comedy based on situations or character flaws created an appearance of realism in contrast to the other sitcoms on television [during the 1980s], that choice eliminated the hard-sell moralizing that accompanied the social relevance sitcoms” (p. 151). The implication was that gender, ethnic, and class inequalities no longer existed in America, when the reality was that the lines of
division were intensifying under the conservative political ideals of the time period (Taylor, 1989).

Class depictions have faced similar problematical portrayals during the 1980s. Perhaps the most notable example of the dismissal of class issues came from *The Cosby Show*. This African-American, upper middle-class family featured a father, who was a doctor, and a mother, who was a lawyer. Together they have four daughters and a son. However, rather than confront class issues that face many real life African-American families, the Huxtables lifestyle and approach to family values resonates with the 1950s style of family representation. With the exception of a few “special” episodes, the problems this family confronts are all relatively simplistic and their orderly lives are restored at the conclusion of each episode. Instead of challenging broader social and cultural concerns, the show often concluded with a “learning experience, a lesson in social adjustment for the children” (Taylor, 1989, p. 161). Rather than instilling values of defiance, these shows emphasized complacency with the status quo (Taylor, 1989). The humor of each show focused less on sitcom conventions, such as one-liners and misunderstandings, and more on character foibles, or shortcomings (Staiger, 2000). As Butsch (2005) observed, parents could now make mistakes and display imperfections, but if they were middle-class status, they could still provide a moral lesson to their children. Individual flaws and problems are emphasized, while broader, systematic issues are readily ignored.

Moreover, the parents on *The Cosby Show*, both have successful careers, have plenty of time to spend with their children, while still maintaining a lavish lifestyle. Consequently, the show depicts an unattainable ideal for many African-American families. As Jhally and Lewis (1992) commented, *The Cosby Show* and other television shows similar to it “envisage class not as a series of barriers but as a series of hurdles that can be overcome” (p. 73). They argued that
the show presented a “freedom of opportunity” in which if the Huxtables can attain it, so can any other African-American or working-class person. The social barriers perceived to be obstructing one’s path have been knocked over and inequality is now an idea of the past (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). During the 1950s, the stable nuclear family and its domesticity was a given; during the 1980s, these families needed to work hard, but could still achieve the American Dream (Taylor, 1989).

1990s: Conventional Sitcom Meets Satire

As FOX struggled to become a legitimate network and compete with the other major networks on television in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the network ventured into a unique approach to the sitcom genre: satire. The other three major networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC had encompassed the majority of prime-time television programming for the last fifty years and FOX was searching for something to make its network unique. Most notably, The Simpsons and Married… with Children were the most remembered sitcoms from this time. Yet underneath their satiric look at family life, the shows still conformed to working-class stereotypes. The working-class men were still bungling idiots with wives and children smarter than them. Ultimately, as Morreale (2003), argued The Simpsons and Married … with Children, served more as parodies and satires of the idealized nuclear families than presenting any real social commentary. Marc (1997) concurred with this conclusion about Married … with Children: “At first glance, the show seems to be a social satire aimed at the pieties of American family life. After only several dozen episodes, however, it reveals itself as not so much a critique of society as a parody of sitcoms” (p. 192). In this regard, these shows parody the idealized media representations of family life, but fail to address any substantial systematic cultural or social
issues (Marc, 1997; Morreale, 2003). Morreale concluded that the shows really only adapted their style of humor to fit a target demographic of younger viewers who liked watching parodies.

Perhaps the one sitcom that at least attempted to highlight the struggles of class status was *Roseanne*. “*Roseanne*’s show arises not so much from narrative suspense about her actions as hero, not from her one-liners, but from the economy or wit by which the show brings together two discourses on family life: one based on traditional liberalism and the other on feminism and social class” (Karlyn, 2003, p. 252). Contrary to previous sitcoms that ignored class consciousness, *Roseanne* attempted to encourage defiance of systematic constraints. Henry (2003) observed that the show’s narrative resembled those of its viewers, allowing them to identify with the family’s struggles. Lee (1992) remarked, “the series demonstrates through its narrative and plot the constant tension of working class experience, and, through humour, the absurdities and pain of living and participating in the American Dream” (p. 92). *Roseanne*’s various jobs, whether as a factory worker, waitress, or business owner, showed her working with other women on a regular basis (Mills, 2008). In one memorable scene, *Roseanne* refuses to allow her boss to continue dictating unreasonable workplace demands. Not only does the scene depict *Roseanne* challenging her boss and quitting her job, but it shows the other women in the factory following *Roseanne*’s lead. This scene clearly demonstrates the power of collectivistic social action, which is a rarity on television, but especially among women.

Rockler (2006) also studied a 1990s sitcom that sought a younger demographic: *Friends*. She concluded that the hip, young urban friends replaced the family sitcom, staple of television comedy, but still failed to represent the collective struggles of marginalized groups. “The self-absorbed characters do not exhibit a consciousness that their personal struggles with careers, relationships, and even issues such as single motherhood are part of a systemic, political context
that transcend their own circumstances” (Rockler, 2006, p. 245). She describes how individuals in American culture are encouraged to “fix themselves” in order to function within existing social structures. She uses the concept of therapeutic rhetoric, “or discourse that discourages citizens from contextualizing their personal problems within structural power dynamics” (Rockler, 2006, p. 246). Individual resourcefulness is valued more than any collective political action. The characters must learn to work within the system, rather than challenge it in any way. This is particularly true when facing economic issues. “According to Friends, if a woman faces financial difficulties or experiences problems in the workplace, she can resolve these problems easily through self-initiative” (Rockler, 2006, p. 254). While the female characters on the show hate, lose, and even quit their jobs, there are no significant consequences for any of them. In the end, the system is fair and any woman can be self-sufficient through hard work (Rockler, 2006).

Shows such as Grace Under Fire, King of the Hill, and King of Queens featured more working-class characters, but the same recycled buffoon stereotype during the 1990s. “Of fifty-three new domestic sitcoms from 1990 to 1999, sixteen featured working-class families” (Butsch, 2005, p. 128). In contrast, Step by Step, Home Improvement, and Everybody Loves Raymond featured flawed middle-class fathers, but nothing like the working-class fathers. After the new millennium, shows such as According to Jim, Grounded for Life, and Malcolm in the Middle continued the same familial patterns established during the 1990s.

Because this dissertation examines domestic sitcoms that have aired since the recession in 2008, the following domestic sitcoms from ABC and Disney Channel were chosen for analysis: Modern Family (2009-present), The Middle (2009-present), Good Luck Charlie (2010-2014), Suburgatory (2011-2014), Dog with a Blog (2012-present), The Goldbergs (2013-present), and Trophy Wife (2013-2014).
Domestic Sitcoms Since the Recession

2009 Domestic Sitcoms

While comedies were still plentiful in 2009, family sitcoms seemed to be nearing extinction (Bellafante, 2009). Domestic sitcoms were readily ignored in favor of other sitcom configurations, including work-place and dating comedies, and other production techniques, such as single-camera and mockumentary-style sitcoms. The last notable sitcoms that featured a family were Arrested Development (2003-2006) and King of Queens (1998-2007). As Bellafante (2009) argued, “The family sitcom, as our understanding would have it, lost its cultural currency when networks determined that for the affluent viewers they sought, the workplace had become the new household, the cubicle the new bedroom and young careerist upstarts the precocious toddlers of the urban nursery” (para. 1).

However, in the fall of 2009, ABC green-lit the domestic sitcom Modern Family (2009-present). ABC was deeply struggling in the ratings during this time (Carter, 2009) and often came in fourth among the major television networks in both viewers and demographics. ABC also hadn’t won an Emmy award for best comedy in twenty years (Stelter, 2010). Thus, ABC executives decided to build a comedy block on Wednesday nights that featured domestic sitcoms. Anchored within the 9:00 p.m. hour, Modern Family proved to be the greatest ratings draw with 12.6 million viewers and a 4.2 rating with adults 18-49 for its pilot episode (Hibberd, 2010). This was also the highest rated half-hour comedy debut on any network since 2007 (Hibberd, 2010). The Middle (2009-present), which premiered one week later at 8:30 pm, also fared well in the ratings, attracting 8.7 million viewers and a 2.6 rating with adults 18-49 (Seidman, 2009). Both shows were quickly renewed for second seasons (Seidman, 2010),
despite the other two domestic sitcoms in the Wednesday comedy block eventually being
cancelled.

*Modern Family* is an unconventional family sitcom that uses a mockumentary format.
Mockumentary shows combine a sitcom format with a reality show style, but heavily script the
plot, characters, and dialogue (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 2010). The sitcom *The Office* has
achieved popular success both in Britain and America and uses this type of format. Rather than a
three-camera set-up, like traditional sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* pioneered, a mockumentary is a
genre of media that looks and sounds like a documentary, but within the context of a fictional
program (Hight, 2001). A multiple-camera set-up is typically recorded in front of a live
audience and features a laugh track, while the single-camera format does not have either of these
elements (Wilson, 2010). Instead, a single-camera follows the action and frequently cuts away
from the show to provide the audience more details about the characters' true thoughts and
feelings (Wilson, 2010). *Modern Family*, particularly through the first season, also features a
voiceover by one of the characters summarizing the family lesson of the episode. Through a
mockumentary, characters can break the fourth wall by making eye contact and even looking
directly at the camera (Detweiler, 2012). As Modern Family’s executive producer, Christopher
Lloyd remarked in an interview: “We get a lot of mileage from characters just glancing at the
camera on their way through a scene. Also, there are little discovered moments we can point to,
where in a standard comedy you'd have to indicate that to the audience more” (Wilson, 2010,
para. 8). Consequently, this mockumentary appears to capture some aspects of perceived reality
about the interactions of the family members. “Mockumentaries 'work' because of the
assumptions and expectations that we as viewers have of representations of reality. When we see
a text that looks and sounds real, we tend to begin reading and responding to it as factual. We
may in fact read 'real' texts in very different ways to fictional texts” (Hight, 2001, para. 5).

Kocela (2009) further observed that because of mocumentary’s parallels to the reality show genre, there is a perceived sense of connectedness between the audience and a show’s characters. By combining comedy with this “reality”, the creators use a style that appears more realistic than traditional shows.

*Modern Family* focuses on three very diverse families that are all related to one another. Jay Pritchett, an upper-middle-class business owner, is the patriarch of the entire family. Six months before we meet the family, Jay remarries a younger Columbian woman named Gloria, who has a 10-year old son, Manny. Manny’s father is occasionally featured as a guest star on the show, but Jay now becomes Manny’s main father figure in this stepparent family. Jay’s daughter, Claire, embodies the nuclear family structure. Claire, a stay-at-home mother when the series begins, is married to Phil Dunphy, a realtor, and they have three children together, Haley, Alex, and Luke. Claire’s brother is Mitchell Pritchett, a lawyer, who represents a same-sex family configuration with his long-term partner, Cameron Tucker. In the pilot episode, the two adopt a baby girl, Lily.

*The Middle* features one nuclear family, the Hecks. Francis (“Frankie”) and Mike Heck have three children: Axl, Sue, and Brick. Unlike many of the families on *Modern Family*, the Hecks are working-class and struggle to pay the bills. Frankie works as a car salesperson in season 1, while Mike works in a quarry, until he is laid off half way through the season. While not a mockumentary, *The Middle* does utilize a single-camera format, with frequent voiceovers from Frankie.
2010-2012 Domestic Sitcoms

In April 2010, *Good Luck Charlie* (2010-2014) premiered on Disney Channel. The show centers on the Duncan family of Denver, CO. This nuclear, middle-class family features parents, Bob, an exterminator, and Amy Duncan, a nurse, and their four children. During the first season, their children, P. J., Teddy, and Gabe are adjusting to life after the addition of their new baby sister, Charlie. The show concludes each episode with Teddy giving advice to her baby sister through her video diaries. While the show is shot in a traditional multi-camera format, when Teddy does her video diary entries, it is a chance for her to convey her thoughts and feelings more in-depth to the audience. According to an interview by *Good Luck Charlie*’s creators, Drew Vaupen and Phil Baker, the show was created in response to the single-camera formats that dominated ABC (Owen, 2010). Vaupen stated: “It’s a safe, TGIF show. [Networks] had moved away from all of this with single-camera comedy. It wasn’t done anymore” (Owen, 2010, para. 8). *Good Luck Charlie* premiered to 4.7 million viewers in 2010 and ended in 2014 after four seasons and a television movie.

*Suburgatory* premiered on ABC in September 2011. Airing between *The Middle* and *Modern Family*, *Suburgatory*’s title comes from a combination of the words “suburban” and “purgatory” and embodies the satiric premise of the show. George Altman and his daughter, Tessa, move from their home in New York City to the suburbs. Single parent George believes that Tessa will have a “better life” in the fictional town of Chatswin, but the family soon discovers that no place is perfect. The show also predominately features two other families: Dallas Royce and her daughter, Dalia; and Sheila and Fred Shay and their children Lisa and Ryan. *Suburgatory* premiered to 9.8 million viewers and a 3.3 rating with adults 18-49 (Gorman, 2011). Despite its cancellation after its third season in 2014, this sitcom is crucial to
this research since it serves as the only example of a single parent household portrayed in domestic sitcoms.

_Dog with a Blog_ is a Disney channel sitcom that premiered in October 2012. The show features the Jennings-James family and their dog, Stan. Ellen Jennings marries Bennett James after three months of dating. Ellen and her daughter, Avery, move in with Bennett and his two children, Tyler and Chloe. Although they are a stepfamily, the show rarely acknowledges that distinction after the pilot episode. There is also no mention of Avery’s father or Tyler and Chloe’s mother. Bennett is a child psychologist, though he is almost always depicted as less intelligent than his children. The family dog, Stan, talks to the children and even writes his own blog. His monologues serve as the voiceover for many of the plot lines.

### 2013 Domestic Sitcoms

Created by Adam F. Goldberg and mainly based on his childhood during the 1980s, _The Goldbergs_ premiered in September 2013. The show premiered in the Tuesday at 9:00 timeslot to 8.9 million viewers (Kondolojy, 2013) and was renewed for a second season in May 2014. Set in Jenkintown, PA, _The Goldbergs_ features Murray and Beverly Goldberg and their three children: Barry, Erica, and Adam. Beverly’s father, affectionately called Pops, also appears in the show. As mentioned above, series creator Adam F. Goldberg modeled the show after his childhood and many of the scenes from the episodes are shown juxtaposed to his home movies from when he was young. The single-camera format of the show also features Adam’s adult self narrating the action and making comments throughout the episodes.

_Trophy Wife_ also premiered in September 2013. The show features the new relationship between Peter Harrison, a middle-aged lawyer who has been married twice before, and his wife,
Kate, an attractive and much younger woman. The show’s title, according to executive producers, was meant to be ironic, since Kate’s character is anything but a clichéd stereotype (Ng, 2013). Instead the show focuses on challenging the stereotypes of femininity, including featuring strong female relationships among Kate and Pete’s two ex-wives, Diane and Jackie. Diane and Pete have two children, Warren and Hillary, and Jackie and Pete have an adopted son, Bert. The series also follows Kate’s attempts at bonding with her new stepchildren. Following *The Goldbergs* on Tuesday at 9:30, *Trophy Wife* premiered to 6.69 million viewers (Kondolojy, 2013), but was canceled after one season in May 2014.
CHAPTER IV: DECEPTION AND LYING

One underlying goal of this dissertation is to connect previous research on familial and interpersonal communication with the scholarly tradition of media and cultural studies. Therefore, this research is situated within past research on family relationships and lying from an interpersonal perspective. By including an interpersonal communicative approach to media analysis, this dissertation aims to unite both fields as a way to analyze how mainstream mediated representations can influence perceptions of the American family. This chapter conceptualizes deception and lying and situates the terms within previous interpersonal research and theoretical frameworks. The significance of lying in daily contexts, as well as the beneficial and detrimental effects of verbal dishonesty in familial relationships are also addressed. Finally, this chapter considers previous typologies that examine the motivations for lying in mediated representation and argues that additional research is warranted to develop new categories that abundantly explain the prevalence of deception in these mediated depictions.

Conceptual Definitions of Deception and Lying

This dissertation focuses on lying because of its prevalence in daily life, as well as the relational impact that verbal deception can have on families. Deception is often deemed to be a negative action that harms relationships because of its damaging effect on trust in the relationship. As Burgoon, Buller, Floyd, and Grandpre (1996) argued, deception defies “the presumption of truth that underlies most communicative interactions” (p. 725). Deception and lying are essential to communication research because they “violate both relational and conversational rules” (Aune, Ching, & Levine, 1996).
Deception is considered so frequent in society that studies have shown that the typical person deceives at least twice a day (Andersen, 2008; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). In fact, Burgoon and Levine (2010) found “as much as one quarter to one third of all conversations entail some form of deception” (p. 201). DePaulo and Kashy (1998) argued that lies occurred “once in every 10 interactions in a broad range of close relationships that included spouses, best friends, family, [and] children” (p. 520). George and Robb (2008) found that deception occurs in 22-25% of all social interactions, while Turner, Edgley, and Olmstead (1975) found that people were totally truthful in only 38% of verbal statements.

Deception and lying are often considered to be interchangeable terms, but there are actually some distinct differences between them. As Hopper and Bell (1984) argued, “there is more to deception than meets the lie” (p. 300). According to Burgoon and Buller (1994), “deception is a deliberate act perpetuated by a sender to engender in a receiver beliefs contrary to what the sender believes is true to put the receiver at a disadvantage” (pp. 155–156). DePaulo et al. (2003) concurred, defining deception as “a deliberate attempt to mislead others” (p. 74). Thus, deception can be any act of dishonesty that a person does to purposefully mislead another (Bryant & Sias, 2011) and can be verbal or nonverbal.

In contrast, lying is verbal dishonesty (Hopper & Bell, 1984). While deception may include other forms of manipulation, concealment, or exaggeration (Ekman, 1985), lying focuses exclusively on the verbal statement made from one person to another. Past interpersonal research has conceptualized lying as a “conscious and intentional act” (O’Hair & Cody, 1994, p. 182). Thus, Knapp and Comadena (1979) defined lying as “the conscious alteration of information a person believes to be true in order to significantly change another’s perceptions from what the deceiver thought they would be without the alteration” (p. 271). Therefore, when
a person constructs a statement in which the person consciously creates information or provides information that is the opposite of what the person knows to be true, that person has engaged in the act of lying (Ekman, 1985).

**Lying in Real Life Contexts**

**Relationship Characteristics and Lying**

More than 200 interpersonal research studies on deception and lying have focused immensely on a person’s ability to detect deception (see, for instance, DePaulo & Jordan, 1982; Levine, Kim, Parks & Hughes, 2006; Talwar, Crossman, Williams & Muir, 2011). However, Horan and Dillow (2009) suggested research should shift to focus on the relational aspects of lying. Because lying violates both relational and partner expectations (see, for instance, DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Peterson, 1996), understanding the relationship between the liar and the recipient of the lie is crucial. Interpersonal Deception Theory (IDT) emphasizes the necessity of communication research to focus both on the lie teller and the lie receiver (Horan & Dillow, 2009). Previous research utilizing IDT has found that people who lie will adapt their communication style to continue their deception depending upon their reason for engaging in lying (Buller, Stiff, & Burgoon, 1986).

The ability to cultivate and sustain a relationship is also associated with the trust and self-disclosure possibilities between two people (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Therefore, the relationship that a person has with another individual is greatly influenced by how truthful the other person is in their own statements. Thus, honesty plays a crucial role in relationship development and sustainability. This dissertation focuses on one of the earliest and longest lasting relationships: the familial relationship. By considering how lying impacts the parent-child, sibling, and spousal
LYING IN FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS

relationships, this research considers to what extent lying impacts the portrayal of these fictional families.

**Parent-Child Relationships**

As one of the longest and most enduring familial relationships, second only to the sibling relationship (Cicirelli, 2006), the parent-child relationship is crucial to one’s ability to develop and maintain a relationship. Parents instill values and beliefs (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Kim & Ward, 2007), socialize their children to cultural and social values (Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson, & Spicer, 2006), and encourage the development of skills (Volling, McElwain, Notaro, & Herrera, 2002). Yet, what happens to those significant functions if a parent lies to a child? Heyman, Luu and Lee (2009) argued that parents lie to their children and reinforce the act of lying to their children in the process. They examined to what extent parents utilize "parenting by lying", a practice in which American parents lie to their children in order to influence the children’s behavior (Heyman, Luu & Lee, 2009, p. 355). Parents who use "parenting by lying" (p. 355) avoid topics that they do not want their children to know about. In this way, researchers concluded that parents influence their children’s beliefs about their cultural values through the exclusion of certain ideas. While some parents may tell white lies, such as Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny will come only if their children behave, this research is concerned with the more enduring lies that fundamentally influence children’s cultural values, such as their judgments about social concerns.

Moreover, through the socialization of parental values, including when or when not to lie, children develop a sense of compliance. “Child compliance is considered essential for socialization…Accordingly, the internalization of parental values and beliefs is a principal goal
of parenting, and compliance is seen as a requisite for that goal” (Stafford & Dainton, 1994, p. 268). Finally, a child’s self-esteem is developed, in part, from communication between his or her parent and him/herself (Stafford & Dainton, 1994). As Satir (1988) argued, children seek validation from their parents to develop their own sense of self-worth.

Yet, parents may also lie to each other. Past research has found that honesty in marital relationships affected the valence of self-disclosure, which then predicted the marital satisfaction in the relationship (Dickson-Markman (1984; Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000). Cole (2006) found that romantic partners use deception to evade overly critical partners and to reduce the amount of tension in the relationship. Therefore, partners can also use lying to be excessively constrictive of their partner, in an attempt to control how their partner behaves or feels (Cole, 2006).

In addition, previous research found a stronger connection between adults lying to acquaintances, than lying to people with whom they have an intimate relationship, such as their spouses or children (Backbier, Hoogstraten & Meerum, 1997). Thus, this research will build on these previous studies to analyze why parents lie to their children, to other family members, and even to others outside the family.

**Sibling Relationships**

Because the sibling relationship is one of the earliest developed and one of the longest lasting, it can also be one of the most significant interpersonal connections that one makes (Bank & Kahn, 1997). During childhood, siblings use interactions with each other to experiment and develop how to behave in relationships (Yeh & Lemper, 2004). Dunn (1983) observed the parallel and complimentary relationship between sibling relationships and parent-child relationships but also saw comparisons to peer relationships. While similar to both parent and
peer relationships, the sibling relationship is a unique entity with distinct characteristics worthy of deeper research. The first familial conflict children experience is often within the sibling relationship (Dunn & Munn, 1987; Perlman & Ross, 1997). Moreover, developing relational maintenance skills early in one’s life, such as assessing the act of lying in a relationship, is essential to cultivating other relationships, such as marital, later in life (Shalash, Wood, & Parker, 2013). Siblings learn to balance their own personal goals with the wants and needs of others in socially acceptable ways (Crockenberg, Jackson, & Langrock, 1996).

Motivation for Lying

As previously stated, lying is considered by communication scholars to be a deliberate and conscious act. Therefore, the reason why a person engages in lying is equally intentional and often for some goal-oriented reason. Yet, when it comes to deception and lying, as Seiter and Bruschke (2007) observed, “consensus has not emerged around a single typology of motives” (p. 3).

Previous Typologies for the Motivation for Lying

Goffman (1974) categorized lying into two early classifications: “benign fabrications” are lies that are created in the best interest of the receiver of the lie; “exploitive fabrications” serve the interest of the liar. In 1980, Hample created categorizations for deception that included lying to benefit the liar, lying to improve the relationship between the two people involved, and lies that benefited the receiver of the lie. Metts (1989) took an even deeper turn toward lying and its relational impact by identifying several main motivations for lying. First, relational partners lie because they are focused on their partner’s needs; for instance, the liar may want to avoid
causing them pain, to maintain their self-esteem, or to avoid causing them to worry. This type of lying would be considered as “socially polite and relationally beneficial” (Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2011, p. 316). Because they benefit the other person, these lies are seen as altruistic and favorable to the relationship. Past research has found a greater connection between partner-focused lies with close relational partners, than with people outside the family (Ennis, Vrji, & Chance, 2008).

However, people also lie for self-focused reasons, such as to enhance or protect themselves, or to avoid humiliation or criticism. “This type of deception is usually perceived as a much more significant transgression than partner-focused deception because the deceiver is acting for selfish reasons rather than for the good of the partner or the relationship” (Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2011, p. 317). Impression management theory (IM) has also been utilized in previous research on lying and deception. Similar to lying, impression management is a goal-oriented behavior (Carlson, Carlson, & Ferguson, 2011). IM is “the process through which individuals manage information about themselves so that others view them in the way in which they would like to be viewed” (Carlson, Carlson, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 497). People engage in “tactics”, or behaviors that manage others’ impressions of them. Thus, individuals may utilize lying as an impression management tactic to influence others’ interpretations of themselves. Carlson, Carlson, and Ferguson (2011) further studied deceptive IM, or “the use of deception in an established impression management relationship” (p. 499). By focusing on the relational level, this study found that people were more likely to engage in deceptive impression management when their desired goal was to be well-liked by others (Carlson, Carlson, & Ferguson, 2011).
Ultimately, Metts (1989) argued that the distinction is whether the person engaged in lying to protect the other person and their relationship or to protect the person who lied. If the person lied to avoid arguments and encourage harmony within the relationship, lying is viewed as a relational benefit (Cole, 2001). Yet, even if the person lied to marginalize his or her own weaknesses, if that decision helped him or her develop or sustain a relationship, it can still be considered a positive action (Cole, 2001).

**Children and Parental Motivations for Lying**

Bussey (1999) concluded that by the time children enter elementary school, they understand there is a distinction between prosocial lying, such as a lie to protect others from harm or to spare their feelings, and antisocial lying, such as to protect one’s own self-interests or inflict harm. For example, children ascertain that it is more socially acceptable to lie to protect someone else, than for self-serving reasons. Past research also found that while the first lies children tell are in order to avoid punishment for a misdeed, children also quickly determine that prosocial reasons for lying are socially acceptable (DePaulo & Jordan, 1982). Children ages 3-10 tell lies for both antisocial, or self-serving reasons, as well as to benefit others, also known as prosocial reasons (Talwar, Crossman, Williams & Muir, 2011). Popliger, Talwar & Crossman (2011), however, found that younger children, mostly kindergarten through second grade, lied to avoid negative penalties from authority figures. In contrast, older children over the age of 10 lied for more prosocial reasons, even when it negatively impacted themselves.

During Talwar, Murphy and Lee’s study (2007), they bestowed a present to children from ages 3-11. The child’s parent was then instructed to encourage the child to tell a lie that the child liked the gift. Talwar, Murphy and Lee (2007) concluded that parental instruction to lie had a
significant effect on the children’s ability to lie. Therefore, they argued that lying can be a socializing agent that parents encourage their children to do. This encouragement ultimately reinforces the idea of politeness over honesty. Even the brief parental coaching had a major impact on the child’s behavior (Talwar, Murphy & Lee, 2007).

Popliger, Talwar and Crossman (2011) also investigated what motivational and socialization reasons lead to children lying. Similar to previous research, they argued that prosocial lying occurs when parents encourage children to be polite and considerate toward others. As DePaulo and Kashy (1998) argued, prosocial lying occurs when the person lying wants to spare the feelings of the person being lied to or wants to make the recipient of the lie feel better. Because prosocial lies are not intended to harm the other person, they are seen as both beneficial, as well as socially acceptable (Bussey, 1999). DePaulo and Jordan (1982) found that prosocial lies are the most common type of lie and occur almost daily. While prosocial lies are common, researchers have been unable to determine how motivational factors contribute to younger children’s prosocial lying (Popliger, Talwar & Crossman, 2011). Yet, establishing to what extent there is a connection between lying and politeness is a key aspect in determining how parental influence impacts a child’s motivation to lie. Heyman, Luu and Lee (2009) surmised that “one possibility is that parenting by lying is a response to the challenge of coordinating conflicting sets of goals. It may be that parents sometimes consider certain goals to be more important than the need to avoid telling lies” (p. 363). For instance, parents may interpret that socializing their children to behave in a certain manner, such as promoting politeness, outweighs the desire to avoid lying to someone. These beliefs are then conveyed to their children.
Responses to Lying

While conducting their study on adolescents 11 to 17, Keltikangas-Jarvinen and Lindeman (1997) determined that adolescents viewed lying as more acceptable when the lie-teller’s motive was prosocial. Lindskold and Waters (1983) found similar conclusions when studying college students. They concluded that altruistic lies were viewed more favorable, followed by self-serving lies; the least accepted lies were those that could jeopardize someone else’s well-being. Moreover, Perkins and Turiel (2007) also found that adolescents evaluated lying to their parents as acceptable when the truth would restrict the adolescents’ activities.

Talwar, Crossman, Williams and Muir (2011) observed that it is the lie teller’s ability to deceive and the facial cues associated with the person that determines if the deception is detected. They concluded that parents were able to detect lies in their children more often when the children lied for prosocial reasons (Talwar, Crossman, Williams & Muir, 2011). Thus, past research has indicated that children’s ability to deceive their parents increases with age. Overall, Talwar, Crossman, Williams and Muir (2011) concluded that adults could detect children’s antisocial lies more than prosocial lies and surmised that motivation could play a key role in their findings: “Individuals are generally likely to be more motivated to uncover antisocial lies—and the transgressions that they often conceal—than to uncover prosocial lies, which frequently are told to facilitate social interaction” (p. 2851).

In addition, teenagers age 12-17 and college students were more likely to identify antisocial lies, than prosocial lies (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman & Cauffman, 2004; Lee & Ross, 1997). Also, adolescents were more likely to deem lying acceptable if their parents were attempting to restrict their behavior (Perkins & Turiel, 2007). Adolescents found lying to their
parents to avert parental control as more acceptable than lying about a misdeed (Perkins & Turiel, 2007).

**Connections Between Lying and Familial Relationships**

Past research has also examined the correlation between lying among family members and the family environment. Research has determined that people lie for a greater variety of reasons and that deception can be beneficial or damaging to a relationship, depending on the reason for the lie (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman & Cauffman, 2004). If the person lies to minimize conflict and the lie doesn’t damage the trust between two people, the lie is still viewed as favorable toward the relationship (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman & Cauffman, 2004).

As Popliger, Talwar and Crossman (2011) noted, “The development of prosocial lying has important implications for understanding social development. It provides a window to view the process by which children learn social skills necessary to communicate with others and form social relationships” (p. 374). Prosocial lying both maintains and hinders interpersonal relationships. While truthfulness is valued in interpersonal communication, avoiding harm to your communication partner is a crucial aspect as well. Consequently, prosocial lying can cause conflict or be considered an acceptable part of the relationship.

Families in which the parents established strict rules and were deemed controlling resulted in increased adolescent lying (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman & Cauffman, 2004). Adolescents believed that their parents didn’t respect their own autonomy when the adolescents displayed their own individuality. In comparison, families which emphasized cohesion and supportiveness saw adolescents who lied less frequently. Jensen, Arnett, Feldman and Cauffman (2004) concluded that the difference between control and cohesion led to adolescents
who valued the trust they have with their parents and ultimately decreased the frequency of lying.

Children who told prosocial lies have also been linked to authoritative parents (Popliger, Talwar & Crossman, 2011). Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen and Hart (1995) argued that parents who are authoritative had children who used prosocial lying to cultivate their social skills. They determined that the motivation behind the lie was less of a factor than the parenting style the child grew up with and the overall family expressiveness. Children who had a tendency to tell prosocial lies also had families who rarely expressed positive emotions (Popliger, Talwar & Crossman, 2011).

Engels, Finkenauer and van Kooten (2006) also investigated the correlation between children lying and the quality of the parent-child relationship. Finkenauer, Engels and Meeus (2002) argued that children raised in affectionate and communicative families lie less than children who grow up in less responsive families. If parents have detected the lie, they are more likely to decrease the amount of communication with their children for fear that they will be dishonest with them. This can ultimately cause alienation within the parent-child relationship (Engels, Finkenauer & van Kooten, 2006). Parents also experience a lack of control in the relationship when their children frequently lie (Engels, Finkenauer & van Kooten, 2006). Consequently, frequent lying by the child is related to a lower quality of parent-child relationship and ultimately undermines the parenting skills of the parent.

However, researchers have disagreed over what lying signifies about the liar. Engels, Finkenauer and van Kooten (2006) argued that frequent lying by the child is associated with inadequate parenting and that parents needed to increase their discussions and disclosures with their children. In contrast, lying by adolescents has been found to be an early indicator of their
own antisocial behavior, including aggression and loss of self-control (Engels, Finkenauer & van Kooten, 2006; Gervais, Tremblay, Desmarais-Gervais & Vitaro, 2000). Lying has also been an indicator of an individual's emotional problems, including low self-esteem, loneliness, and depression (Engels, Finkenauer & van Kooten, 2006). Lying can also be indicative of an overall lack of social adjustment by the adolescent (Engels, Finkenauer & van Kooten, 2006). Past research found “that children who frequently lie to their parents show less disclosure, higher levels of secrecy, poorer communication patterns, less trust between the parents and their child, and more alienation” (Engels, Finkenauer & van Kooten, 2006, p. 956). When lying is detected, this research cites a lack of parental and children interaction, as well as questions the parenting skills of the parents.

**Lying in Media Representations**

While previous studies have examined communicative behaviors on television sitcoms (see, for instance, Comstock & Strzyzweski, 1990; Douglas, & Olson, 1995; Honeycutt, Wellman, & Larson, 1997; Larson, 1991; Skill & Wallace, 1990), very few communication studies examined lying and deception within media content. Currently, only two studies (Leslie, 1992; Mazur & Kalbfleisch, 2003) have analyzed which television characters tell lies and the reasons why these fictional family members lie.

Mazur and Kalbfleisch (2003) studied sitcoms to determine if lying was frequent and the motivation for lying by the characters. They observed that previous studies focused on family communication as depicted on television sitcoms concluded that harmonious communication patterns were most prevalent. Even though lying and deception occur, they still ultimately culminate in favorable outcomes for the characters. Mazur and Kalbfleisch (2003) investigated
1990s family sitcoms to determine how family members deceive others and which family members have a tendency to lie most often. They noted that there are three primary reasons why people lie: to inflict harm, which is detrimental to a relationship, to protect oneself, which is more neutral, or to protect others from harm, which is actually a positive form of lying.

The results of Mazur and Kalbfleisch’s (2003) study found that lies told to harm someone occurred only 11.3% of the time and lies to protect oneself were told 34% of the time on *Home Improvement, King of the Hill, The Simpsons, and Mad About You*. Interestingly, the most common type of lie found in the study was one told to protect another family member. Mazur and Kalbfleisch (2003) surmised that “television families may try to maintain peace and harmony by using lies to spare others. Lying to spare others is considered to be the most positive type of lie because the purpose of this lie is to spare another person's feelings” (p. 205). Consequently, while lying may be perceived as a negative attribute, Mazur and Kalbfleisch's (2003) results indicated that on family sitcoms, even lying is portrayed in an overall positive manner. Prosocial lying, such as to protect others from harm or to spare their feelings, tends to ultimately further the interpersonal relationships of family members, rather than hinder them.

Leslie (1992) also studied lying on situation comedies to discover the ethical implications of media representation that reinforce lies as socially acceptable. He investigated if characters who are friends lied more to each other than family members. His results determined that friends lied to each other more than family members on *Roseanne, Growing Pains, Family Matters, Mr. Belvedere, Alf, Night Court, Dear John, Empty Nest, The Famous Teddy Z,* and *Newhart*. Leslie (1992) also concluded that 39% of those lies were motivated by self-protection. Only 18% of lies were told to avoid conflict and only 5% were told to protect others. Leslie (1992) argued that close friends perpetuate lying for self-interests and that this behavior was socially
destructive to the characters’ relationships. However, by lying to people outside the family, the family unit is perceived as harmoniously secure, specifically when considering other relationships.

Because of the lack of typology on the motivation for lying, specifically within the context of television shows, this research will build on previous interpersonal studies by expanding their typology on the motivations for lying within mediated texts. During the coding process, each verbally deceptive statement will be categorized according to Mazur and Kalbfleisch’s (2003) three primary reasons why television characters lie. However, while Mazur and Kalbfleisch coded prosocial lies as both to spare others and to minimize problems or omit problems, those categories will be separated. Avoiding any perceived problems within the relationship and making the decision to avoid those problems through verbal deception has an austere distinction from prosocial lying. When family members avoid responsibility for their lies, it can be detrimental to their relationship. It is not the presence of conflict that is harmful to a relationship, but the avoidance of the causes of that conflict. When conflict results in constructive or even destructive outcomes, the issues that led to the problem is still directly confronted. In contrast, when issues are left unresolved and continue to aggravate, they can strain the familial relationship. Consequently, lying to avoid these issues cannot be considered prosocial. Any additional lies that cannot be classified into these categories will be organized into an “other” category. Once all verbal deceptions have been gathered, the “other” classification will be further reviewed in order to determine if there are additional categories for the motivations behind lying within mediated texts.
Research Questions

As demonstrated above, identity characteristics surrounding gender, ethnicity, and class in mediated representation have been addressed by cultural scholars in previous studies. However, past research has often dismissed the social and cultural impact of how mediated representations of the different types of family configurations create discourse about one’s perceptions and meaning of family. Therefore, this dissertation will address that deficiency through the following research questions:

RQ1a: On Disney-owned family sitcoms that have aired since 2009, what is the relationship between the main characters when a lie is told?

RQ1b: On these sitcoms, what is the character’s motivation for when a lie is told?

These research questions employ past research on lying to discuss the implications to a character’s relationship when someone lies. This information is crucial to uncovering if there is a pattern of communication in which family members lie more to people outside the family, such as friends and colleagues, or whether they lie more to their own family members. If they lie to family members, what does that signify about the relationship between these two characters? If lying occurs more within the family unit, what does that convey about the relationship between the family members? Ultimately, this research question investigates which familial members on domestic sitcoms lie more frequently to one another and the relational connection of the recipient to the liar.

Moreover, these research questions also consider the motivation for the verbal deception. Past research on lying has indicated that prosocial lying, or lying to spare another’s feelings or to prevent them from harm, signifies a stronger relationship between two people (Jensen, Arnett,
Feldman, & Cauffman, 2004; Popliger, Talwar, and Crossman, 2011). However, frequent instances of lying for self-serving purposes, can be indicative of a family in crisis (Popliger, Talwar, and Crossman, 2011), a family with controlling parental figures (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman & Cauffman, 2004; Popliger, Talwar & Crossman, 2011; Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen & Hart, 1995), lack of affection or communication between parent and child (Engels, Finkenauer & van Kooten, 2006; Finkenauer, Engels & Meeus, 2002), and even antisocial behavior in children (Engels, Finkenauer & van Kooten, 2006, Gervais, Tremblay, Desmarais-Gervais & Vitaro, 2000). These findings indicate to what extent the overall family is deemed a harmonious or argumentative environment when lying occurs.

RQ2a: On Disney-owned family sitcoms that have aired since 2009, while analyzing the relationship between the liar and the recipient of the lie and the motivation for telling the lie, is there a distinction in family structure?

RQ2b: While analyzing the relationship between the liar and the recipient of the lie and the motivation for telling the lie, is there a distinction in class status?

Building upon the conclusions from the first research questions, these research questions consider to what extent family structure and class status affect the relationship between the characters and the motivation for lying on these domestic sitcoms. In other words, do nuclear, middle-class families see an increase in prosocial lying that may ultimately strengthen their relationship, while other family structures tell self-preservation or self-serving lies that could possibly hinder their relationships? Overall, these questions address any distinctions between the characters’ relationship and the motivation for lying in a nuclear, stepparent, single parent, or same-sex household. They also consider to what extent there are any differences between the
characters’ relationship and the motivation for lying in a working-class, middle-class, or upper middle-class household. The conclusions from these research questions address the broader concern about how different types of families are portrayed on television sitcoms.

**RQ3a: When lying occurred on Disney-owned family sitcoms, how did the lie contribute to interference in the narrative of the episode?**

**RQ3b: To what extent do the characters resolve the act of lying in the narrative’s conclusion?**

This project also investigates to what extent the lie is a crucial aspect of the narrative of the episode. Are lies the cause of the disruption of the perceived harmony of the family during the episode? Is lying a major aspect of the episode’s narrative, or is lying deemed inconsequential compared to other aspects? Moreover, how do the characters reconcile their relationship when the act of lying has occurred? Common themes surrounding the familial relationship, the motivation for lying, and the overall perception of the family within each episode’s narrative is considered. These findings further contribute to uncovering which family structures or class statuses are potentially idealized and which are marginalized.
Because mainstream media's representation of the American family is a multi-dimensional and multi-contextual entity, research aimed at a deeper understanding of it cannot be limited to a quantitative, interpretive, and/or critical approach. In order to address the multiple meanings behind representations of the American family on television, a mixed methodological approach is warranted. A combined approach in both qualitative and quantitative methods strengthens the results about the complexities of these contemporary representations and allows for greater discourse about the subtle ideologies that these portrayals depict. Through the quantitative method, a larger number of episodes can be analyzed to determine to what extent the frequency of lying contributes to the overall perception of the family in domestic sitcoms. Furthermore, by also using a qualitative approach, this research can uncover the complexities of the act of lying and how it contributes to familial disruption and resolution within each sampled episode. Consequently, this research provides the opportunity to reveal the multi-faceted complexities of the representation of family in domestic sitcoms.

**Triangulation**

Through a triangulated approach, one can better analyze the contrasts within a multi-faceted phenomenon (Denzin, 1978) (see, also, Denzin, 2012; Olson, 2004). Denzin (1978) has classified four ways that triangulation can be applied: method triangulation, theory or perspective triangulation, source or data triangulation, and analyst triangulation. First, method triangulation involves using both qualitative and quantitative methods within the study. Method triangulation is also one of the earliest interpretations of triangulation, when 1980s researchers first began to
consider its advantages (Creswell & Clark, 2007). In this approach, both quantitative and qualitative data are often used to determine if similar results can be concluded by the same data. It is crucial to note that the combination of these methods is not to increase the validity of them, but to encourage deeper scope of the research subject (Flick, 2002). This research uses method triangulation in a specific way. Because the overall goal of this study is to better understand the multifaceted interpretations from the media representation, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods allows for a broader understanding of the data. While it is not concerned with proving accuracy of the findings by utilizing different methods, method triangulation can be used with this research to investigate multiple aspects of a phenomenon. Thus, as Jayaratne and Stewart (2008) argued, a researcher can “capture a more complete, holistic, and contextual portrayal” (p. 44). Thus, this research will not use method triangulation to confirm findings from either method, but as a way to provide a deeper and multi-faceted context for the research.

The second category Denzin (1978) identified within triangulation is theory or perspective triangulation. This approach advocates using multiple theoretical perspectives to analyze the data. This study adapts a theory or perspective triangulation, informed by an interpretive and critical approach to media/cultural studies and interpersonal communication. Previous research in deception and lying, as well as typologies on lying will be utilized.

This research, however, does not address Denzin’s (1978) third classification of triangulation: triangulation of sources or data. This approach encourages using the same method to examine multiple data sources. Thus, for instance, if this project was interested in comparing 1950s representations of media and their underlying ideologies, a triangulation of sources from the 1950s and today would be applicable. Since this research is only interested in the
sociohistorical framework of sitcoms airing since the recession, triangulation of sources or data is not applicable here.

The final category Denzin (1978) identified is analyst triangulation, which advocates using multiple analysts to observe and interpret the data. Because the overall goal of this research is not to generate objective, replicable findings, an analyst triangulation is also unwarranted in this research.

Consequently, while triangulation plays a significant role in the research design of this project, it is equally crucial to understand that the researcher is selectively focusing on method triangulation and theory or perspective triangulation because the objectives of the research necessitate these decisions. Pickering (2008) argued that cultural studies requires a fixed and flexible research methodological approach. “Methods are guidelines for practice, and researchers should feel free to adopt them to suit their purposes” (Pickering, 2008, p. 5). Thus, the goals of this research outweigh the desire to incorporate all four classifications of triangulation method into this research design. Instead, this dissertation utilizes theory or perspective triangulation through its media studies, critical/cultural studies, and interpersonal communication frameworks. It also draws on method triangulation to uncover and describe the multifaceted interpretations that can be drawn from domestic situation comedies.

**Textual Analysis**

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argued that research should focus on how material contexts (i.e. media representations) shape, constrain, and empower society. As Saukko (2003) wrote, cultural studies has “an interest in the interplay between lived experience, texts or discourses, and the social context” (p. 11). Therefore, this research employs textual analysis as its method of
exploration because textual analysis explores beyond the content of the media to consider the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions (Fürsich, 2009). Textual analysis investigates media’s representations to determine how we make sense of our lives (Brennen, 2012). Using textual analysis allows the researcher to identify televisual texts as cultural artifacts that contribute to the ways in which people construct their perceptions of the American family. Therefore, examining the meaning garnered from the text helps to greater understand our social existence. This methodological approach allows the researcher to investigate social practices through representations and stories. Brennen (2012) wrote, “researchers do not study texts to predict or control how individuals will react to messages but instead to understand how people use texts to make sense of their lives” (p. 194). This dissertation uses two specific textual analyses – content analysis and narrative analysis – to further analyze the ideologies depicted within the multifaceted phenomenon of the representation of the American family on Disney-owned sitcoms.

Twelve episodes from the first seasons of seven Disney-owned domestic situation comedies were included for analysis: Modern Family (2009-present), The Middle (2009-present), Good Luck Charlie (2010-2014), Suburgatory (2011-2014), Dog with a Blog (2012-present), The Goldbergs (2013-present), and Trophy Wife (2013-2014). Besides airing on either ABC or Disney Channel, these shows were chosen because each show premiered after the recession began in the United States in 2008, yet also aired current episodes when this study began. None of the family sitcoms on ABC Family Channel met this criteria, so they were excluded from analysis. Moreover, since each show premiered in a different year, this analysis will focus on each show’s first season to give a broader historical overview of the representation of the
American family within the past six years. A complete list of the episodes used in this study will be included in Appendix A.

This research utilizes purposive sampling, which includes strategically selecting episodes that include lying for the qualitative section of the research. By purposefully choosing episodes which prominently feature lying, the narrative and to what extent the lie disrupts the perceived family order can be analyzed. Three episodes from each of the series were strategically chosen for examination. The number episode of each show selected was then analyzed across every domestic sitcom to also provide a more random sample. For example, the episodes included in the analysis of *Modern Family* were episodes #2, #12, and #17. Thus, episodes #2, #12, and #17 of all the other six shows were included in the content analysis. Consequently, from the first season of each of the domestic sitcoms, episodes #2, #3, #5, #7, #8, #9, #10, #12, #14, #17, #18, and #19 were included in the content analysis. Historically, quantitative researchers argue that results can be generalized to a larger population if the sample is random, or representative of the larger population. However, rather than having a goal of achieving randomness for the purpose of generalizability, this study utilizes this type of sampling, because viewers may only sporadically watch certain episodes of each show. By using a more random sampling, this research can gain a broader understanding of what the casual viewer observes about the representation of the American family.

**Content Analysis**

With its clear procedures to follow, content analysis is a favorable research method, particularly for the identification of manifest content (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998; Stacks & Hocking, 1999). A content analysis is systematically designed, to count
occurrences of symbols, themes, characters, and/or plot devices. “Systematization means that we reduce the potential for bias through the rigorous application of a carefully devised set of parameters, definitions, techniques and procedures” (Hodkinson, 2011, p. 75). Inferences are then made from the frequency of the symbols or themes. Thus, content analysis is also beneficial for investigating the frequency of stereotypes in media texts. Researchers using content analysis can investigate “social stereotyping, mis-representation, and … ‘symbolic annihilation’ (through under-representation or non-representation) of different groups and types of people in society” (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998, p. 111). As first discussed by Gerbner & Gross (1976), “symbolic annihilation” is the absence or underrepresentation of an identity in the media. While research often focuses on the underrepresentation of cultural identities, such as gender, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation, a major objective of this research is to determine to what extent blended and single parent families are symbolically annihilated in favor of traditional, nuclear families within current media representation. Therefore using content analysis to examine to what extent family structure and class status are marginalized on sitcoms is a beneficial approach.

Content analysis was also chosen for this research because of its ability to examine large bodies of multiple texts; hence, it is useful for comparative analysis across multiple media texts (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998; Hodkinson, 2011). This is particularly useful in this analysis, since it allows for a larger sample size to be used. This analysis is less concerned with specific television shows and particular episodes of each show and is more focused on the broader cultural shifts that have occurred surrounding them since the American recession in 2008. This method, thus, allows for seven Disney-owned sitcoms to be included in the research and will facilitate a broader scope to the research.
Coding

The unit of analysis for this section of the project is a lie told by one family member to another character on the show. A lie is conceptualized as a deceptive statement made to another character, for which the audience knows the statement is a falsehood (Leslie, 1992). For example, visual cues, additional dialogue, or plot knowledge that are unknown to the character to whom the lie is directed, can assist the audience in the detection of the lie. This determination can be made by the researcher and the audience because of dramatic irony. Dramatic irony, as Leslie (1992) noted “enables the audience to understand the implication and meaning of a situation, or what is being said, even when the characters do not. The judges were able to isolate lies because, as viewers, they knew much more about the motivations and actions of the characters in the sitcoms than the characters themselves did” (p. 11). The concept of dramatic irony is particularly relevant with mockumentary style and single-camera formats. These formats allow for the camera to break away from the characters to highlight additional information about the scene. For instance, within the mockumentary format, the camera often cuts to the character reflecting his or her true feelings and, thus, revealing a lie that has been told. In addition, within single-camera formats, the camera can break away to an additional scene that provides the viewer with information about the verbal deception that the other characters are not privy to. Discussions about verbal deception to characters that were not present were not included. For example, if two siblings discussed lying to their parents in the past, but the audience does not actually see the lie to the parents, it was not coded. Moreover, as O’Hair and Cody (1994) argued, “we do not construe deception exclusively as a complete and successful communication transaction. Attempted deception is still deception” (p. 183). Thus, the detection of the lie and
the success of the lie were not factors in the identification of a lie, but these avenues can provide further material for future research.

After the primary coder identified each lie, each lie was identified by its familial relationship between the liar and the recipient of the lie. These resulted in the following categories: spouse-spouse; parent-child; parent-parent; parent-other family member; parent-outside the family person; sibling-sibling; child-parent; child-other family member; and child-outside the family person.

Lies were also classified according to Mazur and Kalbfleisch’s (2003) three categories: lying to harm another person, lying to protect one self, and lying to spare others.

Lying to harm another person can include tactics such as inventing stories to intentionally harm a person, distorting information, or omitting pertinent information that the person needs to know. Lying to protect self includes behaviors such as making up stories that make oneself look good, exaggerate personal praise, and/or omit weaknesses. The final strategy, lying to spare others, includes behavior such as lying to spare the other person's feelings, minimizing problems, and omitting problems that may cause the other person to worry (Mazur & Kalbfleisch, 2003, p. 201).

However, while Mazur and Kalbfleisch included minimizing and omitting problems as prosocial, this research distinguished avoidance as an additional, separate category. Avoidance includes minimizing or evading any perceived problems in the relationship or any plot points with the narrative of the episode; thus it can rarely be considered prosocial and a positive aspect of an intimate relationship.
Any additional lies that cannot be categorized according to this typology are then classified into an “other” category. Once all coding was complete, the other category was further analyzed to determine if additional classifications can be added to the typology of motivation for lying in media texts.

Family structure was divided into four categories: nuclear family, stepparent family, single parent family, and same-sex family. The Dunphys (Modern Family), the Hecks (The Middle), the Duncans (Good Luck Charlie), the Royce family (Suburgatory), the Shay family (Suburgatory), and the Goldbergs (The Goldbergs) were classified as nuclear families. The Pritchets (Modern Family), the Jennings-James family (Dog with a Blog) and the Harrison family (Trophy Wife) were categorized as stepparent families. The Altman family (Suburgatory) was the only example of a single parent family and the Tucker-Pritchett family (Modern Family) was the lone same-sex family.

Class status within this research was categorized based on the occupation of the main characters and the disposable income they are shown using within the sampled episodes. This resulted in three categories: upper middle-class, middle-class, and working-class. Thus, the Pritchett family (Modern Family), Tucker-Pritchett family (Modern Family), the Royce family (Suburgatory), and the Harrison and Buckley family (Trophy Wife) were categorized as upper middle-class because all these characters have prestigious careers, such as business owners, lawyers, and doctors; these characters also appeared to have the most disposable income on lavish items throughout the sampled episodes. The socioeconomic status and cultural capital that these characters demonstrate led to their designation as upper middle-class. The Dunphy family (Modern Family), the Duncans (Good Luck Charlie), the Shay family (Suburgatory), the Altman family
(Suburgatory), the Jennings-James family (Dog with a Blog), and the Goldbergs (The Goldbergs) were all classified as middle-class. These characters have occupations such as realtor, nurse, pest control specialist, architect, and furniture store manager. They live in more modest homes, but never really discuss financial issues within their plot points. While the families have problems, money is never one of them. Finally, the Hecks (The Middle) feature parents who work as a car salesperson and in a quarry, and struggle to pay their bills. Their family is classified as the sole representation of working-class families because of the parents’ occupations, dialogue about financial concerns, and the lack of extravagant positions that would designate them as middle-class or upper middle-class.

Data Analysis Techniques

The primary coder independently coded each episode according to the variables above. In order to address the first two research questions, “What is the relationship between the main characters when a lie is told?” “What is the character’s motivation for when a lie is told?” “While analyzing the relationship between the liar and the recipient of the lie and the motivation for telling the lie, is there a distinction in family structure?” and “While analyzing the relationship between the liar and the recipient of the lie and the motivation for telling the lie, is there a distinction in class status?” descriptive statistics were calculated for familial relationship and motivation for lying. Finally, the relationship between liar and recipient were correlated with motivation. To answer the second research question, each family structure (nuclear, stepparent, single parent, or same-sex families) and class status (upper middle-class, middle-class, or working-class)
were analyzed separately to determine if there is a distinction in each type of familial representation among the liar-receiver relationship and the motivation for the lie.

The primary researcher and an assistant viewed each of the sampled episodes. Each episode was viewed twice by each coder separately and coded using the coding sheet provided in Appendix B. If there was any discrepancy, discussion between the two researchers commenced and the primary researcher made any final decisions. Final agreement indicated that the research contained mutually exclusive, clearly designed categories and operational definitions based on previous research (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991; Neuendorf, 2002).

**Narrative Analysis**

In order to produce a more holistic interpretation of the media texts and their cultural significance, this dissertation also utilized a narrative analysis. A narrative analysis approach benefits this type of research because rather than dissecting the text into smaller elements, a narrative analysis considers the entire story in its approach. As Stokes (2003) argued, stories are essential to many cultural forms, such as myths, ballads, and poetry; therefore, analyzing the narratives within mediated representations has a long history in cultural studies.

Additionally, a narrative analysis is valuable with this type of research because of its emphasis on latent content more than manifest content. Thus far, this research on lying and the American family has only focused on the manifest content of the media text. Manifest themes are the surface level content, such as whether Mom, Dad, brother, sister, or grandparents receive the lie. Also, the family structure is an example of manifest content because of its straightforward nature; for example, a nuclear family contains a mother and a father. However,
the latent content, which involves making a judgment about the text observed, has not been considered yet. While content analysis is a strong choice to analyze the manifest content (Stokes, 2003), it is a methodological weakness for latent content. In order to address the latent content, which requires making assessments about the media text, a narrative analysis is also warranted.

Because of this project’s objective to reveal how the American family is portrayed in contemporary sitcoms, the decoding of latent themes also provides a deconstruction of ideological themes that critique and shape society at a given moment (Larsen, 1991). Barthes (1972) observed that everyday experiences contain two kinds of meaning: one which is immediately understood and straightforward, the denotation, and one that is implicit within the first, also called the connotative. “It is as a result of the process of signification at this level being invisible to the individual that ideology is seen as simply ‘the way things are’ and not in terms of the dominant values of the bourgeoisie” (Williams, 2003, p. 155). Thus, broader historical and sociological themes can also be addressed from the recurring themes and patterns within the mediated representations. Latent content is vital to uncovering the ideologies and myths within media content. Stuart Hall (1980) argued that once the culturally constructed interpretation is revealed, one can start to distinguish between what is natural and given within society and what is ideologically driven. Therefore, even though there is a persuasive argument that content analysis is preferable for manifest content, it is severely lacking as the only method for a project that analyzes media texts and their depiction of the American family.

Narrative analysis is used to search for trends within a story or media text. In this way, meaning can be garnered not only within the narratives, but also through the way in which they are structured (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998). Deconstructing ideology remains a
primary goal with this type of research method and, thus, it correlates well with this research method. Stories, as Lawler (2008) argued, “are not simple reflections of a set of ‘facts’: rather, they are organising devices through which we interpret and constitute the world” (p. 32). This research adopts Lawler’s (2008) interpretation that a narrative analysis can utilize the text in question not as a separate entity, but as one historically and socially positioned within the world.

Through a narrative analysis, one considers the entire text, rather than just categorizing specific elements (Stokes, 2003). Because viewers of media content see the entire entity while they are watching, this method also focuses more on what the audience actually observes (Hodkinson, 2011). Since the narrative cannot examine every aspect of a story, it is vital to examine what is included and what is excluded (Lawler, 2008). Thus, it examines stories as partial interpretations of the social world; while they are an understanding, they are also fundamental to people’s social existence (Lawler, 2008).

**Equilibrium Formula**

Consequently, in order to address the final research questions “How did the lie contribute to interference in the narrative of the episode?” and “To what extent do the characters resolve the act of lying in the narrative’s conclusion?” this dissertation also conducted a narrative analysis. In particular, this study focuses on the equilibrium formula within narrative analysis. This approach is important because it emphasizes a disruption within the story and how that story is ultimately resolved. The narrative functions in a linear fashion, with prior events impacting the conclusion of the story (Lawler, 2008). “The point of consideration here is whether closure is achieved through the re-establishing of the status quo, through socially acceptable means, such as marriage, or institutionally through imprisonment, or through acts of socially sanctioned
violence?” (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998, p. 148). The reestablishment of the equilibrium by the end of the story is a standard plot structure (Hodkinson, 2011). However, a narrative approach questions how that reestablishment came to pass. Thus, for this research, the lie may or may not act as the disruption to the equilibrium and through a narrative analysis of the entire episode, the researcher can assess the role of lying in the overall narrative. Using a thematic analysis of this data, this project concludes by examining what themes emerge about lying in these familial representations and to what extent they reinforce the idealized nuclear, middle-class family. By including a narrative analysis method, this research is ultimately strengthened by the combination of latent content and a holistic approach to each sampled episode.

**Concluding Methodological Thoughts**

Because media texts are not one-dimensional, a methodological approach that investigates the multi-dimensional aspects of media representation is warranted. Both content analysis and narrative analysis encompass a method triangulated approach that opens up some partial view of the interpretation of the sitcom; triangulation will not, however, be utilized to verify any findings between them. As Saukko (2003) advocated, ““If one is to unravel the complex historical and political agendas and struggles embedded in texts and interpretation, one needs to analyze them from several different perspectives that flesh out their diverse commitments and blind spots” (p. 100). Media and culture are constantly in flux and because media representation is a multi-contextual phenomenon itself, a multi-dimensional methodological approach is also necessitated.
CHAPTER VI: FREQUENCY OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LIAR AND RECIPIENT AND MOTIVATIONS FOR LYING

Across the sample of 84 episodes, 589 lies were recorded, or an average of 7 lies per episode. Each lie was then coded according to its relationship between liar and receiver and the motivation for the verbal deception. This chapter examines those findings in-depth, including the newly expanded categories within motivation for lying that resulted from the “other” category. Next, this chapter discusses the broader implications of relationship between liar and recipient and motivation for lying across differing representations of family structure (nuclear, stepparent, single parent, and same sex) and class status (upper middle-class, middle-class, and working-class).

**Relationship Between Liar and Recipient**

For each lie recorded, the relationship between the person who lied and the receiver of the lie was also observed. These resulted in the following categories: spouse-spouse; parent-child; parent-parent (another adult who is not the liar’s spouse); parent-other family member (not spouse or child); parent-outside the family person; sibling-sibling; child-parent; child-other family member; and child-outside the family person. Table 1 displays the results of those findings for the 589 lies detected.
Table 1: Relationship Between Liar and Recipient

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Frequency of Occurrence (Percentage within all lies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spouse-spouse</td>
<td>45 (7.64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child</td>
<td>89 (15.11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-parent</td>
<td>70 (11.89%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-other family member</td>
<td>25 (4.24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-outside person</td>
<td>67 (11.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling-sibling</td>
<td>56 (9.51%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-parent</td>
<td>138 (23.43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-other family member</td>
<td>9 (1.53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-outside</td>
<td>90 (15.28%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overwhelmingly, the results found that parents and children lied almost equally on domestic sitcoms. Parents lied 50.26% of the time, while children lied 49.74%. However, children on domestic sitcoms lied to people outside the family more frequently than adults did. Past interpersonal research concluded that there was a stronger connection between real life adults lying to acquaintances, than lying to people with whom they have a strong relationship, such as their immediate family members (Backbier, Hoogstraten & Meerum, 1997). The findings of this study appear to challenge those real life contexts. Within these findings, children on domestic sitcoms appear to minimize the lying within their family, in favor of lying to friends, schoolmates, and acquaintances. The implication drawn from these results is that fictional children on these shows desire a more congruent family structure in which honesty is valued. Even the sibling relationship saw minimal lying (9.51% of lies told). As Yeh and Lemper (2004) observed, siblings use interactions with each other to experiment and develop how to behave in
relationships; however, lying appeared to be less of an investigational act for these mediated siblings. Even though past research found that conflict was frequent among real life siblings (Dunn & Munn, 1987; Perlman & Ross, 1997), lying between siblings on domestic sitcoms was not nearly as common. While lying can be viewed as a goal-oriented experience and siblings learn to balance their individual goals in socially acceptable ways (Crockenberg, Jackson, & Langrock, 1996), that was not the conclusion on domestic sitcoms. Instead, siblings lying to each other was marginalized.

Since the majority of children on domestic sitcoms lied to people outside the family, there was one familial relationship category in which children were designated as the liar that contained key findings: the child-parent relationship. Children told lies to their parents 23.4% of the time. This may symbolize a desire to convey their own autonomous nature or may also be a response to the lies that their parents told.

Out of all the lies coded, parents lied to their children 15.11% of the time; lies between a parent and a child also accounted for 30.07% of the time that adults on domestic sitcoms lied. While these findings could possibly suggest that parents on domestic sitcoms are engaging in "parenting by lying", as real life parents have been found to do (Heyman, Luu & Lee, 2009), a deeper analysis of parental motivations for lying is warranted first.

**Motivations for Lying**

Initially all of the 589 lies were coded into the following categories: prosocial, self-preservation, harm others, avoidance, and “other”. The “other” category contained any lies that could not be classified into the previous four categories. Upon further thematic analysis of the “other” category, two additional types of motivation were revealed: “self-serving” and
“punishment by lying”. Table 2 reflects the results from the analysis of the motivations for lying.

### Table 2: Motivations for Lying

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Frequency of Occurrence (Percentage within all lies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>31 (5.26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harm Others</td>
<td>32 (5.43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial</td>
<td>102 (17.32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment by Lying</td>
<td>18 (3.06%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-preservation</td>
<td>249 (42.28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-serving</td>
<td>157 (26.66%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Self-Preservation**

Self-preservation, or the desire to protect one’s image, was a major motivating factor for domestic sitcom characters to lie within this sample. Nearly half of all lies were told for self-preservation reasons. In Mazur and Kalbfleisch’s (2003) study eleven years ago, 34% of lies told were for self-preservation. The results of this study found 42.28% of lies were told for self-preservation. Consequently, there was a significant increase in lies told for self-preservation reasons. Because lying for self-preservation is seen as focusing on the liar’s own needs and goals as opposed to his or her partner’s, it is a very individualistic act (Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2011). Therefore, it is also deemed more damaging to an intimate relationship. The character lying for self-preservation prioritizes his or her own interests, while risking the relationship he or she has built with the other fictional person. Even though self-preservation is
damaging to a relationship, in these mediated examples, it was still the most frequent motivation for lying.

**Prosocial Lying**

Moreover, Mazur and Kalbfleisch (2003) found that prosocial lying was the major reason that domestic sitcom characters lied and their results accounted for 54.7% of lies told. However, these findings observe a sharp decline in prosocial lying on domestic sitcoms. Prosocial lying has been considered beneficial to relationships (see, for instance, DePaulo & Jordan, 1982; DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2011; Keltikangas-Jarvinen & Lindeman, 1997; Popliger, Talwar & Crossman, 2011). Prosocial lies are seen as both beneficial and socially acceptable because they are not intended to harm the other person (Bussey, 1999). They are often told to protect another person or spare that person from harm. Thus, the lack of lying for prosocial reasons does imply a decrease in familial harmony.

Instead, lying for self-preservation has eclipsed prosocial lying as the main motivation for lying on domestic sitcoms. Self-preservation lies are told to protect oneself, avoid embarrassment or criticism, or to overall augment one’s image. As Guerrero, Anderson, and Afifi (2011) observed, lying for self-preservation reasons is often judged as more significantly damaging to a relationship because the focus is on the liar’s needs and goals, rather than that of his or her partner. Therefore, domestic sitcom characters appear more individualistic in their needs and goals, particularly when compared to domestic sitcom characters during the early 2000s.
**Self-Serving Lies**

In an effort to further expand upon the typologies that have been utilized in previous deception research, an "other" category was created for motivations that could not be categorized into the previous typology. The results of this study determined two additional categories that start to explain the motivation for lying, particularly on domestic sitcoms: “self-serving lies” and “punishment by lying.”

First, self-serving lies were a previous unidentified category within lying on domestic sitcoms, but not within interpersonal research in real life contexts. With particular attention to deception, previous research categorized self-serving deception as manipulation (Ekman, 1985); however, research on lying did not account for self-serving lies in the typologies established for examining mediated texts. The following would be an example of a lie told for self-serving purposes:

Gabe (from *Good Luck Charlie*) has been lying to his teacher that his parents fight consistently. Worried that his teacher will discover his lies, Gabe says, “I don’t want to get Mom/Dad in trouble” to each of his parents to encourage them to fight. Thus, he lies to his parents for self-serving reasons, so that the lies to his teacher would go undetected (episode #5: “Dance Off”).

Therefore, self-serving lies occur when a character desires to blatantly manipulate another character to serve the liar’s own self interests. This differs from self-preservation, because when someone lies for self-preservation reasons, they are attempting to reduce their own inadequacies or embellish their own abilities. Self-preservation involves less manipulation, since
its goal is to improve one’s self-image. In contrast, self-serving lies are told to obtain more specific self-centered goals, such as with the example above, when Gabe engages in self-serving lies to reduce the likelihood that his earlier lies will be discovered. These lies are purposefully told to further one's own desires and could be viewed as one of the most dangerous motivations for lying. Self-serving lies also occurred 26.66% of the time, making it the second most frequent motivation. In fact, self-preservation and self-serving combined totaled 68.94% of the reasons why these fictional characters lied. Consequently, while prosocial lying to protect or spare others may have been a frequent reason in 2003, individualistic motivations are now substantially prominent.

**Punishment by Lying**

The final category that was also discovered through this new typology about the motivation for lying was punishment by lying. This category also emerged when a small number of lies were categorized as “other” because they contained similarities to both the classifications of prosocial lies and lies to harm others. Punishment by lying can occur in one of two forms. The first form is as follows:

#1: Tyler (from *Dog with a Blog*) behaves in a way his parents disagree with by disfiguring several pictures around the house using a black marker. In order to punish him for this action, his parents use the same black marker to draw on his face while he is asleep. The next morning, they lie to him that they would never punish him for something he did not do (episode #5: World of Woofcraft”).
In this example, Tyler’s parents lie to him in order to reprimand him for what they perceive to be bad behavior. However, their response is to use verbal deception as a form of social corrective. Thus, the parent’s desire to socialize Tyler to not damage other people’s possessions is achieved through the act of lying. While the parents have Tyler’s best interests in mind, this type of lie could not really be classified as prosocial. Moreover, this example also demonstrates that the motivation of punishment by lying is distinct from the category of inflicting harm because the parents only want to teach Tyler a lesson, not intentionally physically or psychologically harm him for their own pleasure.

Punishment by lying can also be achieved through the following way:

#2: The Duncan family (from Good Luck Charlie) have a mouse in their home and the father, Bob, is a “pest control specialist.” When Gabe, Bob’s son, lets a mouse out of his father’s trap, he tells Bob that the mouse was never there. Bob quickly detects Gabe’s verbal deception. In response, the next day, Bob tells Gabe that he has quit his job because he must be inadequate in his profession if he cannot catch a small mouse in his own house. Gabe’s panic and guilt at the thought that his father quit his job serve as punishment for Gabe’s earlier verbal deception (episode #17: “The Kwikki Chick”).

The second way that punishment by lying was coded occurred when one character lied to another character for a separate reason; the receiver of the lie, in response, would then lie to the original liar. The motivation for the recipient’s lie was then coded as punishment by lying. In this scenario, punishment by lying is seen as a direct response to the act of lying. The receiver of the
initial lie is attempting to convey to the liar the detrimental effect that his or her lie could have on their familial relationship. Consequently, the recipient of the lie continues to verbally deceive in order to demonstrate the consequences of it.

While punishment by lying, admittedly, was the smallest category in these findings, it does emphasize a previously undiscovered motivation for lying that warrants future research for two primary reasons. First, Knapp (2006) argued that people in intimate relationships may start to lie in a “developmental pattern. This may involve the necessity of repeating a lie or telling supplementary lies to lend support to the original lie” (p. 522). While punishment by lying is distinct from Knapp’s conceptualization of developmental patterns of a lie, it does emphasize that once a circle of lying begins, and the receiver of a lie feels as though the best course of action is to reciprocate with a lie, verbal deception becomes the continued response to perceived negative behavior in that relationship. Communication and disclosure break down in favor of emphasizing the next lie in response. As Sias and Cahill (1998) argued, the ability to cultivate and sustain a relationship is associated with the trust and self-disclosure possibilities between two people. By responding to lying with more lying, that trust could be lost on a fundamental level.

Second, punishment by lying instills a value that lying in response to verbal deception is an appropriate response. Past research has found that parents instill values and beliefs on their children (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Kim & Ward, 2007). If parents are engaging in “parenting by lying”, a practice in which American parents lie to their children in order to influence the children’s behavior (Heyman, Luu & Lee, 2009), these parents position verbal deception as satisfactory and even an agreeable act. Children cultivate their sense of compliance through parental socialization (Stafford & Dainton, 1994). When parents lie in response to their
children’s lies or other perceived bad behavior, they are socializing their children that lying is an acceptable response to these situations.

**Family Structure**

In order to analyze to what extent family structure is a factor in the representation of lying in familial relationships, this study now differentiates the findings based on the categories for family structure. Nuclear family, stepparent family, single parent family, and same-sex family are presented in individual tables to draw broader conclusions about how the representation of these family structures are depicted. In order to formulate these conclusions, the categories of relationship between liar and receiver, and motivation for verbal deception, are now combined in each of the tables below.

**Table 3: Nuclear Family**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Prosocial</th>
<th>Self-preservation</th>
<th>Harm Others</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent-child</strong></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent-parent</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent-other family member</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent-outside person</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spouse-spouse</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sibling-sibling</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child-parent</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child-other family member</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child-outside</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivation Total</strong></td>
<td>61 (16.85%)</td>
<td>139 (38.40%)</td>
<td>26 (7.18%)</td>
<td>14 (3.87%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Self-serving</th>
<th>Punishing by Lying</th>
<th>Relationship Total (Percentage of Lies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>54 (14.92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-parent</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25 (6.91%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-other family member</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13 (3.59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-outside person</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>44 (12.16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse-spouse</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26 (7.18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling-sibling</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43 (11.88%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-parent</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>81 (22.38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-other family member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7 (1.93%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-outside</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>69 (19.06%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation Total (Percentage of Lies)</td>
<td>106 (29.28%)</td>
<td>16 (4.41%)</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nuclear Family Structure

Overall, the nuclear family structure greatly resembled the overall frequencies and percentages across all the episodes sampled. However, one might question why the nuclear family so closely resembles the whole picture. The findings of this study seem to indicate that the nuclear family is still an overall preferred family structure since it so closely mirrors the overall conclusions of this study. Moreover, the parent-child and child-parent saw noteworthy prosocial reasons for lying. Prosocial reasons for lying are considered the most socially acceptable form of lying (Bussey, 1999; DePaulo & Jordan, 1982). By extension, does that expand to the nuclear family structure as the most preferred? Past research also found that prosocial lies occur toward real life individuals on an almost daily basis (DePaulo & Jordan,
These findings may contribute to the interpretation that the nuclear family provides the more mainstream representation.

However, those conclusions could also be more complex, since one of the more conflicting results found that punishment by lying occurred almost exclusively within the nuclear family structure. Eighteen total occurrences of punishment by lying were coded and 16 (88.89%) of those instances came from the nuclear family structure. As explained by Heyman, Luu, and Lee (2009), American parents use “parenting by lying” to manipulate their children’s behavior. Not only do the parents then lie to their children, they also strengthen the idea that lying is beneficial when used for socializing reasons. Because the nuclear family engaged in punishment by lying the most, they may also emphasize the continuation of “parenting by lying.” Heyman, Luu, and Lee (2009) argued that parents could then influence their children’s cultural values. If they are engaging in punishment by lying, these parents reinforce that the response to a lie is continued deception.

Table 4: Stepparent Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation Total (Percentage of Lies)</th>
<th>Prosocial</th>
<th>Self-preservation</th>
<th>Harm Others</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-parent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-other family member</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-outside person</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse-spouse</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling-sibling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-parent</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-other family member</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-outside</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>34 (18.78%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>88 (48.62%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>5 (2.76%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>8 (4.42%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Self-serving</th>
<th>Punishing by Lying</th>
<th>Total (Percentage of Lies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32 (17.68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-parent</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>42 (23.21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-other family member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12 (6.63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-outside person</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7 (3.87%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse-spouse</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8 (4.42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling-sibling</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13 (7.18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-parent</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>49 (27.07%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-other family member</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (1.11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-outside</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16 (8.84%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation Total</td>
<td>44 (24.31%)</td>
<td>2 (1.11%)</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stepparent Family Structure

The stepparent family configuration also provided some intriguing conclusions. For example, lies told between multiple parents (non married) saw its highest percentage (23.21%) out of all the parental relationships analyzed. These findings seem to indicate that lying to other parents within the family, such as former spouses, is more common in stepparent families. When combined with motivation for lying, the category of lying for self-serving motives is also considerably higher (29.55% of all lies) in stepparent families than in other family structures. Consequently, the findings suggest that stepparents also have a desire to lie to other parents for their own manipulative gain.

In addition, self-preservation lies told from one parent to another parent who was not a spouse were very frequent. Of the lies told for self-preservation motives, 27.27% came from the
parent to parent relationship. Moreover, the combination of self-preservation and self-serving motivations resulted in 88.09% of the lies that stepparent families told. Consequently, the motivation for lying by stepparent families was very individualistic. These families were concerned with maintaining their own image or manipulating the other parents in the family more than sustaining their familial relationship.

Stepparent families also lied to people outside the family less frequently than any other family structure. This conclusion was applicable to both parents and children as liars. While past research found a larger connection between partner-focused lies with close relational partners, than with people outside the family (Ennis, Vrji, & Chance, 2008), future research needs to consider the familial implications when a person lies more often to those within his or her family than to those outside the family.

Table 5: Single Parent Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prosocial</th>
<th>Self-preservation</th>
<th>Harm Others</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
<th>Self-serving</th>
<th>Relationship Total (Percentage of Lies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-outside person</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-parent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-outside</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation Total (Percentage of Lies)</td>
<td>5 (20.83%)</td>
<td>9 (37.5%)</td>
<td>1 (4.17%)</td>
<td>2 (8.33%)</td>
<td>7 (29.17%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Single Parent Family Structure**

Within the family structure of single parents, there are a few notable distinctions as well. Single parent families were the only family structure to have zero prosocial lies in their parent-child relationship. Thus, for the twelve episodes included in the study, single parent George (*Surburgatory*) did not lie to Tessa once for prosocial reasons. Instead, George’s motivation for lying came strictly from individualistic goals, such as self-preservation and self-serving. In turn, Tessa also lies to her father for mainly self-preservation or self-serving reasons. These motivations emulate her father’s motivations for lying. Therefore, as single parents are also the sole parental role models in the family, one might question how George’s motivations for lying also impact his daughter’s motivations. Yet, there were also no instances of “punishment by lying” within the single parent structure. Consequently, there also were not any consistent patterns of lying that continued, nor does the fictional single father instill cultural values about lying to his daughter.

Moreover, the single parent structure was also the only family structure in which avoidance was a motivation for lying only to people outside the familial relationship. Thus, while lying was present between these characters, neither father, nor daughter lied to each other to avoid or minimize their problems. Rather these two characters directly confronted any relational problem through conversation, rather than verbal deception.
Table 6: Same-Sex Parent Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Prosocial</th>
<th>Self-preservation</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
<th>Relationship Total (Percentage of Lies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent-parent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 (13.64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-outside person</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7 (31.82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse-spouse</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-parent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (4.55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation Total (Percentage of Lies)</td>
<td>2 (9.10%)</td>
<td>13 (59.10%)</td>
<td>7 (31.82%)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Same-Sex Parent Family Structure

The most notable difference within same-sex parent families came from the reasons why these familial members lied. Prosocial lies were approximately half (9.1%) of the motivating factors for lying when compared to the overall findings (17.32%). Instead of prosocial lying, these characters engaged in lying for self-preservation (59.10%) and avoidance (31.82%). These findings are particularly troublesome because the two main characters that encompass the same-sex family are in a committed romantic relationship. However, the findings of this study emphasize that these characters are engaging in lying to minimize their own weaknesses or to avoid problems that have arisen. Superficially, one might assume that these are negative characteristics associated with this family structure. Yet, Cole (2001) argued that if a person lied to avoid arguments and encourage harmony within the relationship, lying is viewed as a relational benefit (Cole, 2001). Moreover, even self-preservation can be considered positive if the decision to marginalize his own weaknesses, helps the couple develop or sustain a relationship (Cole, 2001).
Class Status

To conclude this chapter, this dissertation next separates the data by class status. Upper middle-class, middle-class, and lower-class will each have separate tables to analyze to what extent class status affects the findings of this research. Once again, in order to discuss these findings, the categories of relationship between liar and receiver and motivation for the verbal deception are combined in each of the tables below. Finally, this section will also discuss how these categories separate by class compare to the overall findings of relationship between liar and receiver and motivation for lying.

Table 7: Upper Middle-Class Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Type</th>
<th>Prosocial</th>
<th>Self-preservation</th>
<th>Harm Others</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-parent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-other family member</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-outside person</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse-spouse</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling-sibling</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-parent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-outside</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation Total (Percentage of Lies)</td>
<td>21 (16.8%)</td>
<td>70 (56%)</td>
<td>3 (2.4%)</td>
<td>13 (10.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self-serving</th>
<th>Punishing by Lying</th>
<th>Relationship Total (Percentage of Lies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24 (19.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-parent</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28 (22.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-other family member</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 (2.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-outside person</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17 (13.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse-spouse</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18 (14.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling-sibling</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 (2.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-parent</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28 (22.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-outside</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 (3.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation Total (Percentage of Lies)</td>
<td>17 (13.6%)</td>
<td>1 (.10%)</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Upper Middle-Class Status

Overall, upper middle-class families mainly complemented the findings of the relationship between liar and recipient of the lie. Yet, parents lying to other parents (22.4%) was twice as frequent in upper middle-class families than in the overall findings. In contrast, children lied to their siblings (2.4%) and to people outside the family (3.2%) substantially less often than the mainstream findings. These results imply that upper middle-class parents lie to each other more than upper middle-class children lie. While there is an observed increase in parent-parent lying, there is a decrease in children lying to each other and to others.

In addition, upper middle-class characters repeatedly depict lying to avoid a problem they are having in their relationship. While the overall findings found avoidance to encompass 5.26% of all lies told, upper middle-class characters told nearly double the amount of lies (10.4%). As previously argued, avoiding potential problems, particularly through the means of verbal
deception, can be very destructive to a relationship. If family members avoid taking responsibility and instead choose to lie, the issue is left unresolved. Without addressing the underlying problem, the relationship can become strained. However, upper middle-class characters appear less concerned with the detrimental impact that lying to avoid their problems can have on their familial relationships.

Table 8: Middle-Class Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Prosocial</th>
<th>Self-preservation</th>
<th>Harm Others</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-parent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-other family member</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-outside person</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse-spouse</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling-sibling</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-parent</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-other family member</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-outside</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation Total (Percentage of Lies)</td>
<td>73 (17.94%)</td>
<td>153 (37.59%)</td>
<td>28 (6.88%)</td>
<td>17 (4.18%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Self-serving</th>
<th>Punishing by Lying</th>
<th>Relationship Total (Percentage of Lies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50 (12.29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-parent</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40 (9.83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-other family member</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17 (4.18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-outside person</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32 (7.86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse-spouse</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27 (6.63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling-sibling</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>48 (11.79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-parent</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>106 (26.04%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-other family member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9 (2.21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-outside</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>78 (19.17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation Total (Percentage of Lies)</td>
<td>121 (29.73%)</td>
<td>15 (3.68%)</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Middle-Class Status**

Similar to the findings on nuclear family structure, middle-class status also saw findings that paralleled the overall results. Thus, the findings of this study appear to corroborate that the middle-class family is still the preferred family structure. While the middle-class did not use lying as a punishment, all five of the other categories were observed. In addition, middle-class children appeared to not only lie less overall, but especially to characters who were not members of the family. Siblings also lied to each other less frequently. Siblings use interactions with each other to experiment and develop how to behave in relationships (Yeh & Lemper, 2004).

However, the socialization of who to lie to and the motivation for that decision are solely lacking in these findings. Consequently, there is a distinct implication that the middle-class family is still portrayed as mainstream, if not necessarily harmonious. Because the results closely
resembled the overall findings, the middle-class representation also emulates the overall representations of the family. Moreover, this conclusion further implies that the middle-class representation depicts the majority of families, at least within domestic sitcoms.

### Table 9: Working-Class Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Prosocial</th>
<th>Self-preservation</th>
<th>Harm Others</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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### Table 9 continued

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Working-Class Characters

In contrast to upper middle-class characters, working-class characters told lies mainly to their children and to people outside the family. As Heyman, Luu and Lee (2009) argued parents not only lie to their children, but they also reinforce the act of lying to their children in the process. However, for working-class characters, the opposite effect appears to occur. Children lied less, particularly to their parents, in working-class families. Consequently, while Stafford & Dainton (1994) concluded that the parental values about lying were instilled on the children, at least when it comes to domestic sitcom children, the findings challenge their conclusions.

Additionally, working-class characters also had only one insistence of lying to avoid a problem (1.75%). This is considerably less frequent than the overall findings. In contrast to the upper middle-class characters, who preferred to avoid their problems by lying, working-class characters did not have similar motivations. Moreover, the one occasion when lying was used, it was directed to another family member outside the television show’s main cast. Therefore, lying to avoid issues was non-existent among the main characters on the show.

While the findings of the working-class characters can be interpreted as beneficial from a relationship standpoint, they also raise the question of why the working-class characters are portrayed as drastically more harmonious. Even though the parents lie, the children are not socialized into valuing the act of lying. There are also no instances of lying to avoid problems. In fact, the majority of the lies told by working-class characters were motivated by self-preservation, or a desire to protect one’s own image. These conclusions warrant further investigation into the representation of working-class characters on domestic sitcoms. Because they are portrayed as more harmonious or concerned with their own image, these findings imply
that working-class characters on domestic sitcoms are putting on a pretense that they strive to be perceived as mainstream and are attempting to achieve that through verbal deception.

**Concluding Discussion**

The findings presented in this chapter start to construct a picture of how verbal deception relates to the representation of the American family on domestic sitcoms. After sampling 84 episodes, an average of 7 lies per 30-minute episode were detected, resulting in 589 lies total. Thus, as verbal deception becomes commonplace in real life, domestic sitcoms also address its prominence. While parents and children lied with almost equal occurrence, sibling relationships experienced very minimal lying.

After examining the motivation for verbal deception, nearly half of the lies told were for self-preservation motives. This designates that domestic sitcom characters lie for their own wants and desires, as opposed to his or her recipient’s. Because this is an individual act, there is a disregard for the damage lies can cause within the relationship. This research also revealed two innovative categories for reasons why sitcom characters lie: “self-serving” and “punishment by lying.” Self-serving lies demonstrate manipulation within one’s relationship and was quite frequent in the findings. While punishment by lying was a substantially less common reason, it is a problematic reason to lie because it promotes a pattern of lying in familial relationships. Additionally, it socializes other family members that verbal deception is an appropriate response to lying.

When divided by family structure, these findings became even more multifaceted. The nuclear family depicted prosocial lying frequently, but also was the largest classification to engage in punishment by lying. Stepparent families also verbally deceived for self-preservation
or self-serving reasons, or for more individualistic goals. While single parent families never used lying to avoid problems, same-sex families frequently avoided their problems through verbal deception.

Class distinctions also brought intriguing conclusions. Upper middle-class family members lied frequently to avoid problems, while working-class families never did. Upper middle-class parents and working-class parents also frequently lied, but their children lied less. This indicated that even though the children were exposed to verbal deception, socialization rarely occurred. Middle-class families emulated the overall findings, indicating that they were depicted as mainstream.

This previous chapter initiated the discussion of the representation of verbal deception between family members on domestic sitcoms. While this chapter focused on the lie itself and the relationship between the liar and the recipient and the motivation for the lie, it failed to consider the deeper impact that the verbal deception had on the familial characters. The next chapter will engage in a narrative analysis to uncover not only the presence and frequency of lying, but the influence it has on the relationship. It will also consider to what extent the effects of the lie can be addressed within one 30-minute episode. Finally, the distinction between family structure and class status will once again be considered.
Through a qualitative narrative analysis, this chapter addresses three specific episodes of each of the series. These episodes were specifically chosen for analysis because of either the characters frequent use of lying or because verbal deception was fundamental to the plot of that specific episode. Each section is divided by show and specific episode and is chronologically organized. At the end of this chapter, further analysis of the broader implications across all the shows will be considered. This chapter ultimately seeks to uncover what role the lie, the motivation for the lie, the relationship between the liar and the recipient, and the resolution play in the episode’s narrative. Furthermore, this analysis will consider to what extent there are any thematic patterns across family structure or class status.

*Modern Family* (2009-present)

**Episode #2: “The Bicycle Thief”**

“The Bicycle Thief” features lying for multiple reasons to several characters. Phil decides that his son, Luke, needs a new bicycle, even though Phil’s wife, Claire, doesn’t believe Luke is responsible enough yet. When he thinks that Luke is being irresponsible with the new bicycle, Phil removes it, so Luke will believe the bike was stolen. However, on his way home, a new neighbor, who Claire dislikes, asks Phil for some assistance. Phil puts down the bicycle to help her and when he returns, he finds the bike has been stolen from him. Claire grows suspicious of Phil’s actions and Phil knows she would not approve of his decision to steal Luke’s bicycle and help the new neighbor. Thus, Phil lies to protect himself. Phil continues to lie
throughout the episode until the new neighbor reveals the truth and the camera zooms in on Phil’s sheepish grin toward Claire. Yet, Phil’s embarrassment appears to be the only resolution to his series of lies. The show cuts to a different storyline without offering any additional closure to Phil’s lies. Phil and Claire do not discuss his verbal deception, nor do they address the larger relational ramifications of lying. Instead, Phil’s embarrassment serves as the perceived punishment.

Cameron and Mitchell also lie for self-preservation reasons during this episode. As they attend their daughter, Lily’s, first play group, they lie to the other parents in the group about their hobbies, tastes in movies, and Lily’s developmental skills to make themselves look better; Mitchell even resorts to stealing a baby’s blocks when that baby can stack the blocks, but Lily cannot. As the only same-sex family, Mitchell is very concerned about their image to the rest of the group. Ultimately, a second same-sex family appears and is welcomed by the group for embracing their individuality. Mitchell and Cameron regret their lies, and the broader implication of the episode shows that they should have accepted their individuality. Yet, similar to the scene with Phil and Claire, Mitchell and Cameron do not discuss with each other, nor with the recipient of their lies, the verbal deception they have told. While these lies were directed at people outside their family, whereas Phil’s lies were to his spouse, Claire, there is still no resolution. Instead, Cameron’s injury after he dances and Mitchell’s embarrassment over stealing a child’s blocks conclude the episode. The resolution results in a humorous event that penalizes the couple for not embracing their individuality, as opposed to a discussion about or a solution for the lying that occurred.

At the end of this episode, Jay also lies to Manny, his new stepson. Throughout the episode, Jay argues with Manny as they try to install a fan in Manny’s room. Manny continually
compares Jay to his biological father, believing him to be superior to Jay. As Manny waits on the curb for his father to pick him up, Jay receives a call that Manny’s father is too pre-occupied in Las Vegas to come spend time with his son. Jay goes outside to inform Manny that his father could not come and the following scene occurs:

Jay: “Say, listen, sorry, but I got some bad news.”
Manny: “What?”
Jay: “Your dad couldn’t make it.”
Manny: “Why not?”
Jay: “The plane was full and this old lady needed to get home, so he gave up his seat.”
Manny: “You’re making that up, aren’t you?”
Jay: “No.”
Manny: “He just didn’t want to come.”
Jay: “Are you kidding me? He was very upset! He was dying to see you. Pause. In fact, look what he sent.”
Manny: “A limo?”
Jay: “Yea, he wanted me and your mom to take you to Disneyland.”
Manny: “I told you he was an awesome dad.”
Jay: “Yea, he’s a prince.”

Manny never finds out the truth, but Jay’s lies for prosocial reasons are framed as extremely positive by the show. Jay had ordered the limo to take Gloria and himself on a romantic getaway for the weekend; now he uses it to spare Manny’s feelings when his biological father cannot
come. Thus, there is a binary depiction between Jay, who has been verbally harsh toward Manny the entire episode and lied to him to spare Manny’s feelings at the end of it, and Manny’s biological father, who is too busy gambling and drinking to spend time with his son. In the end, the show portrays Jay, despite his lying and verbal insults, as the better father because he “showed up.” Jay even gets a voiceover at the end of the episode to reinforce the moral perspective: “The key to being a good dad? Look sometimes things work out just the way you want. Sometimes they don’t. You gotta hang in there. Because when all is said and done, 90% of being a dad is just showing up.” Jay states his monologue as the show cuts between scenes of Phil with Luke and Cameron and Mitchell with Lily, symbolizing the interpretation of what makes a good father. However, the fact that lying was used by all four fathers in this episode is never addressed or considered. Phil lies to his wife, Cameron and Mitchell lie to people outside the family, and Jay lies to his new stepson. All are for different reasons, but readily ignored and forgotten in favor of the broader message that the familial value of spending time with your child is key.

**Episode #12: “Not In My House”**

Lying occurs between two of the couples again in “Not in My House.” Claire finds a picture of a half-naked woman on her laptop and assumes that her son, Luke, was looking at it. Phil lies to Claire that he does not know who was looking at the picture and that he will talk to Luke. He continues lying to Claire that he discussed the situation with Luke and that she should not mention it to him. In reality, Phil only talked to Luke about his own computer issues, not the picture. When Phil leaves to get pizza for dinner, Luke apologizes for reading his sister’s journal and Claire discovers that he was not the one looking at the picture. As Phil walks through the
door with the pizza, everyone in the house turns to look at him, knowing that it was his picture. In the next scene, and when they are alone, Phil apologizes to Claire for the picture and for lying to her. Claire quickly admonishes his lie, explaining that she was only upset about the picture when she thought Luke was the one looking at it. Concerned that her youngest child was growing up too quickly, Claire is nonchalant that her husband lied to her. In this scenario, Phil attempts to discuss his lies and communicate with Claire to find a resolution, but Claire quickly dismisses them in favor of expressing a mother’s desire for her son to remain a little boy as long as possible. This mentality is more reminiscent with a 1950s housewife. Claire has no problem with her husband looking at other women on the Internet, but is only concerned with her children growing up and not needing her any longer.

A second storyline within this episode focuses on Cameron’s lies to Mitchell. When Cameron discovers the gardener crying, he wants to investigate why the gardener appears so emotional. Mitchell complains that Cameron gets too involved in other people’s problems. Cameron lies to Mitchell that he knows the gardener’s name and that he can speak Spanish; his lies are quickly revealed as he accidentally offers the gardener his bed, instead of a glass of water. Cameron further lies that the gardener’s problems don’t bother him, when Cameron clearly cares and Mitchell knows he is lying. However, Cameron’s motivation for lying is one of self-preservation because he wishes to conceal from Mitchell how much he really does care about everyone. After discussing his frustrations with his father about Cameron, Mitchell returns home and Cameron continues to lie that Mitchell cannot go in to the house. While Mitchell was gone, Cameron created an elaborate wedding inside their home for the gardener. Yet, the plot of the episode focuses on Cameron’s personality flaw of being overly compassionate toward others, a trait many people would find advantageous in a partner. Instead, the show depicts Mitchell’s
struggle to seemingly accept that flaw and presents Mitchell as the more sympathetic character. However, the lies Cameron tells for self-preservation are ignored and never confronted by either partner. The show implies that Mitchell and Cameron need to accept each other’s flaws, while lying can go unnoticed.

**Episode #17: “Truth Be Told”**

“Truth Be Told” directly confronts lying within all three families and all of their storylines. When Jay attempts to hang a picture in Manny’s room, the picture falls and accidentally kills Manny’s turtle. Petrified that this will hurt their wavering relationship, Jay begins a series of lies to Manny about a raccoon coming through the window, looking for a snack, and killing the turtle. When Manny believes that the raccoon entered his room because he left chips in his room, Jay does not contradict him and continues to lie to Manny. Jay cannot sleep that night and lies to Gloria about the reason why, even though she already knows that Jay accidentally killed the turtle and feels guilty. Jay enters Manny’s room, where the following scene occurs:

Jay: “What are you doing up?”

Manny: “Waiting.”

Jay: “Waiting for what?”

Manny: “The truth. It wasn’t a raccoon, was it?”

Jay: “Oh, all right, you got me. I killed Shell. All right, I’m sorry. It was an accident.”

Manny: “Why didn’t you just tell me?”
Jay: “Because I didn’t want you to be upset with me. You and I got off to a rocky start. Lately, it’s been pretty good. I was afraid that I’d mess all that up if you knew I was the one that killed your pet.”

Manny: “Now you’re the one who killed my pet and made a stupid lie about it.”

Jay: “Well, I don’t think it was stupid. I thought it was pretty clever. Pause. I was just trying to avoid past mistakes. Look, I know I can’t make things all better right now, but maybe over time.”

Manny: “Maybe.”

Jay: “Get some rest.”

Manny: “Since we’re confessing things. You know that scratch on your car?”

Jay: “The one that can’t be buffed out? Yeah?”

Manny: “You should probably know how that happened.”

Jay: “I know how that happened…a raccoon did it.”

During this scene, two characters finally discuss lying that occurred throughout the episode. Within the sampled episodes of Modern Family, this is the only scene that directly addresses the impact that a character’s lies have on a relationship. Even though Jay tries to minimize the deception as a “stupid lie”, Manny’s insistence in discussing his deception leads to a meaningful conversation between the two characters. Even though he accidentally killed Manny’s pet, Jay still subsequently lied about it. Manny is equally concerned with both Jay’s accidental killing of his pet, but also with Jay’s act of lying. In response, Manny discloses that he also did something
accidentally and lied about it. Jay’s response that “a raccoon did it” signifies that Manny is forgiven for his lie. Consequently, Jay and Manny’s relationship appears strengthened through the dialogue they express about the lies they each have told.

Lying also occurs in the Dunphy household. At the beginning of the episode, Luke teases and mocks Alex. In order to punish him, Alex proceeds to lie that Luke was adopted and his “real” mother is coming to meet him later that day. When Phil’s old girlfriend arrives for a visit, Alex convinces Luke that she is his real mother coming to take him away. Luke runs out of the room, crying. While the scene is designed for a humorous subplot, Alex’s lies are never addressed. In fact, Luke never questions his parentage again and has forgotten about Alex’s lies by the next episode. There is no resolution to Alex’s lies and Luke’s suspicions during this or any subsequent episodes. The characters have forgotten that it occurred because the show is heavily serialized. Sitcoms that do not rely on a continuing plot are considered serialized (McQueen, 2009). No matter what occurred during the plot or to another character in a previous episode, each new episode starts from the same basic premise. Luke disregards Alex’s lies and no resolution is established. However, Luke is carefree by the next episode.

Cameron and Mitchell also lie to each other and to Mitchell’s boss in the episode. As Mitchell pulls up to a traffic light, he complains to Cameron about his horrible boss, only to notice his boss in the car next to him. Worried that his boss overheard him, Mitchell lies to him and says that he was complaining about Cameron’s boss instead. When Mitchell’s boss insists he work on Sunday, Mitchell decides to quit his job in order to avoid losing any additional family time. The lie to his boss is ignored and does affect Mitchell’s job status. Even though he is concerned about his job loss, Mitchell returns home and lies to Cameron that it is exciting that he quit. Not wishing to worry his partner, Cameron also lies that he is excited for him. After a
few minutes, the reality of the situation sets in for Mitchell and he begins to panic. The following scene occurs:

Cameron: “No, don’t panic. If you panic, I panic.”

Mitchell: “I just quit my job!”

Cameron: “Mitchell, I’m used to nice things! What are we going to do?”

The lies that have been told to each other are once again ignored. The gravity of Mitchell voluntarily giving up his source of income overshadows the lies that the couple has told moments before. The scene is made even more disconcerting as Cameron is more concerned with maintaining his upper-middle-class lifestyle than basic necessities, such as food and a roof over their head. Regardless, lying is the furthest idea from their minds; once again, lies told have no resolution.

*The Middle (2009-present)*

**Episode #7: “The Scratch”**

“The Scratch” begins with the Heck family struggling to finish gathering their trash within the house, as the garbage truck rounds the corner. In the chaos, Frankie, the mother, accidentally hits her son, Brick, with a beer bottle. Later that day, Frankie and her husband, Mike, are called into school. Brick has told his teacher that his mother hit him with a beer bottle, causing the school’s administration to be concerned. As a result, the school and police require a social worker to visit the family’s home. Nervous that Brick will once again unintentionally reveal something that can be easily misinterpreted by the social worker, Frankie and Mike prepare a “practice run” with Brick for the visit. The following scene occurs:
Mike: “For example, what would you say if she asks if your mom ever hits you?”

Brick: “Not deliberately.”


Mike: “No is good. Keep it brief…keep it simple.”

Brick: “Ok, I’ll just tell her whatever you tell me I should say.”

Mike: “Well you wouldn’t want her to think that we’re coaching you.”

Brick: “But aren’t you coaching me?”

Frankie: “What, this? No, this isn’t coaching. We’re just practicing. So to recap, if she asks you if we were coaching you, you would say?”

Brick: “Yes.”

Frankie: “Gosh, you know? I think you could say no for that question too. What do you think?”

Mike: “I like no as a go-to answer.”

Brick: “So you’re telling me to lie? Okay.”

Frankie: “No, no, no. Nobody is telling you to lie. I think we’re just bending the immediate truth just a teeny, teeny bit to get to the truth that is the true truth. You understand?”

Brick: “No.”

Frankie: “You don’t?”

Brick: “I don’t know. But you said no was my go-to answer. Can I go watch TV?”
Because of the impending visit from the social worker, Frankie and Mike start to lie to Brick to maintain their family’s image. While the bottle hitting Brick was an accident, Frankie and Mike’s lies of self-preservation that they are not coaching him are to make their family look good and omit any perceived weaknesses by the social worker. These lies are never addressed because the plot implies that they are necessary to prevent Brick from saying anything that could cause the Hecks to lose the children. Brick is portrayed as unable to comprehend why telling someone that his mother accidentally hit him with a bottle sounds detrimental to his well-being. Therefore, the lies are deemed a necessity for the benefit of the overall family. When the social worker arrives, Frankie continues to lie, insisting that her daughter, Sue, covered her head because she was cold. Actually, Sue ran into a door a few moments before and the hat covers the subsequent bump. Frankie also lies that the family spends every moment possible together, plays outside, and reads Bible verses. Ultimately, Frankie’s lies are further ignored because they are ascertained as essential for protecting the family’s overall image. The family wants to remain together and Mike and Frankie want to keep their children; in order to prevent any further misunderstandings, lies to Brick and the social worker are deemed necessary.

**Episode #9: “Siblings”**

Episode #9 features the Heck family lying again with self-preservation as the motivation for their lies. When Frankie notices that one of her neighbors has siblings that actually enjoy spending time together, she questions how the family has become so close. The mother reveals that she gives her kids “the proper tools to resolve things.” Frankie agrees that she also does this, but a flashback shows her yelling at her quarrelling children to keep it down, so that she can
watch television. While the phrase “proper tools” is stated, its definition is not explored on a deeper level. The show presents the opportunity to address sibling interactions and conflicts, yet counters the opportunity with vagueness and lying. Frankie continues to lie that Mike supports her decisions when it comes to the children interacting with one another. Once again, a flashback proves that Frankie is lying to the neighbor. Finally, the neighbor states that spending time together with family dinners, game nights, and car trips is crucial. Frankie lies and says that is obvious, but the voiceover reveals she has forgotten the list already. Thus, even though Frankie questions how to encourage her children to interact in more positive approaches, she also lies to the neighbor to preserve her own image as a dedicated mother. No resolution is deemed necessary, since Frankie is lying to safeguard her neighbor’s impression of Frankie’s family.

Frankie tries to implement the neighbor’s suggestions and takes the children out to play football. Brick lies that a car is coming, in order to allow his sister, Sue, to score against their parents. The lie is not only ignored, but Brick’s manipulation is actually celebrated by his parents’ smiles and cheers and Brick’s dancing. The lie is ignored because the children are bonding over defeating their parents in the game. Frankie’s goal of spending time together as a family without fighting is achieved. Yet, another aspect that is disregarded is that the children are not actually communicating with one another. With their focus solely on victory against their parents in the football game, profound conversations are ignored. The children are not discussing anything except strategizing to defeat their parents in a football game. As they deliver wreaths to the neighbors, a different neighbor comments on how helpful the children are and how well they get along. Frankie lies to the neighbor that “it’s a lot of work, but Mike and I have just always made family a priority.” This final lie, once again, protects the family’s image, this time to the
neighbors. For a second time, lying to preserve both Frankie’s and the family’s reputation is valued more than honesty.

**Episode #19: “The Final Four”**

Brick and Sue lie in a secondary plot storyline in “The Final Four.” Brick doesn’t want to attend his classmate’s birthday party and he explains his dilemma to Sue. Sue proposes that Brick tell their mother about his concerns, but Brick confesses that their mother thinks interacting with other classmates would be beneficial for him. Brick has always been portrayed as socially inept on the show, preferring to read and stay in the library rather than engage with others; he also frequently stares at the floor and repeats words under his breath after he has just said them. Brick then convinces Sue to call his classmate’s mother, pretending to be their mother, in order to avoid having to go to the party. Brick lies to Sue that she has a grown-up voice because he wants her to call so he can avoid the party. When Sue still refuses, Brick proposes a trade: he will do her math homework and ensure that she gets an A if she will call the classmate’s mother. Sue finally agrees and lies to the classmate’s mother that she is Frankie. While pretending to be her mother, Sue lies that Brick cannot attend the party. After she successfully leaves a voicemail message, Sue asks Brick if he has ever lied before. Brick tells her no, but seconds later stares at the floor and whispers under his breath “I’m lying.” When Frankie’s uncle dies and his funeral is scheduled for the same day as the party, Frankie asks Sue and Brick to remind her to call his classmate’s mother and tell her Brick cannot come. Sue and Brick quickly realize that their lie will be exposed, so Brick convinces Sue to call the classmate’s mother again and continue to lie. The following scene occurs:
Brick: “Don’t panic. Here’s what we’re going to do. You’re going to call Mrs. Secola again and say I can come to the party. So when Mom calls and says I can’t, it’ll all make sense.”

Sue: “Ok, good.”

Recording: “Hi, you’ve reached the Secolas. Please leave a message.”

Sue: “Hi there, Allison. Just calling to let you know that my son can come to the party after all. Thank you.”

Brick: “Whose your son? You didn’t say who you were.”

*Sue calls back.* Sue: “Hi, forgot to say my name. It was Francis Heck just letting you know that Brick can’t come to the party.”

*Sue calls back.* Sue: “He can…he can come to the party.”

*Sue calls back.* Sue: “Did I say Axl? Because I meant Brick. I just want to be accurate. Hello?”

*Sue calls back.* Sue: “Did I say Axl? Because I meant Brick. I just want to be accurate. Hello?”

Brick has unplugged the telephone chord from the wall because Sue has started to panic. Brick shakes his head.

Clearly, Sue is portrayed as uncomfortable with lying, while Brick remains relaxed and confident that lying is the best approach to solving his problem. Yet, both siblings lie for self-serving reasons. Brick may have initiated the lies, but he wants to avoid going to a social gathering where he is nervous about interacting with others. Sue desires an A on her math homework, so she agrees to lie, also for her own personal gain. However, there is a blatant distinction between the lies as well. Brick lies to Sue, a family member, and manipulates her into deceiving the classmate’s mother. Sue, on the other hand, lies to someone outside the family, yet, is depicted as more remorseful than Brick, who appears quite at ease with the lies. As Sue continues to
panic and threatens to tell their mother, Brick convinces her to call the classmate’s mother one more time to try to prevent the initial lie from being discovered. Unlike the previous phone calls, the classmate’s mother picks up this time. Sue tries to recover with two more lies, but ultimately breaks down and confesses the entire truth. Then Sue hangs up before the classmate’s mother has a chance to respond. Brick shakes his head and throws his arms in the air, while Sue looks ashamed. Certain that the classmate’s mother will tell Frankie, the two siblings wait for their mother to punish them. However, Frankie does not, so the following scene occurs:

Sue: “I just wish she’d punish me and get it over with because the guilt is killing me. Mom trusted me. Now she’ll know I’m not the child she thinks I am and I’ll have lost that trust forever.”

*Frankie enters.* Frankie: “Ok, guys time to go.”

Sue: “Mom there’s something I have to tell you. I called Mrs. Secola. I called her about the party.”

Frankie: “Oh, honey, thank you. Oh, I’ve been meaning to do that all week. And an A on your math homework too. You are my good girl.” *Frankie kisses her on the head.*

Ultimately, Sue decides that telling the truth to her mother is preferred to telling lies. However, Sue’s confession is met with a classic sitcom misunderstanding. Sitcoms have historically utilized misunderstood situations derivative from screwball comedies in 1950s movies (Morreale, 2003). “Crazy comedy” sitcom plots often include puns and miscommunication as their sources of humor; the emphasis is placed on the misunderstanding and therefore the discourse is given less weight than a comedy that uses satire to discuss broader “socially relevant” ideas (Attalah, 2003). In this case, the misunderstanding, however, serves as the
resolution to the lies told earlier in the episode; it is also the only resolution to lying in the three episodes sampled of *The Middle*. Frankie essentially rewards Sue for her honesty, but in a very indirect way, because she misunderstands her daughter’s attempt at truthfulness. Thus, the first episode of *The Middle* to provide a resolution for the characters lying is also marred with a sitcom genre convention: the sitcom misunderstanding. Consequently, this undermines the seriousness of Sue’s confession and diminishes her effort to be truthful to her mother.

**Good Luck Charlie (2010-2014)**

**Episode #5: “Dance Off”**

In the fifth episode of the series, Teddy and Gabe both lie in two different plot lines. First, in a video diary to her baby sister, Teddy expresses her determination to get her first kiss from a boy she likes. As she records this statement, her father, Bob, enters and asks what she is talking about. To preserve her image as a dutiful daughter, Teddy replies that she will get her first A+ in math. Her father never knows about the lie. Later, Teddy lies to the boy she likes, Spencer, on a few occasions so that they can go to the dance together and be alone together in the car. Spencer suspects she is lying, but readily ignores the lies because he has the same goal as Teddy: to have their first kiss. The two finally kiss in the car. However, there is no resolution for the lies Teddy told throughout the episode. Moreover, Teddy is actually rewarded for lying by obtaining her first kiss, the goal she desired all episode. Thus, the plot of the episode rewards lying, rather than portraying it in a negative manner.

In contrast, Teddy’s brother, Gabe, also lies for self-serving purposes throughout the episode. Gabe reveals to his brother, P.J., that he has been lying to his teacher. In order to avoid doing his homework, Gabe has been telling his teacher that his parents, Amy and Bob, constantly
fight. When parent-teacher night arrives, Gabe knows his previous lies to his teacher could be exposed. Thus, the following scene occurs:

Gabe: “Mom, mom are you wearing perfume?”

Amy: “I am.”

Gabe: “Oh.”

Amy: “What you don’t like it?”

Gabe: “Oh, I like it. But…”

Amy: “But what? Does someone else not like it?”

Gabe: “I don’t want to get Dad in trouble.”

Amy: “Wait Dad says he doesn’t like my perfume?”

Gabe: “He doesn’t just say it. He makes a face too. Sometimes there’s gagging.”

Amy: “Oh, wow. That’s interesting. Has your father shared anything else with you about how I disgust him?”

Gabe: “I’ve said too much already.”

Amy: “Ok, ok.”

_Gabe enters the living room and sees Dad._

Gabe: “Nice jacket dad.”

Bob: “Isn’t it? Got my company logo right there. Free advertising and a great conversation starter.”

Gabe: “Um, does Mom know you are wearing it?”

Dad: “Oh, I’ve been dressing myself for quite some time now. So no, I didn’t run it by her.”
Gabe: “Oh, I guess she’ll just have to live with it.”

Dad: “Why is there a problem?”

Gabe: “I don’t want to get Mom in trouble, but…but just between us, she thinks you talk too much about your job.”

Dad: “I talk too much about my job? The same job that puts a roof over your mother’s head.”

Gabe: “Hey, I’m on your side.”

Dad: “So, ah, what else does she say about me behind my back?”

Gabe: “I’ve said too much already.”

Through this scene, Gabe lies to both of his parents as a way to manipulate them into fighting with one another. This series of lies comes after he has already admitted to lying to his teacher about his parents fighting that night. When they reach the conference, Gabe continues to lie to his teacher that his parents are fighting. However, once his parents start talking directly with the teacher, Bob and Amy discover that Gabe has been lying. When they directly confront Gabe, he admits the truth. His teacher then insists that Gabe submit all of his overdue assignments by Monday. Consequently, Gabe’s lies to his teacher are directly addressed through this punishment; however, Gabe’s lies to his parents are ultimately ignored. Bob and Amy continue to talk and discover that Bob does not like her perfume and Amy does not like having bug logos everywhere. Their humorous comments and subsequent small disagreement overshadow the fact that Gabe is not penalized for his lies to his parents. The punishment of completing his homework assignments, a task Gabe should complete anyway, represents the punishment for his lying. Yet, his teacher is the one to give him the punishment, not his parents.
Episode #7: “Butt Dialing Duncans”

Teddy lies to her mother, Amy, in “Butt Dialing Duncans” because she wishes to go to a movie that opens at midnight on a school night. Teddy’s best friend, Ivy, convinces her that lying to Amy would be the best way to achieve the goal of seeing a movie. Teddy then lies to Amy that she would rather spend time with her, loves her taste in clothing, and is her “BMF: Best Mom Forever.” Unfortunately for Teddy, she accidentally butt dials Amy right at the same time as she tells Ivy that the plan to manipulate her mother worked. Amy overhears the entire plan and decides that Teddy needs to be punished for her deception. As Teddy and Ivy wait in line for the midnight movie, Amy and Ivy’s mother appear dressed in their interpretation of teenage clothing. The two mothers shriek like teenage girls, grab the bullhorn from the usher, and proceed to be extremely embarrassing in their comments and dancing. Teddy and Ivy look away, thoroughly mortified. Later, Teddy and Amy discuss Teddy’s deception and her mother’s humiliation as punishment. The following scene occurs:

Teddy: “I don’t know what to say mom. I’m sorry.”

Amy: “That’s a start.”

Teddy: “I should have never done that. I feel awful.”

Amy: “Now I’m feeling better.”

Teddy: “Just do me a favor. In the future, when I do something stupid, could you just ground me like a normal mom?”

Amy: “Oh, Teddy. I think we’ve established I’ll never be a normal mom.”

Unlike the previous episode in which Teddy’s lies are rewarded when she wants to receive a kiss from Spencer, Teddy’s lies to her mother are punished through public humiliation. When it
comes to Teddy, lies appear acceptable to people outside the family, but not to other family members. However, the scene is also followed by a moment in which Amy and Teddy directly address Teddy’s lies and Teddy has the opportunity to really apologize for them. This instance and the opportunity for Teddy to apologize is something that none of the other siblings have had.

**Episode #12: “Kit and Kaboodle”**

In episode #12, Gabe and P.J. both engage in lying. Gabe has a crush on one of his classmates at school. After he tells Amy that he has a “friend” who needs advice on how to talk to girls, Amy suggests that Gabe ask the girl questions to find out what commonalities they share. The next time he sees the girl, Gabe lies “Me too” in response to everything the girl says, including that she is an only child and her parents are divorced. These are not aspects they have in common, however. When the girl and her mother arrive, Gabe starts to panic that she will discover his siblings and that his parents are married, so he enlists Teddy to cover for his earlier lies. Teddy lies to the girl and her mother that Teddy is the housekeeper and she is from Canada. When P.J. arrives home, Teddy lies that he is only the chicken delivery guy and takes P.J. on the porch to inform him of the situation. In the meantime, Gabe continues to lie to the girl. Next, Bob returns home, followed by Amy, so Gabe’s lies really start to unravel. The following scene occurs:

Gabe: “I may have told a teeny little lie. I’m sorry. I just wanted you to like me.”

Girl: “Gabe, you should have just told me the truth.”

Gabe: “I know and I promise from now on I’ll always be completely honest with you.”
The neighbor, Mrs. Dabney, walks in. Mrs. Dabney: “I’m back.”

Girl: “Now who’s this?”

Gabe: “That’s either Virginia, who’s nice and gives out candy, or Mrs. Dabney, her evil twin.”

Girl: “We’re out of here!”

While the resolution appears somewhat bizarre, Gabe had encountered both Mrs. Dabney and Virginia earlier in the episode. At this point, he was telling the truth. However, the plot demonstrates that once Gabe established a history of lying, the girl could never believe him. While the resolution is designed for humor, it also signifies the detriment that lying can have on a budding relationship. Once Gabe was dishonest, the girl could never be certain that he was being truthful with her again.

Additionally, P.J. lies for self-serving reasons during this episode too. P.J. needs to babysit his baby sister, Charlie, while working at his chicken delivery job. His customer asks who she is and P.J. explains he is watching her while their mother is “at the hospital.” In reality, their mother, works at the hospital as a nurse. However, the customer misunderstands P.J.’s statement and believes his mother is ill. Thus, the customer gives P.J. a larger tip. P.J. starts to correct her, but instead lies that “Mom being in the hospital is hard.” Because having Charlie with him and lying that his mother is at the hospital worked well the first time, P.J. lies to his father about why he wants to continue taking Charlie to work with him. His father, Bob, suspects that P.J. is lying, but is so too lazy to follow him upstairs to question him. The next time P.J. works, he lies to all of his customers about his mother and the hospital in order to get more tips. At the end of the episode, one of P.J.’s customers appears at the front door. As Amy opens the door, it appears as though P.J.’s lies will finally be discovered. Amy listens to the
customer explain how she sympathizes with P.J. and offers the family a casserole for dinner. Because Amy knows she cannot cook and the casserole “smells so good,” Amy continues the lie and accepts the casserole. Therefore, while Gabe was punished for his lies by losing the girl, P.J. financially benefits from his lies. Moreover, Amy has the opportunity to discredit his story and punish him for lying; instead, she accepts the casserole for dinner, so the entire family profits. While both Gabe and P.J. lie for self-serving purposes, the major distinction between the two is that Gabe is punished for his lies to someone he is trying to develop a relationship with. P.J. lies for financial gain and with no resolution and no punishment, it appears more acceptable than Gabe’s lie.

*Suburgatory (2011-2014)*

**Episode #2: “The Barbecue”**

Overall, instances of lying occur significantly less often in *Suburgatory* and several episodes sampled contained no lies at all. However, lying does occur in episode #2, when Tessa spends some time at a neighbor’s party and kisses a boy. When her father, George, hears about the experience from a neighbor, he lies to Tessa about knowing the boy’s name and anything about him. His self-serving motive is to garner information about what exactly happened between his daughter and the boy. Tessa lies that she does not really know the boy because she does not want to tell her father about the kiss. Instead, Tessa picks a fight with George and storms out of the room. In this instance, George resorts to lying as a method of parenting. He withholds information he knows to manipulate his daughter into revealing more about her interactions with a boy. Tessa, in turn, lies to George for self-preservation. She is struggling to identify why she finds this particular boy attractive, since he is portrayed as a stereotypical,
unintelligent jock. Even to herself, Tessa does not want to admit her fascination with him. At the end of the episode, George and Tessa discuss their adjustment to life in the suburbs, but do not address any of the lies they told each other earlier in the episode. They appear to reach closure by recognizing the close bond they have and by acknowledging that they can discuss issues with one another; however, lying is not considered an issue that they need to address.

**Episode #8: “Thanksgiving”**

During the “Thanksgiving” episode, George asks his neighbor, Dallas, to occupy Tessa while he goes into Manhattan for a job interview. Knowing how much Tessa loves the city and would want to come, George believes that Dallas and Tessa spending the day together would be a much better option. When Tessa doesn’t want to do any of the activities that Dallas suggests, Dallas makes a deal with her that if she does one hobby, she will take Tessa anywhere for lunch. Of course, Tessa chooses a restaurant in Manhattan and Dallas agrees if Tessa promises not to tell George about their trip. While walking down the street in New York, both Dallas and Tessa spot George kissing an unfamiliar woman. As several neighbors gather at Dallas’s house for Thanksgiving, the truth is revealed in the following scene:

George: “Wow, there is so much…so much I’m thankful for this year.”

Tessa: “Like the Triborough Bridge?”

Dallas: “Tessa, we shook on it!”

Tessa: “We know about your secret Puerto Rican girlfriend!”

George’s friend: “Please tell me this is true!”

George: “Wait, have you been following me?”

Dallas: “Tessa! You made me a promise!”
George: “You took my kid into Manhattan?”

Tessa: “You lied to me.”

George: “You lied to me.”

Dallas: “You lied to me. You told me you were going to work!”

George: “I was at work.”

Dallas: “That doesn’t constitute as work.”

The audience never sees George directly lie to Tessa, but he did verbally deceive Dallas that he was going to the city for a job interview. After the confrontation, George and Tessa moderately discuss the problem. Tessa expresses her desire to return to the city and struggles to understand why George can return to New York occasionally, but she cannot. In reality, Tessa is not concerned with the lies that have occurred or that George has a new girlfriend. Instead, Tessa’s focus is on her desire to return to her old life in New York. She feels as though George sneaking off to the city is unfair to her because she must remain in “suburgatory.” Thus, Tessa’s concerns somewhat deal with George’s deception, but not the lies that he has told. Rather it is George’s omissions, a different form of deception from lying, that upset Tessa the most. Those concerns and their adjustment to their new surroundings are addressed through communication between George and Tessa, but verbal dishonesty is not.

Episode #9: “The Nutcracker”

In “The Nutcracker”, Tessa overhears her father breaking up with his girlfriend in New York through a video chat. George explains to the girlfriend that he feels like he is a “bad dad” for dating someone from the city, while he has “confined Tessa to the suburbs.” Since Tessa
overhears, she decides that the best Christmas gift she can give her father would be to have his girlfriend back. So she arranges for the girlfriend to come for a visit. In the meantime, George has already become interested in the art teacher, Amy. He lies to Amy that he is having a big tree trimming party so that he can spend more time with her. When Tessa discovers that Amy has come to the party and George’s New York girlfriend is due any moment, Tessa pours out the eggnog and lies to George that she does not know how it is empty so quickly. When that does not work in convincing George to leave, Tessa next lies that she is sick and then that Amy does not “like our troops” as excuses why Amy should leave the party. For the first time on the show, Tessa is lying for prosocial reasons because she believes her father will be happier with the girlfriend he just broke up with and wants to ensure that Amy is not in the way to ruin the reunion. However, George finally reveals that he lied to the New York girlfriend and that Tessa was not the reason he broke up with her. George used Tessa’s desire to return to the city as an excuse and an avoidance tactic to prevent the girlfriend from being upset. After both women leave angry, George apologizes to Tessa for using her as the reason for his break-up. In turn, Tessa apologizes for going on George’s computer to contact his girlfriend. She apologizes for the act of using his computer without his knowledge or permission, but does not express regret for lying to him. George states that both characters learned a “valuable lesson”, but the topic of conversation quickly shifts to George’s lack of a love life. In approximately two sentences, the characters have resolved their issues of lying and deception and have moved on to the next topic. Despite finally having a resolution to the act of lying, it is extremely brief, in favor of discussing the next relationship subject. Given the amount of discussion this father and daughter have about other topics, the lack of concern about truthfulness is disturbing.
**Dog with a Blog (2012-present)**

**Episode #5: “World of Woofcraft”**

Lying is also less frequent in *Dog with a Blog*. Yet, Tyler lies in “World of Woofcraft” for self-preservation. While babysitting his sister, Chloe, she tricks Tyler into taking her to get her ears pierced. When Tyler discovers she manipulated him, he worries that his parents will punish him. Thus, Tyler lies to his stepmother, Ellen, that Chloe’s ears look best covered and her hair should be styled over her ears. Their parents eventually find out and punish Chloe for getting her ears pierced. Moreover, they punish Tyler, not for lying to Ellen, but for an earlier bad deed in the episode. Therefore, Tyler’s lies go unpunished, but his act of drawing on pictures around the house is penalized. In comparison, it appears as though lying is acceptable, particularly compared to Tyler’s other behavior. Furthermore, Tyler’s parents decide to punish him by drawing on his face, the same way he drew on the pictures around the house. Ellen even lies, “We’d never punish you for something that wasn’t your fault!” This act further demonstrates that the parental characters often use lying as a form of punishment for their children. Bennett, the father, and Ellen penalize Tyler for his bad actions earlier in the episode by continuing to lie to him. Thus, lying is satisfactory when it is used to punish a child.

**Episode #7: “The Parrot Trap”**

In episode #7, Ellen expresses to Avery that she dislikes the family dog. Avery questions if Ellen does not feel left out when the other family members bond with the dog, but Ellen does not wish to engage with him. In response, Ellen decides to get a bird to prove to her family that she can be an animal lover and, by extension, a compassionate person. The entire family dislikes the bird, including Ellen, but she lies to her family that the bird does not bother her. Ellen lies to
make herself look better in the eyes of her family. When they are not watching, however, Ellen makes faces and tells the bird she hates it. The family starts to have its suspicions about Ellen’s true feelings and the following scene occurs:

Avery: “Mom, do you really like this bird?”

Ellen: “Yes! Now come on Lucy, help me with breakfast. We’ll make eggs for everyone else and the tip of my index finger for you.”

Ellen leaves the room.

Ellen: “Why did I have to make such a big stink about being an animal person? Now I’m stuck with you, you stupid, awful, wretched...”

Bennett enters the room.

Ellen: “Who’s my special lady?”

Bennett: “You know honey I can’t say that I’m crazy about the bird, but I am relieved that you are getting along with her so well. You know, peer-reviewed studies say that people who don’t like animals can be heartless and antisocial, with no ability to bond with other living things.”

Ellen: “Well, that’s not me. The bird and I are besties!”

Ellen continues to lie to her husband and her children that the bird is important to her in order to maintain her own image. Her husband, Bennett, has already explained that he believes people who dislike animals are “heartless” and “antisocial.” In order to omit her weakness in bonding with animals, Ellen continues to lie. When the bird escapes, Ellen admits the truth to her family that she is delighted that the bird flew away. She then begins to cry because she believes she is as “heartless” and “antisocial” as the studies suggested. The dog notices her sorrow, so he licks
her. Avery tells her mother that the dog can tell she is a good person, so Ellen instantly believes it to be true. Thus, even though she has lied for self-preservation throughout the episode, Ellen’s lies are overshadowed by her perceived inadequacies. The resolution focuses on Ellen’s incentive to “be a good person” and is quickly resolved from a well-timed lick from the family dog. Ellen’s self-esteem is redeemed and order is restored to the household.

**Episode #14: “Crimes of the Art”**

“Crimes of the Art” begins with Avery and Tyler entering a community art competition. While art is something that Avery really enjoys, Tyler has just recently shown an interest in it. Avery becomes frustrated when the crowd and art judges instantly praise Tyler’s work, but ignore hers. In her frustration, Avery accidentally knocks over Tyler’s sculpture. Moments later, Tyler returns and asks what happened to his sculpture. Avery lies four times with various reasons why she could not see what occurred. In reality, Avery’s lies are self-serving because she really broke it, but does not want Tyler to know. When Tyler attempts to rebuild it, Avery lies again that the new sculpture looks good. Avery’s lies start to worry her and as her guilt increases, she starts to lose her hair. Eventually she decides that she needs to tell Tyler the truth and the following scene occurs:

Avery: “Tyler, wait. I did it. I broke your sculpture.”

Tyler: “What?!”

Avery: “It was a terrible thing to do and I feel awful.” Shows him her hair that is falling out.

Tyler: “Aih! I can’t believe it was you!”

Avery: “I don’t know what got into me. I am so sorry!”
Tyler: “Is it because you’re angry that you’re losing your hair and I have so much?”

Avery: “I didn’t realize how much your sculpture meant to you.”

Tyler: “Well, thanks for being honest.”

Avery: “Tyler took that pretty well.”

Next scene. Tyler enters with a painting.

Tyler: “Avery.” Punches painting. “Someone ruined your painting!”

Tyler exclaims that they are even. Avery replies they are not even, because hers was an accident and Tyler’s was on purpose. As the siblings continue to fight, their father, Bennett, enters and highlights the importance of their sibling relationship. Bennett states, “Listen, you guys are going to have a lot of relationships in your life. Friends, romances, over attentive dry-cleaners. But you’re brother and sister now…the one relationship that you two are always going to have, long after your mom and I are both gone, is each other.” He encourages the quarreling siblings to work it out. Each apologize to one another for damaging each other’s artwork. However, Avery does not ask for forgiveness for the lies she told Tyler throughout the episode. The episode ends with each sibling saying they are glad they have each other. Yet, no resolution for the lies is addressed, despite the fact that the siblings spend time discussing their actions in destroying each other’s art work and how they are thrilled to have each other now.

In a secondary storyline, Ellen’s feelings are hurt when Bennett does not recognize that other people may find her attractive. When he accidentally calls Ellen “needy”, Bennett attempts to cover his mistake by stating he said “sweetie.” Bennett exacerbates the situation when he does not recognize Ellen in a painting of her that the boy next door created. Once again, Bennett
lies that he did know it was her to prevent Ellen from identifying his mistake. The couple then have a discussion about how Ellen needs validation for her self-esteem and, as her husband, Bennett is the best person to give it to her. While the discussion alone is problematic because Ellen’s sense of self worth comes solely from her role as wife and mother, Bennett’s complacency and encouragement only further support this identity constraint. Moreover, the focus on her identity and the flaws therein overshadow any mention of Bennett’s lies. Thus, for the second time, lies are excused in favor of focusing on identifying Ellen’s personality flaws and her acceptance of them. In the previous episode, Ellen was distraught because she thought that she was not a “good person”; now she needs her husband to tell her that she is beautiful. These self-centered concerns overshadow any dishonesty in the couple’s relationship.

_The Goldbergs (2013-present)_

**Episode #3: “Mini Murray”**

Episode #3 features lying by the two sons, Barry and Adam, and their mother, Beverly. When Adam wants to see a scary movie that his mother doesn’t approve of, he lies to his grandfather, Pops, about which movie they are going to see; Adam tells Pops they are going to see _The Great Mouse Detective_. Afterwards, Adam is so terrified of every sound in the house that he cannot sleep. He lies to Beverly that he has a “tummyache” and asks to sleep in her bed. Beverly quickly discovers that Adam lied about which movie he saw. Rather than address his lying, she in turn, lies for the self-serving reason that she wants him to “snug” (her version of a hug) her and sleep in her bed at night. She continues to manipulate the situation by putting a clown, similar to the one from the movie, in his room; she also turns the television on and off.
from the other room, making it appear to work on its own. When Adam discovers his mother’s lies, he confronts his mother in the following scene:

Adam: “You!”
Beverly: “What’s the matter Pooh?”
Adam: “Don’t you Pooh me!”
Pops: “Don’t you Pooh him!”
Adam: “There is a monster in this house…and it’s you!”
Pops: “You’re the monster!”
Beverly: “If that’s what you really think of me, then I’ve failed as a mother!”

*Adam holds up the walkie-talkie his mother used to scare him.*

Beverly: “Well, you lied too. I told you not to see that movie and you did it anyway. And you shouldn’t have let him see something so scary.”
Pops: “Not my fault! That movie was wildly mistitled. There was neither a mouse, nor a detective!”
Adam: “I hope you enjoyed the hugs while they lasted…because I got news for you woman. As of this moment, I’ll never snug you again! Ever!”

Both Adam and Beverly have lied for their own self-serving reasons: to see a movie and to receive affection from her son. However, both of those lies are linked to negative consequences. Adam has been scared for a week, while Beverly lost the closeness she experienced with her son.
While these lies appear to be progressing toward a conclusion, the scene does reveal that Adam’s lie to Pops has never been revealed or resolved. In this scenario, Adam and Beverly’s relationship is prioritized, since the lies have not only been detected, but will be resolved. By the end of the episode, Beverly apologizes and explains that she feels forgotten when Adam doesn’t want to show affection anymore. Beverly states, “I just need a hug. And when I don’t get one, I do bad things.” The two characters negotiate hug time, and Adam even gives her a “free” hug to symbolize that everything is forgiven.

In a secondary storyline of the episode, Barry also lies for self-serving reasons. When his father, Murray, takes him to work at the family’s furniture store, Barry lies to customers to increase his sales. Murray is proud of his son’s actions until he recognizes that Barry has become really successful at selling furniture. When Murray believes that Barry enjoys selling furniture at the expense of his other interests, he fires Barry. Barry lies that he will open his own store and pilfer all of Murray’s employees and customers. The episode concludes with Murray explaining to Barry that he wants more for his son than to be a furniture salesman. Thus, Barry’s lies throughout the episode are completely overshadowed by his father’s desire to provide better opportunities for his son. Murray even rewards his son at the end of the episode with a new pair of Reebok sneakers, so Barry can improve his basketball skills because Barry’s dream is to be a professional basketball player. Consequently, not only are Barry’s lies ignored, they are essentially rewarded by his father.

**Episode #7: “Call Me When You Get There”**

In “Call Me When You Get There”, members of the family lie primarily to harm others and for self-serving reasons. At the beginning of the episode, Adam and Erica tell Murray that
the remote control to their VCR has a voice activation feature. When it does not start, Adam and Erica then lie that their father needs to identify himself before the remote will work. Murray loudly yells his name into the remote, while the children laugh hysterically on the sofa. Thus, the episode begins with lies to harm others. The children purposefully distort information in order to embarrass their father for their own pleasure. At the end of the episode, Murray attempts to do the same thing to Barry and lies that the remote has a voiceover function. Already aware of the trick, Barry lies to his father and once again, the children humiliate their father for their own amusement. While not as vital to the plot as the main lies, these series of lies demonstrate one of the principal examples of lying to harm others. The family members are taking pleasure in lying to each other and purposefully distorting information for their own humorous objectives. Moreover, the episode begins and ends with lies, making them a central part of this episode.

In the main storyline, Erica and Barry band together to circumvent their mother’s driving rules. Beverly establishes a set list of guidelines that all her children need to follow if they are going to use the car. When Barry breaks one of the rules by not calling home to tell his mother he arrived safely, Beverly calls the movie theater to find him. To prevent future embarrassment, Erica encourages Barry to develop a cover story for where he is really going. In the following scene, Barry lies to his mother repeatedly:

Barry: “Hey, mom. Listen, I’ve been thinking and I wanted to say how sorry I am for not calling you from the theatre.”
Beverly: “Well, thank you. That’s very mature of you and I appreciate it.”
Barry: “And I appreciate you. I know I don’t say it enough, but… I love you girl.”
Beverly laughs and kisses Barry on the check. Beverly: “I tell you what – you’re going to get some extra stir fry tonight.”

Barry: “Oh, I almost forgot…can I go to Roger McFaden’s house tomorrow night?”

Beverly: “I love Roger McFaden!”

Barry: “I know you do, that’s why I chose him…to teach me Spanish. We have a quiz. I’ll be home at ten, which is rule four if I recall. And don’t worry, I’ll follow all the other rules too.”

While Barry believes he successfully avoided his mother’s rules, his lies start to fall apart quickly. The location of the party has no phone, so he cannot call his mother to prevent her from worrying; this step was essential to his deceptive plan. Thus, Barry scrambles to find a phone in the middle of the woods. In the meantime, Beverly becomes extremely concerned about why her son has not called. She enlists Murray to go look for him in case he is “laying face down in a ditch somewhere.” Ironically in his search to find a phone, Barry trips and does fall face first into a nearby ditch. When his father finds him there, the following scene occurs:

Murray: “You couldn’t have been sitting up in a ditch? Or reclining comfortably in a ditch? No! You had to be face down … exactly like she said. And to think I told your mom you could be trusted. Mostly because I wanted to watch the game. But you know what, a small part of me thought, hey he’s not a complete moron!”

Barry: “Only some of this happened cause I’m a complete moron. The rest is because of mom’s stupid rules.”
Murray: “Hey! Her rules are there to protect you. I almost died when I saw your jacket in the road.”

Barry: “You worry about me too?”

Murray: “Now don’t put words in my mouth! Of course I do. Your mom can’t know anything about this.”

Barry: “What? You’re going to lie to mom?”

Murray: “Absolutely! She finds out about this … you’re not going to be able to leave the house until you’re forty. And then my life is ruined too.”

Barry: “Nice, I’m off the hook then!”

Murray: “You are so grounded! Secretly though. You will choose to stay in every weekend for the next three months. And for the love of God, when I do let you back out in the world, you will call me when you get there!”

Barry: “I will, I promise.”

Consequently, Barry’s self-serving lies to his mother are now penalized. Not only has he spent the entire night away from the party searching for a phone, but he is now grounded by his father. While this would normally be a straightforward example that lying has consequences, the plot is flawed because of Barry’s nature. Throughout the series, Barry is portrayed as intelligently inept. Knowing that the party was in a secluded area during a time when cell phones had not been invented yet, Barry should have known that calling his mother from there would be impossible. Thus, the punishment Barry faces could also be associated with his stupidity and
undermines the link between lying and being punished. His foolish actions, not his lying, could be interpreted as the cause of his reprimand. Moreover, Murray’s response to his son lying is for Murray to lie to his spouse. When he found Barry in the ditch, Murray realizes that if he tells Beverly that she was right, Murray would never be able to relax in front of the television again. Therefore, Murray lies to Beverly when he returns home. He informs her that Barry is waiting for a tow truck and then will study at his friend’s house. Therefore, because of Beverly’s implied controlling nature, the rest of the family uses deception for their own self-serving desires. Barry and Erica want more independence, while Murray just wants to be left alone. Thus, all three family members engage in deception against Beverly to achieve their own individualistic goals. Yet, Barry is punished for his lies, while Murray is rewarded by receiving more time to relax after work.

**Episode #19: “The President’s Fitness Test”**

In episode #19, multiple lies occur for a myriad of reasons. Because he is worried about his ability to climb the rope in gym, Adam lies to his male gym teacher about being sick to preserve his own reputation among his classmates. Beverly then agrees to write Adam a note to get him out of the test, even though she lied to Murray that she wouldn’t write the letter. Murray then lies to Adam that he used to be afraid of swimming, but he got in the pool anyway. While Murray is trying to motivate Adam, he reveals at the end of the episode that he never did swim; thus, he lied for self-preservation. Ultimately, these lies are overlooked and quickly dismissed, as the plot focuses on Adam’s determination to climb the rope. With the background music of “Eye of the Tiger”, Adam successfully climbs the rope. Through his successful accomplishment,
Adam’s, Beverly’s, and Murray’s lies are disregarded. The plot of the episode focuses exclusively on Adam’s triumph.

Alternately, Erica’s French pen pal is visiting her, and Barry wants to date a French girl. He asks Erica to help him speak French to communicate with her, but Erica decides to lie to tease him instead. The following scene occurs:

Barry: “Erica, I’m going to need your help. Here’s a bunch of phrases I need translated into her native tongue, so I can get a little of that native tongue.”

Erica: “Girl, our countries have been at war too long. Let’s make peace and love together.”

Barry: “Um-hm.”

Erica: “You know what…I will help you.”

Barry: “Nice. I can tell by that smile we’re on the same page.”

Pops: “You’re going to mess with him, aren’t you?”

Erica: “Big time.”

Pops: “I don’t know how he doesn’t see that kind of thing coming by now.

It’s very disappointing!”

When the French pen pal arrives, Erica has translated the flash cards for Barry. However, Erica lies about the true translation of the phrases. For example, instead of saying “Welcome to our home… it’s really nice to have you here”, Barry reads “Welcome to our home… that terrible smell is me” in French. In the next scene, Erica says she translated all of Barry’s song into French for him; however, she lied and has once again, set him up for humiliation. Ultimately,
Pops reveals Erica’s lie to Barry and Barry storms out of the room. Thus, Erica’s lies are revealed by someone else, while she takes pleasure in verbally deceiving her brother. Even though Erica does not reveal the truth herself, she still finds sympathy for her brother, so she decides to lie to him for prosocial reasons. The following morning, Erica hands Barry a note.

Erica: “Look, she left you this note.”

Barry: “Oh, no. I don’t read French.”

Erica: “But I do.” *Reading.* “Barry, sorry I was so weird around you. American boys intimidate me, especially the ones that are so good at sports, nun-chucking, and Frisbees.”

Barry: “She knows about my Frisbee skills? Did she write about the sketch I gave her of us riding a dolphin?”

Erica: “No, but she did say if you are ever in Paris, look her up.”

Barry: “Does it really say that?”

Erica: “Yes!”

*Pops takes the note.* It does. It really does. Looks like she was in to you kiddo.”

Barry: “I’m not surprised. I’m irresistible. *Barry leaves the room.*

Pops: “Hey… this is a thank you note to your parents.”

Erica: “Well, I felt sorry for the big dope.”

Pops: “No, you care about him.”

Erica: “Maybe a little.”

Pops: “Well, it was a nice thing to do.”
Therefore, the plot finds a resolution through additional lying. The distinction, however, between the first set of lies by Erica and the second set from Erica and Pops is that the subsequent lies are for prosocial reasons. Initially, Erica wants to tease and humiliate her brother. When she discovers that her actions may have been mean-spirited, Erica tries to make amends. Yet, her approach to resolving the situation is additional lying. Even Pops starts to lie in order to boost Barry’s confidence with girls again. These second set of prosocial lies go undetected because it is implied that a resolution is unnecessary. Erica and Pops lied to spare Barry’s feelings, so they have done a positive thing that does not require a resolution. Yet, even when Erica was lying to harm others, the resolution to those lies is additional lying.

_Trophy Wife (2013-2014)_

Episode #2: “Cold File”

In the second episode of the season, two main storylines address lying for the Harrison family. In the primary storyline, Kate is attempting to demonstrate her usefulness to Pete’s children. So when the opportunity presents itself, she volunteers to complete Bert’s bedtime ritual with him. When Bert does not go to sleep after countless attempts, Kate allows him to watch television. Unfortunately, she falls asleep first and Bert remains awake. When he is exhausted the next morning, Kate says he can have a sip of her coffee, but Bert drinks the entire cup. Jackie and Pete both ask Kate about the previous night’s events, and Kate lies that everything went well and Bert’s obvious caffeine rush is only excitement to play soccer with his teammates. Bert eventually ends up in the hospital, where Kate reveals the truth to Pete and Jackie. Both are initially irritated with Kate, but not really for lying. Rather both are concerned
about Bert’s health and not Kate’s lies. When they receive the news that Bert is okay, Kate apologizes to Bert and he instantly forgives her. Then the following scene occurs:

Kate: “And I want to apologize to you because I should have told you that
I was messing everything up.”

Pete: “It’s alright. Just in the future, let’s not keep things from each other,
okay? That’s what my ex-wives are for.”

This scene highlights the importance of Pete and Kate’s relationship. While Pete and Kate can lie to other family members, specifically Pete’s two ex-wives, Pete and Kate vow to be honest with one another. Ultimately, this undermines the other familial relationships on the show. As the newest relationship in the family, Pete, in particular, prioritizes his spousal relationship with Kate over those with his children and co-parents. While the show’s premise is about a stepfamily’s adjustment to one another, in this particular moment, the spousal relationship between Pete and Kate is prioritized.

A second storyline in this episode surrounds Diane and her two children Warren and Hilary. While eating on their mother’s white couch, a location where they aren’t supposed to be, Warren and Hilary spill salsa. The children attempt to hide the stain and lie to their mother that their day was wonderful and they haven’t eaten. However, Diane has already detected the truth and proceeds to psychologically torture them into revealing the truth. First, she serves quesadillas and asks if they should have salsa. Next, she puts on salsa music and encourages the children to dance. In the end, she flips the sofa cushion over before the children come in the room and moves toward it like she will sit on it. The children beg her to stop and confess to their actions and lying to her.
Hilary: “Please stop! Why can’t you punish us like a normal parent?”

Diane replies, “Normal parents don’t get results.”

Ultimately, the children confess to spilling the salsa and lying to their mother, but it does beg the question if manipulation is an appropriate parenting response to lying. Diane wants her children to confess to their actions, but she also demonstrates that manipulation and lying are appropriate ways to punish her children. Thus, Diane’s response to verbal deception is continued deception.

**Episode #3: “The Social Network”**

“The Social Network” also features lying as a main part of the storyline. When Pete discovers that Hilary went to meet a boy instead of being at an all-girl sleepover, he starts to panic about what she might have done. Kate lies to try to keep Pete from jumping to the worst possible conclusion, trying to tell him that “hooking up” means kissing and nothing more. With Diane’s encouragement, Pete then resorts to searching for Hilary’s diary in her room; in the process, he accidentally posts on Hilary’s social network the name of the boy she has a crush on. Hilary then finds out and is furious with her father. When Diane arrives, she lies to Hilary that she knew nothing about Pete’s intentions to snoop. Pete agrees that she had nothing to do with it, causing Diane’s ego to reveal that she was the mastermind behind the plan to snoop. While Hilary is angry that both her parents lied to her, she is substantially more concerned that they spied in her room and revealed her crush to her classmates. Hilary sulks in her room and Kate goes to console her. The lying pattern continues as Hilary lies to Kate four more times in order to avoid remaining grounded and staying in her room. When Kate and Pete individually discover that Hilary lied to attend a party, they both follow her to the party to confront her.
However, when they arrive at the party, they discover that no one is drinking and everyone is listening to music or having discussions; there is no perceived wildness to the party. Therefore, they completely ignore the lies that Hilary told and encourage her to attend more parties like this one. Lying is ignored without resolution. Hilary attending what her parents deem are “wholesome” parties is encouraged. Because Hilary’s choice of parties reinforces her parent’s desire for her to be well-mannered and courteous, her verbal deceptions are completely ignored. Pete, Kate, and Diane even agree that Hilary may remain at the party, thus rewarding her decision to lie. There are not only no consequences for Hilary’s lies, but by remaining at the party, she has achieved her goal of attending the party with no costs for how she lied to get there.

In addition, the episode concludes as Warren receives an instant message from Courtney Winters, one of the most popular girls in school. Courtney, as revealed earlier in the episode to the audience, is really his mother, Diane, who created a false identity to spy on her children and find out what they are doing. Courtney says that she cannot date Warren until he achieves a higher GPA, so Warren vows to win her love by studying harder. Therefore, an episode that heavily featured lying, followed by its dismissal of the act of lying, concludes with another lie to encourage Warren to study. This is also the second episode in a row in which Diane uses deception to manipulate her children into making what she believes are better choices. However, the act of lying is never addressed because the implication is that Diane lies as a parental tool to facilitate her children making better choices.

**Episode #18: “Couples Therapy”**

Episode #18 of the series, entitled “Couples Therapy,” features Pete lying to Kate and both his ex-wives, but for two distinct reasons. When Kate makes chili that is inedible, Pete
dumps her chili and makes his own instead. Then he allows Kate to believe it is her chili. When Diane discovers his lie and confronts Pete that he avoids confrontation in his spousal relationships, Pete continues to lie and say that he does discuss issues with Kate during their couples therapy sessions. When Jackie finds out from Diane that Pete is in couples therapy and tries to discuss it with him, Pete continues the lie. Moreover, when Kate finds out about Pete’s lies to his ex-wife, she also continues the lie about couples therapy, so that Pete and she can avoid clean-up duty at the school and take tennis lessons instead. Diane and Jackie find out about their lies and confront them on the tennis court. Pete contends that he never meant to lie and only wanted to avoid confrontation. Kate agrees and calls Pete’s lies “white lies.” However, Diane reveals that Pete also lied to Kate about her chili. An extremely angry Kate storms off the tennis court and starts walking home. The following scene occurs:

Pete: “How much can I apologize about chili?”

Kate: “It’s not about the chili, Pete. I just want our marriage to be better than your marriage to Jackie and Diane.”

Pete: “You do understand we weren’t all married at the same time, right?”

*Pause.* I really do want to change, Kate.”

Kate: “Ok, then do it. Tell me how bad my chili was.”

Pete: “It caused an immediate gag reflex.”

Kate: “Ouch. But I’m glad you said it.”

Pete: “No, no. Come on now, you’re mad. So get mad.”

Kate: “Fine, fine. Never lie to me again. It’s patronizing and it’s insulting. And my chili was…was it really that disgusting?”

Pete: “I fed it to a squirrel and it promptly died.”
Kate: “Ok, good. See a little confrontation. We’re still happy, still
married. For the record, I’m done making chili though. It’s such a
waste of mayonnaise.”

Pete: “Oh, God, that’s what it was.”

When Kate emphasizes that it is not about the chili, but the fact that Pete lied to her, the plot of the episode is focused solely on Pete’s lies to Kate. However, the lies that they both told to Diane and Jackie are ignored with the concentration solely on Pete’s lie to Kate. Kate even states “I want our marriage to be better than your marriage to Jackie and Diane.” As Kate emphasizes, the couple is “still happy” and “still married.” While their relationship is accentuated and the act of lying is directly addressed, for a second time in two different episodes, lies to Diane and Jackie are readily ignored. Pete and Kate’s relationship and the lies told between them are the ones that have resolutions.

**Familial Relationships**

The previous chapter focused primarily on the frequency of lying and to what extent the motivation and relationship of the characters affected how domestic sitcoms portray varying family structures and class representation. In this chapter, the objective shifts toward examining lying as a multifaceted, complex event that has consequences and resolutions related to relationships, familial values, and the portrayal of the family in domestic sitcoms. Through the narrative analysis completed above, several themes emerged associated with the act of lying and the resolutions presented when associated with the character’s relationships, motivations, family structure, and class status.
Spousal/Romantic Partner Relationship

Overall, the spousal or romantic partner relationship saw lying quite often in the sampled episodes, but rarely saw any consequences or resolutions for the action. Embarrassment for the liar was a frequent conclusion, particularly for the characters on *Modern Family*. Phil’s awkward grin, Mitchell’s mortification for stealing a baby’s blocks, and Cameron’s physical injury served as penalties at the conclusion of the episodes. However, only Phil’s humiliation can be attributed to his lying.

Partner’s flaws were another common theme as the consequence for lying among spouses or committed couples on domestic sitcoms. Self-preservation was a major reason for verbal deception between two romantic partners. Furthermore, a partner’s flaws regularly surpassed the lies told. Cameron and Mitchell (*Modern Family*) had to accept each other’s individuality, such as dance style, compassionate nature toward others, and desire to maintain an upper-middle-class lifestyle; Ellen’s (*Dog with a Blog*) identity as a wife and mother also features more attention than her husband’s lies; Murray’s (*The Goldbergs*) desire to watch television and sit in his chair when he comes home from work is valued more than his lies to his wife. These individual, personality faults then are prioritized over the act of lying. Thus, while a small resolution may be depicted, that resolution focuses more on these imperfections while omitting lies as an individual’s flaw.

A more complex theme that comes from these episodes is that apologies and the discussion of lying may or may not occur between characters in a romantic relationship. Phil (*Modern Family*) attempts to discuss the fact that he lied to Claire, but she quickly dismisses it in favor of her own parental concerns. In contrast, *Trophy Wife* featured two episodes in which Pete and Kate lied, but then had significant discussions about how lying can be detrimental to
ly in familial relationships. The implication in both of these episodes from *Trophy Wife* is that lying to others is acceptable toward other family members, so long as it is not their significant other. Yet, they are also the only main characters to fully discuss the implications of lying and find a resolution to each other’s verbal deception. Kate even states that their relationship is stronger by encouraging honesty and open communication between them. This theme is missing from all the other sitcoms analyzed.

**Parent/Child Relationship**

In situations where the parents lied to their children, there were several common patterns as well. First, lies told by a parent to a child were often considered vital to the family’s welfare within the plot point. For example, Jay (*Modern Family*) lies to his stepson for prosocial reasons to spare him from knowing his biological father was not coming to spend time with him; Diane (*Trophy Wife*) lies to Warren in order to manipulate him into studying harder to achieve a higher GPA; Murray (*The Goldbergs*) lies to motivate his son to climb the rope without revealing Murray’s own inadequacies in swimming; Frankie (*The Middle*) lies to her son in order to improve the family’s image when a social worker is scrutinizing their home. None of these lies by parents receive any resolution because the plot of the episode implies that a resolution is unwarranted. These characters do not require an outcome that discloses or discusses the lies told because they are recognized as beneficial for their child or their family’s image. The episodes conclude with the positive image that the family’s well-being is better off because of the verbal deception from these parents.

However, Beverly (*The Goldbergs*) does lie to her son to manipulate him into being more affectionate; this is a stark distinction from the other parents who lie to their children for
perceived beneficial reasons. In contrast, Beverly lies to her son in response to his lies, but most importantly to obtain “snugs”, her version of hugs. Yet, also in contrast to the other lies that parents tell, this lie features an apology and a resolution at the conclusion of the episode. Interestingly, her son, Adam also lies to his mother and his grandfather about the movie he is going to see; his lie, however, is forgotten and overshadowed by Beverly’s manipulation. Nevertheless, the mother and son discuss negotiating time to spend together and the episode concludes with the same content, loving family that the episode started with.

In contrast, children lying to their parents often face punishment in a variety of forms; yet, those punishments also appear flawed by other plot points in the episodes or the character’s depictions. When Gabe (Good Luck Charlie) lies to his parents and his teacher, it is the teacher who punishes him with a task he should have already completed: his homework. His parents overlook his manipulation of them, as they struggle to be truthful with themselves. Teddy (Good Luck Charlie) lies to her mother, who proceeds to punish her through public humiliation. Ultimately, Teddy is the one child to apologize for lying to her parent. When Tessa (Suburgatory) lies to her father, the two discuss other aspects that transpired during the plot of the episode; yet, they do not confer about, apologize for, or find resolution for the lying that has occurred. At one point, they even discuss the “valuable lesson” they learned from the episode, but that lesson has nothing to do with lying. When Tyler (Dog with a Blog) lies to his parents, they punish him for earlier bad behavior, but not his lies to them. Perhaps the most complex punishment for lying comes involves Barry (The Goldbergs). His lies are revealed to his father, who punishes him. Yet, the inferior way Barry attempts to lie tarnishes the conclusion because someone who knows there would not be a phone in a secluded wooded area in the 1980s could possibly have been more successful at deception; thus, Barry’s intellectual flaws mar the
punishment he receives for his lies. Moreover, Barry’s mother is portrayed as so thoroughly controlling, that even the father perceives that lies to her are necessary. Thus, while there is somewhat of a punishment in the resolution to Barry’s lies, it is imperfect because of these external factors that influence the notion that lying for self-serving reasons can be detrimental to a child-parent relationship.

**Sibling/Sibling**

Overall, siblings lied to each other less frequently than children lied to adults. In addition, their lies were also featured in secondary storylines within an episode and were never the main source of disruption in an episode’s plot. Mainly, siblings lied to each other 1) to harm each other; or 2) for self-serving or manipulative reasons. For example, Alex lies to Luke (*Modern Family*) in response to him teasing her earlier in the episode. Yet no resolution is identified and the characters never speak of the verbal deception again. In comparison, Erica (*The Goldbergs*) also lies to her brother to mock him when she gives him misinterpretations of French phrases. However, in Erica’s situation, her solution to the harmful lies she has told is to then lie for prosocial reasons. When she discovers that Barry is hurt by her first set of lies, she continues to lie to spare his feelings and motivate his self-confidence. In this situation, there is a resolution to the detrimental lies that a sibling has told another sibling. Yet, the deficient solution is more verbal deception for a prosocial, and perhaps more acceptable, motive.

The second main motivation for sibling lies is for self-serving or manipulative reasons. For instance, Brick (*The Middle*) lies to his sister for self-serving reasons to avoid attending a party. While Sue struggles with the deception throughout the episode, Brick does not feel the need to address his lies to her. Similarly, Avery and Tyler (*Dog with a Blog*) apologize for
destroying each other’s artwork, but not for the lies that Avery told Tyler earlier in the episode. Thus, out of the four examples of siblings lying to one another, only one demonstrates any resolution or regret for using lying in a sibling relationship. Moreover, that single conclusion is still marred in that Erica continues to lie to improve the situation she created through lying. The show implies that her first lies that inflict harm on her brother require an explanation and a resolution; however, a prosocial lie does not merit the same conclusion. Instead, prosocial lying can be used to ameliorate a situation.

**Family Members Lying to Outside Characters**

The final relationship category considered was to what extent family members on domestic sitcoms lied to other characters outside their immediate family. Overall, family members often lied for self-preservation of either themselves or the family as a unit. Frankie (*The Middle*) lies to her neighbors about the quality of time and the verbal communication that her children have together. Adam (*The Goldbergs*) lies to his gym teacher to avoid his own humiliation when attempting to climb the rope during class. Thus, to improve their own or the family’s appearance, lies are deemed a necessary act.

Perhaps most interesting within this section is when the characters lie to characters outside the family for financial gain. Barry (*The Goldbergs*) lies to his customers to increase sales in his dad’s furniture store. P.J. (*Good Luck Charlie*) similarly lies to increase his tips at his chicken delivery job. Both are ultimately rewarded with praise from his father (for Barry), and increased profits and an edible dinner (for P.J.). Lies for monetary gain are not only completely ignored within the plot of the episode, but are actually rewarded. For example, in comparison to P.J.’s lies, his brother Gabe also lies in the same episode to a girl Gabe is
interested in dating. Gabe’s lies ultimately cost him the girl. In this episode, there is a binary distinction in which both brothers lie to characters outside their immediate family. However, perhaps because he wants to develop a deeper relationship with the recipient of his lies, Gabe’s lies cost him that opportunity. Thus, the show implies that lying to someone you want to develop a relationship with is problematic, yet has fewer concerns about manipulating someone for financial profit.

**Motivation**

**Self-Preservation**

Similar to the findings of the previous chapter, self-preservation was still a major factor in a character’s decision to lie. In every series except *Good Luck Charlie*, lying for self-preservation occurred at least twice in these episodes. Moreover, resolutions associated with lying for self-preservation were rare. Other plot points often surpassed lies for self-preservation. For example, embracing your individuality, accepting your partners’ flaws, concern that your children are growing up too quickly, protecting your family’s image, protecting your own weaknesses from discovery, comprehending how the other person in the relationship feels, and accomplishing your own goals were all common themes that were addressed and discussed in the conclusions of these episodes. Yet, lying was not considered and was readily ignored in favor of these categories. Verbal deception was deemed less significant to overall relational maintenance or other plot points from the episode.

While this is the overall trend, there were two specific instances in which lying for self-preservation was thoroughly addressed by the characters. Jay and Manny (*Modern Family*) bolster their relationship after lying occurred specifically because the two characters address the
lying that occurred in the episode. Jay attempts to minimize the situation by calling his lies “stupid”, but Manny encourages an open dialogue about Jay’s lies and his motivation for telling them. Unlike the other examples presented above in which additional themes were considered superior to lying, Manny is equally concerned with both Jay’s actions and his decision to lie. Manny also discloses a lie that he told Jay, and in the end, the two find forgiveness through their conversation. Similarly Kate and Pete (Trophy Wife) do not focus on other factors that occurred during the episode, such as whether or not her chili is edible. Instead, Pete, who lied for self-preservation reasons, is honest with Kate and the two find resolution through their discussion. At the end of their exchange, Kate even affirms, “We’re still happy, still married.” Thus, while the lie created a temporary disruption, the episode concluded with a comprehensive discussion of the lie and its implications.

**Self-Serving**

Lies told for self-serving reasons were also frequent in these sampled episodes. Yet, the outcomes of the lies included a variety of rewards, punishments, and resolutions. For example, Teddy’s (Good Luck Charlie) lies to her new love interest to present the opportunity for her to obtain her goal of a first kiss; PJ (Good Luck Charlie) is financially rewarded for his lies to his customers about his mother being in the hospital; Adam (The Goldbergs) suffers no punishment or apology for his lies in order to see a scary movie; Barry (The Goldbergs) lies to his customers so that he can be successful in business like his father; in order to avoid his controlling wife and acquire some relaxation time in front of the television, Murray (The Goldbergs) lies to his wife about where the children are; finally, Hilary (Trophy Wife) lies to Kate in order to go to a
classmate’s party even though Hilary is grounded. Consequently, there is a recurrent theme that lies told for self-serving reasons are either rewarded or readily ignored.

Punishments for telling self-serving lies were somewhat rare. However, when lies told for self-serving reasons were resolved, they were usually in the form of sitcom genre conventions (misunderstanding), homework requirements, failing to win the girl you desire, discussions about other aspects of deception (while ignoring the lying), secret grounding, and punishment by lying.

**Prosocial**

While previous research (Mazur & Kalbfleisch, 2003) found that the major motive for domestic sitcom characters to lie is for prosocial reasons, these findings infer that the opposite is true. Not only was lying for prosocial motives one of the smaller categories, it also contained no resolutions about the lies. Instead, reinforcing family values, learning valuable lessons about other aspects of familial life, and overall avoidance were considered the resolutions for prosocial lying. This affirms previous research (see, for instance, Keltikangas-Jarvinen & Lindeman, 1997; Lindskold & Waters, 1983) that prosocial lies are deemed socially acceptable. Familial characters on domestic sitcoms appear to reinforce those findings, since none of the prosocial lies resulted in any resolutions.

**Family Structure**

While analyzing these findings along the classification of family structure, the findings basically reflect the overall results of this study. Regardless of the family structure, there was still very little resolution for, or discussion about, the lying that had occurred in the episode. The
one show that did not feature a lack of resolution as the largest conclusion to lying comes from
the single father classification: *Suburgatory*. Within this show, George and Tessa discuss the
events that have occurred over the course of the episode and disclose information to bolster their
relationship; however, the act of lying is only a brief topic and is never one that warrants an
apology or forgiveness. Thus, when analyzing the representation of the single parent household,
the desire to find a resolution to lying is at least present.

Moreover, characters did struggle to find resolutions throughout the show’s narrative, but
confronted obstacles by the plot points of their episodes. These obstructions included sitcom
genre conventions, other people punishing or secretly punishing them, punishing through
humiliation, and lying to encourage children to behave in a certain way. Once a character hit one
of these barriers, no matter the family structure, resolution became impossible. There were no
differences concluded based on family structure.

An additional intriguing finding within family structure was the fact that the stepparent
families discussed in-depth and searched for a resolution to the act of lying more than any other
family configuration. Considering that families in the nuclear family classification outnumber
the stepparent category, this finding is compelling. Fictional stepparents and their children and
newly married spouses do acknowledge that lying is a crucial part of building this relationship.
Could this finding support that lying and responding to the act of lying are crucial elements to
developing a new relationship within these domestic sitcoms? Stepparent families on domestic
sitcoms certainly value finding solutions for verbal deception. In contrast, nuclear, single parent,
and same-sex families that have always been together do not seem to warrant the same
identification and discussion about lies told in domestic sitcoms.
Class Status

Unlike family structure, when dividing the results among the class status categories, a broader picture starts to emerge. Characters that were classified as upper middle-class either very clearly resolved the verbal deception they faced in the episode or they did not. While middle-class and working-class characters often saw complicated attempts at resolution, upper middle-class characters distinctly either disclosed and discussed the relational impact of lying or they readily ignored it. In this way, there were no complex resolutions, such as lying being overlooked because of personality flaws, punishments for other behavior except the act of lying, or discussions about “moral lessons” that do not even address lying. Instead, upper middle-class characters were extremely obvious and evident when lying was acceptable and when it was not permitted. For instance, when Jay lies to Manny to protect him from Manny’s fathers’ actions, it is viewed as positive because the lie was told to spare Manny’s feelings. In contrast, when Jay lies to Manny for self-preservation, Jay feels guilty and eventually confesses his lie to Manny. Thus, lies told by upper middle-class characters and the outcomes from those lies were very straightforward.

Additionally, when upper middle-class characters sought resolutions for lying, it was always because of the impact that lying had on their familial relationship. Jay and Manny (Modern Family) strengthen their relationship as stepfather and stepson by disclosing, discussing, and ultimately forgiving the lying that occurred throughout the episode. Kate and Pete (Trophy Wife) also bolster their spousal relationship by conveying how detrimental the initial verbal deception was. After identifying the destructive implications of lying, Kate and Pete (Trophy Wife) resolve their concerns through honest dialogue and forgiveness. Thus, these examples of upper middle-class characters seeking resolutions for lying are also directly related
to their goals of maintaining and strengthening their intimate relationships with other family members.

Working-class characters also sustained a common theme when it comes to lying and resolutions: working-class characters do not seek resolutions for lying. While upper middle-class and middle-class characters had a few examples where lie tellers and receivers searched for resolutions, the working-class characters never sought any. Lying, no matter the reason, was acceptable. For example, Brick and Sue spent an entire episode lying to the mother of Brick’s friend. While Sue is certain they will be caught, Frankie always has a larger concern to address. Consequently, lying appears to be an after thought to the family’s other concerns.

Finally, middle-class families both desired solutions to, and equally ignored, lying. Middle-class families also saw a significant number of attempts at resolutions that were suspect, such as punishing through humiliation or lying, or attempting to discuss lying, but ultimately conversing about another plot point from the episode. As the largest classification in this section, one might expect the findings to be as diverse as they are when compared to upper middle-class and working-class families. However, this diverse picture of lying and resolutions within the middle-class family also speaks to the network’s desire to convey middle-class characters as mainstream as possible. With the upper middle-class characters, their act of lying, as well as their search for, or dismissal of, lying can be seen as either positive or negative. The working-class characters lack of desire to resolve the influence of lying could be considered detrimental. Yet, the middle-class characters are portrayed in multifaceted ways perhaps to appeal to as many people in the target demographics of 18-49 year olds as possible. Kendall (2011) called this phenomenon “middle-class-values framing”, which occurs when the values believed to be best for everyone’s interests also emulate middle-class representations. Past
interpersonal research has found that sometimes lying is beneficial and sometimes it is
detrimental. This complex resolution to lying may occur in mediated representation to also
confer that sometimes a resolution is needed, sometimes a conclusion is not, and sometimes it is
just plain complicated.
CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSIONS

This concluding chapter will further highlight some of the key findings within this dissertation. However, it is important to emphasize that the conclusions from chapter six, which used a content analysis to uncover the relationship between the liar and the recipient of the lie and the motivation for the verbal deception, and chapter seven, which discussed the narrative implications and outcomes from lying, do not constitute an overall pattern across these domestic sitcoms. One of the benefits of utilizing triangulation in this research was its ability to investigate multiple aspects of the representation of family in mediated texts. As Jayaratne and Stewart (2008) stated, this type of method can “capture a more complete, holistic, and contextual portrayal” (p. 44). By combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, the researcher can draw the strengths from both approaches. However, this mixed methods approach will not, and should not, be used to consider the validity between the findings from the content analysis and narrative analysis conducted in the previous two chapters. Thus, this concluding chapter will first discuss the findings from each of the research questions. In addition, the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research in these areas are also considered. Finally, the final thoughts discuss the broader overview of the implications from this study on the frequency of lying in relationships, the motivation for verbal deception, and the constructive or disruptive outcomes that result from telling a lie.

One of the major findings from this research was the number of lies told per episode to familial members. As previous interpersonal research has shown, lying is a very common occurrence in real life interactions (Andersen, 2008; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). DePaulo and Kashy (1998) even found that lies occurred “once in every 10
interactions in a broad range of close relationships that included spouses, best friends, family, [and] children” (p. 520). This study discovered 589 lies across 84 episodes, or an average of 7 lies per episode. Consequently, while lying appears to be prevalent in real life contexts, recent domestic sitcoms also address its frequency within the familial relationship.

The first part of the first research question asked what the relationship was between the liar and the recipient of the lie. Fictional parents on these domestic sitcoms lied frequently to their children, but children lied more to characters outside the family. These findings indicate that children are portrayed as desirous of a more harmonious family structure in which honesty is valued. Even the sibling relationship, which usually contained lies in real life, saw very few in the fictional representations. Overall, parents engaged in more frequent lying among family members, while children used verbal deception while interacting with characters outside the family.

The second part of the first research question investigated the motivation for the liar’s verbal deception. Results concluded that self-preservation was a primary reason for telling lies, since nearly half of the lies told were for self-preservation reasons. By focusing on the liar’s own needs and goals, lies told for self-preservation are very individualistic acts (Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2011). Thus, these types of lies can be destructive to an intimate relationship. This study also found a noteworthy decline in prosocial lying. Prosocial lying, or lying to protect others or spare their feelings, could indicate a decrease in familial harmony. However, when Mazur and Kalbfleisch (2003) operationalized the category of “prosocial lying” in their original typology, they also included avoidance. This dissertation, however, distinguished between lies told to protect someone and lies told to minimize or evade perceived relational problems. By differentiating avoidance from prosocial, these new categories of lying motivations may have
contributed to the decline in lying for prosocial motivations. Consequently, additional research is required to investigate to what extent the decline in prosocial motivations to lying are indicative of a broader trend of portrayals of less harmonious families.

Because this research was interested in using content analysis to examine symbolic annihilation, or the under-representation or non-representation of types of characters on domestic sitcoms (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998), this dissertation’s second research question asked to what extent these family depictions differed based on family structure and class status. When examining the conclusions divided by family structure, nuclear families saw large increases in lying for prosocial motivations. However, nuclear families also saw the greatest frequency of punishment by lying. Thus, the families were portrayed in two opposing ways: harmonious or utilizing lying as a social corrective. Prosocial lying both maintains and hinders interpersonal relationships. While truthfulness is valued in interpersonal communication, avoiding harm to your communication partner is a crucial aspect as well. Consequently, prosocial lying can cause conflict or be considered an acceptable part of the relationship because the underlying goal is to preserve the relationship (Popliger, Talwar and Crossman, 2011).

Single parent families were also portrayed in a mixed way. When the parent lied to his child, it was never for prosocial reasons, but there were also no lies told to avoid problems either. In contrast, stepparent families were depicted as more individualistic in their lying, since they engaged in verbal deception for self-preservation and self-serving reasons. They also lied more to family members than to characters outside the family. As a result, stepparent families were portrayed in a more disapproving manner. Similarly, same-sex parents also lied mainly for self-preservation or to avoid problems in the relationship, both deemed more damaging to a relationship. Consequently, while depicted as having various reasons for lying, the nuclear
family remains the more multifaceted family structure, but also contains lying that can be perceived as more positive than the other family structures.

The second part of the second research question asked to what extent socioeconomic class status was a factor in the portrayal of these families on domestic sitcoms. Overall, the middle-class families easily complemented the overall findings of the study, implying that the middle-class families are also mainstream. They were portrayed as the most multifaceted families, with diverse relationships between the liar and the recipient and the motivations for the lie. Within upper middle-class families, parents lied mainly to other parents and even the children lied less overall. Yet, upper middle-class families frequently avoided discussing problems in favor of lying to minimize other issues. In contrast, working-class families did not engage in lying to avoid familial problems. These complementary depictions warrant additional research to uncover why upper middle-class families are portrayed as willing to circumvent relationship problems by lying, yet working-class families do not engage in lying to evade familial issues.

The final research question in this research project considered how the lie interfered with the narrative of the episode and to what extent the characters resolved the lies within the episode. While the spousal characters frequently lied to one another, they rarely saw any consequences or resolutions for their actions. Instead partner’s flaws surpassed any discussion of verbal deception within the plot of the episode. With the exception of *Trophy Wife*, all the other shows minimized spousal lies. While lies told by adults did not warrant a resolution, lies told by children did face a minimal punishment. However, even those punishments were flawed because of external plot twists and sitcom conventions, such as misunderstandings. Perhaps most worthy of note within this section is when the characters lie to characters outside the family for
relationship development or sustainability, the characters are punished, but when they lie for financial gain, they are ultimately rewarded by the show’s plot. Thus, the shows imply that verbal deception with someone you want to develop a relationship with is negative, yet has fewer concerns about manipulating someone for financial profit. In addition, resolutions associated with lying for self-preservation were rare because other storyline points overshadowed the verbal deception. For example, embracing your individuality, accepting your partners’ flaws, concern that your children are growing up too quickly, protecting your family’s image, protecting your own weaknesses from discovery, comprehending how the other person in the relationship feels, and accomplishing your own goals were all common themes that were discussed in the conclusions of these episodes, but lying never was addressed. Similarly, lies told for prosocial motives never saw any resolutions for lies.

Contrary to the frequency of lying, the resolution of lying did not see any differences based on family structure. The one notable finding within family structure was the desire of stepparent families to discuss verbal deception and search for resolutions when lying was detected. This conclusion may interpret that how a stepparent family responds to the act of verbal deception is vital to developing a new relationship. Unlike family structure, class status did observe noticeable patterns in the resolution of lying. Upper middle-class characters were extremely obvious when lying was acceptable and when it was not permitted. When upper middle-class characters sought resolutions for lying, it was always because of the impact that lying had on their familial relationship. In contrast, working-class characters also sustained a common theme when it comes to lying and resolutions: working-class characters do not seek resolutions for lying. No matter the motivation, lying was acceptable. The middle-class characters saw a pattern where characters made attempts at resolutions, but those efforts were
problematic. For example, middle-class characters were often punished through humiliation or further lying, but ultimately another plot point from the episode eclipsed the desire for a resolution. Because the characters were presented as the most multifaceted, these depictions imply that middle-class characters are more mainstream than upper middle-class or working-class characters. “Middle-class-values framing”, or portrayals of middle-class characters that emulate the values believed to be best for everyone’s interests, was clearly present in these depictions (Kendall, 2011). While the findings of this study did not conclude that upper middle-class or working-class families are depicted as superior or inferior, they are certainly not as multi-faceted or multi-dimensional as middle-class characters. Because most of the families on television are portrayed as middle-class, domestic sitcoms suggest that in an American society that is struggling to recover from the recession in 2008, middle-class status is as attainable as ever. The diversity of media representations of middle-class families implies that anyone can belong to that social classification and there are no social barriers to stand in your way, if you are willing to work for your own success.

**Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research**

While this research provided some interesting findings, it does have some limitations worthy of discussion and that warrant future research. First and foremost, while the Disney corporation has a vast influence through its cultural products, it is also not the only network to air domestic sitcoms. While the domestic sitcom was thought to be dead in 2009, it has fully revitalized itself in the past few years. As of the 2014-2015 season, all four networks including ABC present domestic sitcoms: CBS airs *Mom* and *The McCarthys*; NBC airs *About a Boy*; and FOX airs *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*. While each of these shows differ in tone and
subversive possibilities, a broader analysis across multiple networks could find varying results than the ones presented here. For example, *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* often find humor through satire and parody, aspects that were not considered within this research. Including these shows in a deeper analysis of intertextuality could find different results.

Moreover, the lack of working-class families, single parent families, and same-sex families also hindered the overall findings. With only one show falling into each category, the results are reduced to one show’s producers and writers’ interpretations of these types of families. Comparing and contrasting the findings of this research on Disney-owned domestic sitcoms with non-Disney owned sitcoms that feature working-class, single parent families, and same-sex families would present a deeper analysis of family structure and class status. For example, Fox’s *Raising Hope* features a working-class father, Jimmy, who cares for his daughter. This show would add supplementary data to future studies that was not possible with this research.

Future avenues of research could also benefit from an intersectionality approach. Intersectionality “conveys the sense that individual identity and our social life are both shaped by multiple, overlapping, and contradictory systems of power that operate simultaneously” (McCann & Kim, 2010, pp. 147-148). While this research considered family structure and class status as separate identity characteristics, an intersectionality approach would analyze how these multiple oppressions might intertwine and overlap to produce new positions of subordination. Moreover, the identity characteristics of gender and ethnicity could also be examined to see how these characteristics influence the findings revealed in this study. Currently, ABC and Disney Channel do not air any domestic sitcoms with non-white characters. However, that will change once ABC premieres *Black-ish* in the fall of 2014. Thus, future research could address how the
intersection of multiple identity constructs affect the results of this dissertation. Rather than considering family structure, class status, and ethnicity as separate categories, future research could highlight the commonalities within oppression and examine the collective struggles of any oppressed members of society to illustrate the collective patterns of struggle that dominant individuals reinforce in society through media (re)presentation. In order to see patterns of oppression within real-life, we can start the discussion by analyzing the intersectionality present in the cultural artifacts that we create. Critiquing media representations can give insight into our cultural values and what is judged as natural and normal, as opposed to what is deemed deviant and aberrant within our social order.

Another limitation of this dissertation is the decision to focus exclusively on mediated texts, specifically televisual texts. Considering additional mediated representation, such as movies, blog posts, webisodes, and news articles could yield alternate results. A mixed method of textual analysis served as the method for this dissertation because it was deemed the best way to uncover the multi-faceted (re)presentations of the American family. As Eaton (1978) argued, nostalgia in sitcoms associate the representation of television in the past with the “cultural past.” However, he questioned to what extent the audience of those television shows negotiated their interpretations and could uncover some of the ideological themes encoded within television. Thus a limitation is that textual analysis is still restricted only to the text itself. Consequently, future research could combine textual analysis with audience analysis. Through multiple types of methods, the multi-dimensional concept of the American family in media representation could be analyzed on a more in-depth level. A mixed method approach is warranted in the study of media images because it encompasses a critical lens through textual analysis, but also allows for the audience’s interpretations. In order to analyze how satire can be a site of social change, a
mixed method approach that engages in the text and audience perceptions would be the most beneficial. Thus, future research needs to unite textual analysis and audience analysis to examine to what extent humor reflects, transforms, and potentially revolutionizes our understanding of the cultural impact of the American family in sitcoms.

In addition, by employing a combination of textual analysis and audience analysis, future research could utilize Stuart Hall’s (1980) model of encoding/decoding to better understand how individual’s cultural beliefs and values about the American family are possibly shaped or challenged by sitcoms. Stuart Hall’s (1980) model has suggested that people interpret media messages in one of three ways: audiences accept the message as the creators intended (dominant-hegemonic); audiences understand the message, but reject it because it violates their societal experiences or cultural values (oppositional); or audiences can accept some aspects, while rejecting others (negotiated). Stuart Hall’s model of encoding/decoding emphasizes the interaction between an audience and a text, an aspect that was not possible with this dissertation research.

Moreover, while this project utilized humorous media texts because of the crucial way in which humor represents dominant ideologies within our culture, this research did not have the opportunity to engage in the intertextuality of the text to draw connections to the way in which humor can be used to subvert or illuminate marginalization. This research utilized dramatic irony, which enabled the researcher to interpret meaning and implications from scenes based on information that the other characters may not have known (Leslie, 1992). Future research could unite dramatic irony with superiority theory, in particular, because of superiority theory’s socially based viewpoint (DiCioccio, 2012). Superiority theory can be used to analyze to what extent the source of the humor of a text comes from the perceived inadequacies of someone else.
When watching a humorous media text, if the audience member feels superior, he/she is more likely to laugh (Morreall, 2009). When the audience finds humor in the “lower” person, behavior, or idea within society (Meyer, 2000), it demonstrates the powerful nature of the underlying ideology. Thus, engaging in the source of the humor beyond the narrative could be beneficial to future research. In particular, as more television sitcoms utilize single camera techniques and mockumentary style formats, superiority theory could be a unique way of analyzing the narrative. Because these types of production techniques involve disruption of the show’s plot in favor of uncovering more in-depth interpretations, the combination of dramatic irony and superiority theory could produce an additional multi-layered intertextuality of the media text.

Further research on deception and lying in mediated representation is also warranted. While this study focused exclusively on lying, or verbal dishonesty, future research could investigate when and how a lie is identified by the characters and to what extent a lie is successful in the liar’s viewpoint. Future research could also analyze other forms of deception in conjunction with lying. Falsification of information, manipulation, and even self-deception could all be considered within the realm of domestic sitcoms. Moreover, deception detection has a plentiful research history in real life contexts, but is still lacking in domestic sitcom representation. A narrative analysis that considers when, how, and if familial members discover that someone has lied to them could provide additional insight and build on the research started in this dissertation.
Concluding Discussions

Both within real life contexts and mediated representations, “parenting by lying” appears to be a common theme emerging. However, more research is needed to determine to what extent “parenting by lying” is detrimental to the parent-child relationship. By continuing to study lying as a relational act, more in-depth findings and the implications to one’s interpersonal relationships can be analyzed. Even though these are only mediated texts and not real life families, the depictions of lying could still resonate with audiences of these popular domestic sitcoms.

Additionally, this dissertation revealed the necessity of ongoing research to develop a typology for the motivation for lying, particularly within televisual texts. As Seiter and Bruschke (2007) observed, “consensus has not emerged around a single typology of motives” (p. 3). While they were referring to real life contexts, more creation of a typology of the motivation for lying is also needed to explain the observations uncovered from domestic sitcom portrayals, as well as the depictions from dramas and reality television. Mazur and Kalbfleisch (2003) started to develop a typology, and this dissertation builds upon their research with the emergence of two new categories: “self-serving” and “punishment by lying.” In particular, “punishment by lying” merits continued research, since its usefulness appeared to be verbal deception as a form of social corrective, or as an acceptable response to being the recipient of a lie. While it bridged similarities with other categories, such as prosocial and to harm others, punishment by lying is distinctly its own motive. Punishment by lying is also worrisome considering that continuing to lie within a familial relationship could fundamentally damage any trust that two characters have. Honest disclosure breaks down in favor of emphasizing the next lie and a circular pattern of verbal deception develops. Moreover, this study did not consider to what extent “punishment by
lying” and “parenting by lying” are interconnected. Parenting by lying involves the socialization of social and cultural values. Parents communicate their own values and judgments to their children, providing the children with a determination of what is acceptable and what is not. When lying is not only interpreted as acceptable, but utilized as a social corrective, these findings could be indicative of a deeper social issue. If parents consistently lie to their children, particularly as a form of social corrective, the implications for that verbal deception are severe. Children could determine that lying is not only socially acceptable behavior, but actually encouraged if they are the recipient of a lie first. Therefore, interpersonal communication, cultural studies, and media studies research should be concerned by the possible connections between these two emerging themes.

Moreover, when considering the motives for why these domestic sitcom characters lie, self-preservation and self-serving were the two most frequent motives. Since lying is a goal-oriented action, the fact that self-preservation and self-serving were the two most frequent reasons for lying is very intriguing. A main objective of this research was to investigate these mediated texts within a sociohistorical framework since the 2008 recession. One might surmise that since the recession, these media texts emphasize an increase in the cultural value of individualism. Past research has argued that domestic sitcoms in the 1950s portrayed a distorted view of consumerism (Coontz, 1992, Douglas, 2003, Taylor, 1989). The dominant ideology of the American Dream, in which anyone who worked hard enough could be successful, resonated with a post-war America. As Taylor (1989) observed about domestic sitcom families during the 1950s, they “were advertising and embodying the American dream, portraying the middle-class family as an essential building block of a benign social order” (p. 17). During the 1980s, which saw a reversal from the “socially relevant” possibilities of the 1970s domestic sitcoms, mediated
families still needed to work hard, but ultimately, the American Dream was possible for anyone willing to earn it. Consequently, the American Dream and its values of individualism reside somewhat closely along the lines of lying for self-preservation and self-serving motives. The goal of telling lies for self-preservation is to improve one’s image; with self-serving lies, the objective is to obtain what you desire through manipulation. Both categories prioritize the liar’s individual goals and therefore resonate definitively with the cultural value of individualism. Thus, it is intriguing that the value of individualism is exposed within domestic sitcoms as Americans are still struggling from the effects of the recession in 2008. The family has often been perceived as a communal entity, in which family members often do what is collectively best for the family before they do something for themselves. Yet within the context of the domestic sitcom since the recession, the implication is that individualistic goals will make you more successful. The opportunity is there, specifically for those who focus on their individual needs above all else.

This dissertation connected the fields of media studies, cultural studies, and interpersonal communication studies to analyze the social, cultural, and political influence of the representation of family on domestic sitcoms. As culture remains a multi-faceted and complex influence on our perceptions, and lying remains a frequent behavior that we encounter, it is vital to continue to investigate how these tensions are (re)flected and (re)presented in media texts. By including an interpersonal communicative approach to media analysis, this dissertation drew from these fields as a way to present a more holistic picture about the representation of family and class status, while also investigating verbal deception in domestic sitcoms.
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**APPENDIX A: MEDIA CITED**


