

ABSTRACT

DIMENSIONS OF THE FATHER ROLE: AN INDUCTIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF TELEVISION SITCOMS

by Timothy Allen Pehlke II

Domestic situational comedies served as the focal point of a recent examination of father involvement. Twelve half-hour programs aired during prime-time on one of the six major networks were recorded during the fall 2004 season. All instances that involved either discussion or fulfillment of the father role were later transcribed. Use of inductive thematic analysis led to the identification of five dimensions of the father role: breadwinner, household chores, interactions with mother, interactions with children and interactions with others. Additionally, fathers were portrayed alternately as foolish, immature and overweight. These findings present a more complex and balanced image of the television father than revealed in any previous research. Several interesting novel findings came in an examination of racial and class differences. Representations of Latino and African American fathers compare favorably to Caucasians, whereas portrayals of working class fathers are slightly more negative. Implications for future research and practice are provided.

DIMENSIONS OF THE FATHER ROLE:
AN INDUCTIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF TELEVISION SITCOMS

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DEDICATION

For the fathers who have impacted my life: my dad Timothy Pehlke Sr., my grandfather Max Pehlke and my great-grandfather William Pehlke. Thank you for the stories you have told, the lessons you have imparted, the times that we have spent together, and for all the sacrifices you have made on my behalf. I couldn't have made it this far without you!

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The last 400 years have witnessed dramatic fluctuations in the domestic responsibilities of men and women. During the Colonial Era it was the father, not the mother, who was in charge of childrearing, a role that included everything from socialization to moral instruction (Coontz, 2001, p. 186). This all changed in the 19th Century, as the Industrial Revolution led more and more men into employment outside the family dwelling. In response, women gradually assumed responsibility for managing the household (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988, p. 50). Another shift came during the 1940s as the increased labor demands of World War II forced large numbers of women to join the workforce (Carlson, 2003, p. 76). Although the vast majority of these women returned to the home after the war, their efforts laid the foundation for women's liberation and the recent push towards gender equality.

The ensuing transformations have resulted in both positive and negative outcomes for contemporary fathers. One positive change is the growing emphasis placed on father involvement throughout children's upbringing, thus reverting to the norms of earlier times (Coontz, 2001). "Long considered minor players in the affairs of their children, today's fathers often are depicted as major parental figures, people who are expected to—people who presumably want to—be there when their children need them" (LaRossa, 1988, p. 451). These changes have had numerous benefits for children, including lower rates of child abuse, higher levels of family income and enhanced developmental progress (Mackey, 1998). The advances of the feminist movement have also presented new challenges to contemporary men. Among the most serious of these is a confused sense of gender identity—men are increasingly unsure of their role in the home (Kimmel, 1996). Whereas past doctrine advocated a limited role for men, equal partnership is now considered the ideal. These changing tenets are dispersed through many mediums, one of which is the mass media.

American families maintain a longstanding relationship with the mass media. What began with the nightly newspaper and a favorite radio program has quickly expanded to include DVD players and the Internet. Among the most popular forms of media is television, as the average American spends over 28 hours per week watching various forms of televised programming (Nielsen, 2000, p. 14). The influence of this medium is magnified still further by the fact that over 270 million citizens have access to at least one television set (Nielsen, 2004).

Such widespread access makes television one of the few activities open to the vast majority of Americans, regardless of race, gender or socioeconomic status. Researchers have also come to recognize the effects that television has on audience members.

The world of television shows and tells us about life—people, places, striving, power, and fate. It shows and tells us how things work and what to do about them. It presents the good and bad, the happy and sad, the successful and the failures, and tells us who's on top and who's on the bottom (Signorelli, 2001, p. 341).

Previous studies have documented the negative messages that television sends about such issues as violence and sexual activity (Brown & Witherspoon, 2002). Much less is known about the messages that television transmits about family life, particularly the role of fathers (Marsiglio, 1993), the subject of this research endeavor.

Statement of Problem

In recent decades growing attention has been devoted to the relationship between American families and the mass media. The bulk of this work has focused upon two critical issues: gender stereotypes and the changing face of family life. In the former instance researchers have focused primarily on the discriminatory portrayals of women (Downs, 1981; Vande Berg & Steckfuss, 1992; Elasmr, Hasegawa, & Brain, 1999; Signorelli & Bacue, 1999). Other research has examined portrayals of television families over a 40 and even 50-year period (Douglas & Olson, 1995, 1996, Olson & Douglas, 1997). These studies have overwhelmingly relied upon the use of content analyses, a process “that involves establishing categories and then counting the number of instances when those categories are used in a particular item of text” (Silverman, 2001, p. 122). Although these studies provide important insights on how women are portrayed outside the home, they lack an in-depth focus on representations of masculinity within the television household, a problem the current study attempts to rectify.

The current study sought to expand upon this knowledge through use of an inductive thematic analysis. In this process the principles for organization emerge from the data itself (Patton, 1990). From here the researcher will attempt to identify key concepts embedded within the data, which will then be used to identify typologies or themes.

The primary purpose of typologies is to describe. These typologies can later be used to make interpretations about the nature of the program, but the first purpose is description based on the analysis of patterns that appear in the data (Patton, 1990, p 400).

This approach carries several advantages, including its simplicity, consistency with the goals of qualitative research, usefulness in both qualitative and quantitative work and its applicability across cultures. “Themes can provide insight into the cultural beliefs and values that instill powerful experiences and motivations and shape how individuals plan, make sense of, and respond to events (Luborsky, 1994, p. 190). Information would then be classified with the assistance of current research on the father role and emergent themes. This is consistent with the belief that fatherhood, while undergoing numerous shifts, is a role that is embedded across both space and time.

Domestic situational comedies, or television sitcoms, would serve as the focal point for this analysis. These programs “are defined as half-hour, prime-time, nationally distributed series in which the main characters are members of a family and in which the major portion of action is among family members, usually in the home” (Butsch, 1992, p. 388). These programs have gained widespread acclaim, with at least one such program ranked in the Nielsen Top 20 every season for over 50 years (Lackmann, 2003; Time Almanac, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004; Zap2it, 2004). Well known examples include *I Love Lucy*, *Father Know’s Best* and *The Cosby Show*. Perhaps more than any other genre “the domestic situation comedy, or family sitcom, has a rich history of depicting and transmitting American families into viewers homes” (Olson & Douglas, 1997, p. 409). Douglas (2003) tied this success to two factors: the use of family as a plot device and the use of the home as a central setting (p. 18). This would seem to be consistent with the continued centrality of family life in the United States (Carlson, 2003).

Justification of the Problem

The selection of this topic represents the intersection of multiple fields of interest on the part of the researcher. Through working with at-risk youth in multiple settings it has become apparent that far too many young people grow up in broken homes. These observations are supported by data from the United States Census, as there were over 17 million single parent households in 2002 (Department of Commerce, Economics & Statistical Administration, 2002). Mothers head a significant percentage of these households, around 75% of the total, resulting in a situation where a large number of young people are raised without any involvement on the part of their biological father. The absence of an involved father can have many negative ramifications for youth. For “[i]t is a father’s task to help raise his children so that they can be constructive members of society, to transmit to his children those cultural values they must have

to succeed in life” (Popenoe, 1996, p. 140). Fathering also benefits men, as there are many intrinsic benefits to parenting, including the pride that comes in seeing the accomplishments of one’s offspring (Mackey, 1998, p. 235). Indeed, many have found that the true meaning of life came “not by fleeing the home, family, and domestic responsibility or through mournful resignation to the traps of domesticated manhood, but by embracing them” (Kimmel, 1996, p. 327-328). Given the current state of fatherhood, and the vastly underestimated importance of this role, a case can be made for the present study.

This study also stems forth from an interest in television and the messages that it transmits about family life in the 21st Century. Americans spend an enormous amount of time in front of the television set and it would be naïve to think that this viewing has no real impact upon the course of daily life. As a boy I remember spending hours in front of the television set, watching such programs as the *Wonder Years* and *Boy Meets World* on a weekly basis. Now a family scholar, I hope to gain a greater understanding of the messages that television sends about both fatherhood and masculinity as a unit. This is particularly important in understanding individuals that lack an involved father, who instead must learn about parenting from sources outside the family, including the mass media. In reflecting upon this fact, the selection of the domestic situational comedy proved rather easy. Despite many evolutions of the last five decades, the situational comedy remains a constant part of the television landscape, “a genre of television programming which, it can be argued, has been America’s major socializing agent for over four decades” (Berkman, 1993, p. 69). Having laid the groundwork for this scientific endeavor, the following segment will introduce the current study.

Purpose of the Study

The current research endeavor examined the dimensions of fatherhood displayed on network television. From this data the author delved into some of the deeper meanings put forth by current programming. A qualitative methodology, inductive thematic analysis, was selected for this purpose. In addition, the template style was selected as a means for organizing research data, with Lamb’s (1998) theory of fatherhood providing guidance in the coding process. This examination encompassed domestic situational comedies aired on the six major networks (ABC, CBS, FOX, NBC, UPN and the WB) over the course of one month during the fall 2004 season. Data analysis focused upon both the dimensions of fatherhood depicted on these programs, along

with the messages that these portrayals send about contemporary fathers. A detailed overview of current literature on this topic is provided in the following chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study builds upon previous work conducted in multiple disciplines. Among those cited in this review are psychology, sociology, mass communication and family and child studies. A review of relevant research is divided into three sections. The first will address the dimensions of the father role across United States history. An overview of television and its role in both shaping and transmitting culture is provided in section two. Section three examines televised portrayals of family life, a field that encompasses work on gender stereotypes, historical change, family functioning and the representation of fatherhood on domestic situational comedies.

Dimensions of the Father Role

Historical Analysis of the Father Role

Over the course of the last 400 plus years the role of men and women has changed significantly in the United States. The extent of these differences has only begun to emerge recently, thanks to a growing body of research on the history of parenthood. According to Demos (1982), the Colonial father had six primary roles: teacher, guidance counselor, benefactor, moral authority, psychologist and role model. Fathers, as is true of the present era, also had the potential to pass down a variety of negative characteristics, including alcoholism and spousal abuse. This potential for help or harm was magnified by the surprisingly active role that Colonial fathers played in childrearing. It was not until the 19th Century that women emerged as the leading figure in household management, a result of Industrialization's transforming influence on family life. As a result of changes in the workplace, which kept men outside of the home for larger amounts of the day, fathers were reduced to bit players in the conduct of family life. With this came a decline in the time fathers spent providing moral instruction and engaging in one-on-one interactions with children. Fatherhood was instead reduced to the breadwinner role. This expectation remains central to current understanding of fatherhood, even as current and future generations of males challenge the status quo (Lamb, 1998).

In an examination of the father role in contemporary America, Lamb (1995) argued that fatherhood is undergoing a significant shift. While the breadwinner role remains predominant, fathers have begun to take on a more active role in the domestic sphere. This includes such

activities as helping out with housework and spending more time in childcare. Gone is the era where a general sense of detachment was considered the norm, replaced instead by a renewed emphasis on paternal involvement. Lamb (1995) noted that fathers spend time with their children in one of three ways: one-on-one interaction (*engagement*), being available when needed (*accessibility*) and in looking out for the child's well being (*responsibility*) (pp. 23-24). The importance of this role even extends to times of seeming inaction, as men offer much needed emotional support and encouragement to the mother. Given these contributions it is easy to see why "evidence suggests that father absence may be harmful not necessarily because a gender-role model is absent, but because many aspects of the father's role—*economic, social and emotional*—go unfilled or inappropriately filled" (Lamb, 1995, p. 32). In later work, Lamb (1998) altered this model to incorporate the research findings of others, adding several new dimensions. Among the additions are the provision of emotional support to the mother (Parke, Power, & Gottman, 1979), time spent helping out with household chores (Pleck, 1983, 1984) and direct interactions with the children (Lamb, 1997). The actual fulfillment of these expectations is discussed below.

In recent years the extent of father involvement in the United States has been called into question. Although some studies suggest that contemporary fathers are more involved than their predecessors (Pleck, 1997), some have suggested that these changes are a product of decreased maternal contributions (Lamb, 2000). Put forthrightly, the efforts of today's fathers look better in light of decreased efforts on the part of working mothers. A recent study (Andrews, Luckey, Bolder, Whiting-Fickling, & Lind, 2004) put these hypotheses to the test in an examination of how the public perceives father involvement. Over 1,000 individuals agreed to participate in a telephone-based questionnaire. The interview consisted of three parts: opinion of workplace policies, perceptions of father involvement and demographics/ questions about one's children. Of these individuals 46% did not believe that father's were fulfilling their paternal responsibilities. Perceptions varied by gender, as women were significantly more likely to disagree that fathers provide sufficient financial support (23.6% versus 9.9% for men), cooperate with the mother (35.8% versus 24.2% for men) and share their religious beliefs with the children (35.7% versus 22.5% for men). Among fathers the majority of participants seemed satisfied with their contribution, with a small percentage desiring greater involvement with their child's schoolwork and recreational activities.

Another similar study (Wood & Repetti, 2004) examined the progression of fatherhood across child development. Using a sample of 132 cohabiting partners with children in the fourth grade, the study assessed father involvement, mother involvement, demographic information and the influence that life events had on parental dynamics over a three-year period. Results suggest that father involvement increases the most when couples either have a higher percentage of boys and endure major lifestyle changes. For instance, a decrease in work hours by five or more hours per week resulted in greater father involvement for 39% of participants. The researchers also note the importance that “gendered activity” has in fostering father-son interactions. As sons get older they take on more of their father’s interests, resulting in increased opportunities for father-son bonding. Limitations of this study include the lack of sample heterogeneity and the use of cohabiting couples, who may not be representative of the population. Although father involvement changes significantly over time, the extent of these contributions remains vitally important, a fact of particular importance given our rapidly changing world.

Diversity in Practice

In discussing the evolving tasks associated with fatherhood one must not forget the focal point of these efforts—children. “The needs of children haven’t changed amid the many social changes that have swept through adults’ lives. They still need time for play, talk, supervision, companionship and learning” (Garbarino, 1993, p. 52). Even after generations of social upheaval, children’s needs remain the same, leaving parents to fulfill their responsibilities in ever more creative ways. Given these distinctions it is important to study the many differences that exist within the practice of fatherhood. Indeed, “fatherhood is no simple phenomenon, but a complex garment of many things” (Peterson & Steinmetz, 2000, p. 315).

Research by Jain, Belsky and Crnic (1996) sought to shed light on these concerns through research on the multitude of different ways in which fathers fulfill their expected duties. Namely, the study classified fathers with regard to their perspectives of the father role. The study included a sample of 69 married, Caucasian, middle and working class males. Participants were evaluated across four categories (caretaking, play, teaching, and discipline) through a combination of in-home and laboratory observations. From this, the researchers were able to uncover four types of fathers: caretaking, playmate-teacher, disciplinarian, and disengaged. The vast majority of these individuals (48 of 69) fell into one of the latter two categories; characteristics that are best identified with 1950's era conceptions of fatherhood (Mintz &

Kellogg, 1988). All remaining participants (21 of 69) displayed more “progressive” interpretations of the father role. Further analysis revealed a significant relationship between how fathers parent and their background (education, occupational status, etc.). “More specifically, the progressive (caretaking and playmate-teacher) fathers were of higher status (i.e., in terms of education and job status) than the traditional (disciplinarian and disengaged) fathers” (Jain et al., p. 439). The study also revealed higher levels of involvement among fathers with unruly children, the inevitable response to heightened levels of need. From this one may conclude that there are many variations within the fulfillment of the father role, as men have many different notions of the tasks that go with being a father. For example, some fathers administer discipline, while others let the mother handle such tasks.

Another important issue in understanding fatherhood involves the consistency with which men fulfill their paternal responsibilities. Research by Peck (1996) examined the consistency between men’s beliefs about fatherhood and their actions. The study laid out three factors that were expected to influence father involvement: number of children, level of involvement on the part of the father’s father, and whether or not the father’s mother worked. Participants were asked to complete both an interview and several assessment devices, including such tools as the Father Belief Index and measures of child discipline. The researcher found a negative correlation between number of children and attitudes toward fatherhood, indicating that fathers with large families had more negative attitudes toward fatherhood, possibly a result of the added stresses that go along with this situation. Involvement on the part of one’s own father proved nearly significant, while no relationship found between spousal employment and individual beliefs.

Researchers have also examined the differences that exist between fathers and non-fathers. Eggebeen and Knoester (2001) hypothesized that fathers would be healthier, demonstrate greater levels of community involvement, be closer to their family of origin and work less total hours than individuals who are not parents. Using data from the 1987-1988 version of the National Study of Families and Households (NSFH), the researchers were able to conduct a thorough analysis of the lives of over 5,000 men between ages 19 and 65. Research findings lend support to the notion that active residential fatherhood translates into a higher quality of life for men.

The more these men were engaged in activities with their children, the more satisfied they were with their lives, the more socializing they did, the more involved with their communities they were, the more connected they were to their families, and the less involved they were with their work (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001, p. 389).

These benefits did not extend to mental health, where no significant differences were found between fathers and non-fathers. It is also worth mentioning that nonresidential fathers shared similar social and work lives with non-fathers, highlighting the importance of residence in the father role.

Role Salience

In our rapidly changing world much has been made of the evolving status of paternal involvement. Although perceptions of fathering have changed significantly in recent years, it remains to be seen whether or not fathers' actions have adjusted correspondingly. Specifically, how important is fatherhood in comparison to all the other aspects of life. The term role salience is used to describe this "weighing" out process, in which men knowingly or unknowingly rank parenting in comparison to their many other responsibilities. A large body of research (Bruce & Fox, 1999; Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1993; Stone & McKenry, 1998) has examined the importance of fathering in the construction of male identity. The fear, of course, is that fathering will somehow get lost in the shuffle of daily life. The truthfulness of these speculations is examined below.

Further exploration of this topic came in the research of Daly (1993). This study examined the construction of identity among fathers. Using symbolic interaction as a theoretical guide, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 fathers of young children (below the age of six) living in intact households. Three primary themes emerged from this process. First, men noted a lack of role models. Biological fathers serve as a negative point of reference for many contemporary men, leaving them clueless about the conduct of successful fatherhood.

For these fathers, not only were they without a map-reading guide, but the contours of the map had changed in that they were faced with the challenge of putting together in a balanced way the competing demands of the residual provider role and the emergent cultural demands that they be a different father from their own fathers (Daly, 1993, p. 527).

In response, men constructed their notions of fatherhood from a variety of sources. Instead of asking specifically for advice, these men modeled characteristics that they admired in others, including their own mothers. Finally, men placed an emphasis on providing a good role model to their own children. This model typically differed from that of their own father figure, as they took on less of a threatening presence. It also is worth noting that even though men recognized the failures of their own fathers, they still had great respect for these men. From this one may conclude that fathering leaves a lasting impact upon their one's offspring

Another study by Daly (1996) probed the deeper meanings that fathers attach to spending time with their family. A total of 32 men were recruited for the study through contacts with the YMCA, YWCA and a large corporation. Participants were limited to fathers with intact families who had children age 6 or below. Through use of semi-structured interviews, the issue of time emerged as a central issue. Fathers defined successful fatherhood as the product of spending quality time with family members. In addition, it was perceived that one must be sincere about the time that is spent with family members; meaning that one must truly value the time that is spent with the wife and kids. Conflicts between work and home life represented a major concern for fathers.

Fathers experience a number of contradictions in their experience of family time, a conflict between the paid work they have traditionally been required to do and they parenting they are now expected to do, a disjunction between the ideals and the realities of being a provider and a father, and a discrepancy between their desire to spend more time with their children and an ongoing set of perceived constraints that seem to interfere with this (Daly, 1996, p. 474).

It is through the managing of such conflicts that each individual father constructs the boundaries of fatherhood. The challenge of fathering may also be seen through the way in which men view time spent with family. It was common for men to talk about “carving out” time for family, signaling a lesser emphasis on parental duties. Finally, fathers expressed difficulty in handling children without the assistance of their wife, problems that transcend racial and class boundaries, the subject of the ensuing section.

Differences by Race and Socioeconomic Status

Race. In studying variations within the realm of fatherhood one must also take into account the role that race and socioeconomic status play in shaping the fatherhood. Several

recent studies have examined racial differences in the practice of fathering. Research by Toth and Xu (1999) examined the role that factors such as race, parenting ideology and ethnicity play in childrearing. Data from the first wave of the National Study of Families and Households (NSFH) were used to obtain a sample of 1,258 fathers with children ages 5-18. Using a seemingly unrelated regression analysis, the researchers were able to identify some surprising distinctions. Differences were identified in the area of cognitive involvement, with African American fathers demonstrating the greatest willingness to supervise their children's activity, and Latino fathers taking the most active role in their children's lives. Members of these two groups also appear to place a greater emphasis on family closeness and respecting authority. No significant differences were identified in emotional expression, as all three groups displayed similar levels of affective behavior.

Conflicting results were obtained in a study of racial and ethnic differences in father involvement among two-parent families (Hofferth, 2003). Using data from the Child Development Supplement (CDS) to the Panel Study on Income Dynamics (PSID), a nationally representative sample of individuals and families residing in the United States, the researcher was able to examine various dimensions of parental involvement. Variables include the amount of time spent with children, responsibility, parental warmth, parental monitoring and precise demographic information. Results indicate that the average father spends 14.95 hours per week with their child, with African American fathers spending significantly less time with their children (12.76) than Whites (15.35). In addition, African Americans spend less time eating and reading with their children and display lower levels of parental warmth than either White or Hispanic fathers. On a positive note, African Americans and Hispanics demonstrate the highest levels of responsibility, findings that prove consistent with the work of Toth and Xu (1999). Living in a good neighborhood represents another key factor in determining the amount of father involvement. Fathers that live in "good" neighborhoods tend to spend less time with their children; likely the product of longer work hours or heightened comfort about children's safety.

Socioeconomic Status. Social class represents another key determinant of paternal involvement. A study by Lareau (2002) investigated the role that paternal income plays in the lives of children ages 8-10. Research was divided into three phases: school observation and home interviews with several third grade classes (two each from the Midwest and Northeast), followed by observations of 12 Northeastern families. From these steps the researcher was able

to identify several distinct differences between poor/working class and middle class children. First, poor/ working class youth engage in far fewer structured activities (1.9 average) than middle class children (4.9 average) do. The two classes have opposing attitudes towards television. “Most middle-class parents we interviewed characterized television as actually or potentially harmful to children . . . [t]hese concerns did not surface in interviews with working class and poor parents” (Lareau, 2002, p. 763). Working class/ poor parents also demonstrate a heightened suspicion of authority figures, as witnessed by a poor/ working class parent’s actions during routine doctor visits, and spend less time in dialogue with their children. In contrast, middle class youth demonstrate a sense of entitlement, with parents who take greater interest in their recreational activities. Along with this comes the danger of over-parenting, which may stifle creativity and create a sense of dependency among children.

Another study (Burbach, Fox, & Nicholson, 2004) provides an analysis of parenting, stress and the development of expectations among fathers of young children. To participate, fathers had to both reside in a specified Midwestern city, have at least one child ages 1-5 years, and reside with that child at least six months concurrently. The researchers asked participants to complete a series of assessments measuring parental involvement, parental stress and children’s behavior, using 2x2 ANOVA as a means of analysis. Results suggested that lower income fathers use verbal and corporal punishment on a significantly more frequent basis than middle class fathers; though the authors believe all classes use these forms of punishment far too frequently. Higher levels of stress and increased use of television to entertain children were also identified among fathers of lower SES. Fathers of all classes demonstrated similar developmental expectations of their children and were equally likely to see prosocial behaviors among their children.

The next section will address the impact that television programming has had on the human experience. From a little known technological innovation that few families could afford to a mandatory appliance for nearly every American household, television has long been a purveyor of family imagery (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). While the abundance of family messages is a foregone conclusion, much remains to be seen about the impact that these images have on actual American family life. A discussion of television’s complex relationship with culture is provided below.

Television

The study of television and its influence upon human behavior remains a topic of great interest to researchers. This section will examine a wide array of literature in this field. First, an overview of literature pertaining to the following question: Does television shape or reflect culture? is provided. “Television . . . is an art at once cultural, economic and social, in which cultural judgements and decisions, constrained by given resources, continuously imply and imagine sociological outcomes” (Born, 2000, p. 420). In either case, television programming presents an important domain for scientific research. Second, the lasting impact that television viewing has on individuals, most notably children, is explored.

Television and Culture

Implications of the relationship between television and the family are everywhere. Commercials introduce families to new products, programs such as *The Simpson*’s introduce new words into our family’s vocabulary, while experts hail television viewing as an avenue for “family togetherness”. Despite the many links between television and the family, the extent of this relationship remains unclear. According to one extreme view, television directly influences the course of cultural life in the United States, while others believe that television is merely reflection of human frailty. In line with the former position, Chesebro (1984) argued that media have grown into its own distinct culture. “The electronic media function as a discrete cultural system, possessing its own orientation and concomitant value system” (Chesebro, 1984, p. 120). What’s more, frequent television viewing has the potential to shape the way viewers see the world, instilling an ideology that shapes the course of their everyday lives. Douglas (2003) would concur with this position, noting television’s influence on family cognition.

In the most general sense, television portrayals are seen to affect cognition because together they form a public record of the family and, as such, provide a consensual reality of viewers, a shared way of thinking about and interpreting family life and family relations (Douglas, 2003, p. 12).

This influence is tied to four factors: exposure to alternative family norms, realism of family portrayals, exposure to novel situations, and the potential for creating new attitudes toward everyday life (Douglas, 2003). In viewing television programs, family members are exposed to stimuli and models that are both consistent and inconsistent with their current practices. These images may then either reinforce existing behaviors or else promote novel pathways.

Others believe that individuals may choose to accept or reject the messages put forth by televised programs. Saenz (1992) notes that factors such as race, ethnicity and geographic region have an effect on how individuals perceive television programs. For example, someone from rural Appalachia may not appreciate the redneck humor of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, while African Americans could find the contents of *Good Times* to be offensive. “Viewers . . . develop an aesthetic enjoyment of television’s rhetoric, without necessarily subscribing to the ideology supported by such rhetoric” (Saenz, 1992, p. 41). Television’s influence is altered still further by the way in which programs are viewed (live versus videotaped) and through the use of commercials, a feature which disrupts the flow of the story.

A similar perspective may be found in the work of Signorelli and Morgan (2001). In this article they define cultivation analysis, a perspective which argues that the effects of television viewing results not so much from watching individual shows, as from the culmination of messages that pour forth from many shows. Proponents of this perspective “approach television as a system of messages made up of aggregate and repetitive patterns of images and representations to which entire communities are exposed—and that they absorb over long periods of time” (Signorelli & Morgan, 2001, p. 334). They also make the point that television programs share the same messages with a diverse society composed of individuals who have endured a multitude of divergent experiences. If this statement were indeed true, then it would be possible for a crowd of people to watch the very same program and be influenced in a multitude of different ways.

Influence of Television Viewing

The previous segment examined the relationship between television and culture. Through this the case has been made for television viewing as at least a partial factor in the formation of cultural life in the United States. Any further examination must take into account the influence that television viewing has on both individuals and families. Over the years many researchers have attempted to provide insight on this important topic, though this information has proved mostly inadequate. One the first attempts to reconcile the many conflicting findings on this topic came in 1982, when the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) sponsored the first comprehensive and integrative review of all prior literature (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Much of this work was focused upon the many negative aspects of television viewing, which include the use of excessive violence and the portrayal of unhealthy habits without associated consequences.

A section of this review was devoted to the positive aspects of television viewing, which include instruction in such attributes as altruism, friendliness, self-control and the ability to cope with fear. These results spurred an entire generation of new studies that have brought researchers ever closer to understanding the true impact of television watching.

Children and teens represent one of the key components of the overall television audience, watching just under 20 hours of programming per week (Nielsen, 2000). Around 25% of this time is spent viewing programs that air during prime-time (7-10 p.m. EST). Further analysis of youth viewing habits reveals several interesting patterns. A study by the Kaiser Foundation (Roberts & Foehr, 2004) examined the media consumption of children and adolescents. Using a nationally representative sample, the Kaiser study included both questionnaires and a TV diary. Television remains the dominant media force; with roughly 85% of all young people engaged in some level of viewing each day. Among children ages 2-7, educational programs are the most popular (68%), followed by children's entertainment programs (62%) and comedies (26%). Comedies become the genre of choice after age 7, viewed by (50%) of all youth between ages 8-18, followed by dramas (24%) and children's educational programs (24%). These findings represent an important contribution to efforts to attempt to understand the role that television viewing plays in the lives of American young people. Today's youth "are born into homes in which, for the first time in human history, a centralized commercial institution rather than parents, religious organizations, or schools tell most of the stories" (Signorelli, 2001, p. 34).

The emergence of television has also raised new questions about the transmission of gender specific behaviors to young children. One popular view, the social cognitive theory of gender, would argue that young people learn gender behaviors through observing and imitating the actions of others (Santrock, 2003, p. 320). This model was put to the test in the work of McGhee and Freuh (1980) among 64 youth (grades 1, 3, 5 and 7) from the St. Louis, Missouri area. Their study examined the relationship between the amount of television viewed and the prevalence of gender stereotypical beliefs. Findings were consistent with social cognitive theory—revealing a strong relationship between heavy television viewing and stereotypical attitudes. It appeared that "heavy television [viewing] may contribute significantly to children's acquisition of stereotypic perceptions of behavior and psychological characteristics associated with males and females" (McGhee & Freuh, 1980, p. 185). Such effects were most severe

among heavy viewing females in the late elementary grades, who displayed highly questionable views on what constitutes appropriate behavior on the part of males.

Television can also be an important source of information about family roles. Research by Buerkel-Rothfuss, Greenburg, Atkin and Neuendorf (1982) examined the extent to which television shapes youth's perceptions of family roles. A sample of 648 youth from working class, inner-city neighborhoods in Michigan and California took part in this study. Measures were then taken to control for factors such as age, race, and socioeconomic status. Upon selection, participants were asked to complete a survey assessing four domains of interest to the researchers: type of programming viewed, realism of programming, presence of affiliative behavior in their own family, and the extent to which parents monitored what their children are viewing. Results offered a surprisingly positive perspective on the effects of television viewing, as those who watched programs frequently were significantly more likely to believe that real life families show comfort and support. The researchers are quick to warn, however, that parents should closely monitor what their child is viewing. Nevertheless, "it appears that parents' positive intervention, such as guiding their children toward family shows, viewing with them, commenting on show content, and maintaining control over the amount of viewing, can enhance what children learn about affiliative behavior from viewing family television shows" (Buerkel-Rothfuss et al., 1982, p. 200). These findings lend credence to the importance of the parental role in shaping the life course of children and adolescents, a subject explored in further detail below.

The period known as adolescence represents a time of great physical, mental, and emotional transformation. It is during this stage that children begin the transition to adulthood. With such drastic change comes the potential for both great accomplishment and serious harm. It is for this reason that developmental researchers consider adolescence to be a critical point in the course of human development (Santrock, 2003). Of the many factors that influence this transition, television and other forms of media rank among the most influential, consuming an average of 6-7 hours per day (Nielsen, 2000). "The young, often turn to television, intentionally and unintentionally, to learn about the world in which they live. As they become teenagers and young adults, television provides easily accessed information about the world they will soon enter" (Signorelli & Bacue, 1999, p. 542). It is the content of these messages that most disturbs researchers, as noted below.

In a review of current literature on this topic, Brown and Witherspoon (2002) noted the false messages presented in the media, which “depict a world in which unhealthy behaviors such as physical aggression, unprotected sex, smoking, and drinking are glamorous and risk free” (p. 153). In presenting a world without consequences, the mass media encourage adolescents to practice unhealthy behaviors. Television programs have even gone so far as to present violent acts in an appealing way, using humor and artistry to turn gruesome acts into glorious adventures. These effects are compounded still further by the fact that media use is typically a sedentary activity, which in turn promotes obesity, another often cited problem among today’s adolescents. Despite these failures, the authors note the role that individuals play in filtering the content of these messages. “Adolescents come to the media with individual characteristics, and from families and communities that already have pushed them in certain directions and that have provided models of healthy and unhealthy behavior. Those perceptions and experiences will influence what effect the media have on their health in the future” (Brown & Witherspoon, 2002, p. 153).

Some researchers have suggested that television shapes individual aspirations for the future, presenting opportunities that were previously unimagined, as noted in research by Fisherkiller (1997). Using interviews conducted among youth attending an alternative middle school located in New York City, this study examined attitudes toward the mass media among adolescents through use of a qualitative methodology. Interviews resulted in a series of detailed accounts revolving around how “students acquire strategies within television culture that help them configure their individual versions of the American dream” (Fisherkiller, 1997, p. 484). In one instance the show *Who’s the Boss* provided a model of material success for Dezeray, an impoverished immigrant from the Dominican Republic. “It is Dezeray’s home culture . . . that constructs her drive to find a better life. But it is television culture that supplies the images she has of a better life and suitable images for presenting herself” (Fisherkiller, 1997, p. 474). This example illustrates the melding of fiction and reality, which occurs when adolescents adopt the messages put forth by television. In another instance the character Murphy Brown inspired a timid young female to be more assertive, while the selection of *The Cosby Show* as his favorite program provided a sign of growing racial awareness among an African American male. These interviews provide valuable insights into the way in which television viewing shapes the lives of

America's youth. The ensuing study examines the influence of television viewing across the life course.

As noted previously, television viewing remains among the most common forms of leisure for individuals of all ages. The meaning of this activity and its varied use between childhood and old age is examined in the work of Chayko (1993). Using data from the National Opinion Research Center's 1988 General Social Survey, the researcher was able to monitor the television viewing habits of 967 participants. Independent variables included life stage, work status, perceived social class, education, happiness and social isolation. The elderly watched the most television (4.05 hours per day), followed closely by young people (3.79 hours), while the middle aged "settlers" spent the least amount of time watching programs (2.56 hours). Through use of a multiple regression analysis it was determined that full time workers watch significantly less television than the unemployed; the elderly proved to be an exception to this rule. It was also determined that depression resulted in greater amounts of television viewing for individuals across the life course. Indeed, the author considered warding off loneliness as one of the key reasons for television viewing.

Television, like other facilitators of nonphysical co-presence (such as computer bulletin boards or radio talk shows) can give us a sense of community with others . . . It can be a way of connecting to others that can give individuals a sense of common identity, shared experiences, and even social bonding with others (Chayko, 1993, p. 587).

Examples of this include women's obsession with daytime soap operas and men's heavy reliance upon televised sporting events. The coming section will focus upon studies of televised families and the messages that they transmit about American family life.

Television Portrayals of Family Life

The two previous sections have provided a review of studies examining the changing role of fathers in the United States and the influence that television has on both American culture and the larger society. These two lines of research merge in the study of how television programs portray family life. "If television is as powerful and influential a medium as it is generally accepted to be, one can hardly assume that the patterns of family life being presented on a regular basis are not influencing the family patterns of real households" (Moore, 1992, p. 42). More importantly, researchers must consider the messages that television programs transmit about family life, and how these messages in turn influence the lives of real life families. The

ensuing reviews will examine the body of research on this topic, concluding with those studies that have focused specifically on televised portrayals of fatherhood on television.

Gender Stereotypes

The term stereotype is used to define any attitude or behavior that provides an oversimplified representation of an individual or group (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 1994). For example, some individuals believe that women are only suited for work in the home, while others cannot imagine men happily employed in the nursing profession. While such beliefs may seem logical to some, these beliefs are ultimately incorrect, and therefore threatening to individual liberties. With that in mind, researchers have examined the way in which men and women are portrayed on television. Fourteen programs aired during the fall of 1977 served as the subject of an early study of this topic (Downs, 1981). Program contents were coded with regard to a list of 11 predetermined categories of stereotypical gender behavior. Stereotyping was found in three groupings—work activity, domestic activity, and emotional expression. Differences were also found in the area of problem solving, as male characters were much less likely to either seek assistance or help others. These findings were limited by the lack of a video-recording device, which prevented coders from replaying each program.

More recent studies have provided a more extensive analysis of gender portrayals on television sitcoms. Research by Signorelli and Bacue (1999) examined 36 weeklong samples of programming aired between the fall of 1967 and the spring of 1998. Their research focused on two factors: recognition and respect. From this they were able to identify a growing number of female characters, which rose to 39% of the total amount during the 1990s. Also, while the number of working males still outnumbered that of females in the 1990s, the gap between the sexes had in fact decreased significantly. Another interesting finding came in the area of age. Men were identified as four years older than women on average, which the authors link to American culture's obsession with physical beauty in women, along with the notion that youthful characteristics are somehow superior.

A similar study (Eaton, 1997) focused specifically upon the newer television networks (Fox and UPN). Working under the hypothesis that these networks would permit more stereotypical portrayals of women than the three original networks, the researchers conducted a content analysis of television promotional advertisements over the course of a one-week span.

When specifically analyzing FOX and UPN portrayals compared to the other three networks, crosstabulation results indicate that FOX was more likely to portray women in minor character roles, dressed in provocative attire, and more physically fit than the other networks. UPN was also more likely to depict women as more attractive, physically fit, and provocatively dressed than the three veteran networks (Eaton, 1997, p. 868).

These findings are likely the result of Fox and UPN's push to attract younger viewers, whom the authors perceive as more responsive to such slanted portrayals. It must be noted, however, that these results are limited by the use of television promos, which may provide a skewed representation of program's actual contents.

If television programming is indeed littered with stereotypical portrayals, how realistic are these depictions? Research by Moore (1992) investigated this issue in a study of "successful" programs aired between 1947 and 1990. By "successful" the author was referring to shows that received consistently high ratings over an extended period of time (more than one year). Fictional families were then divided by family type (conventional versus nonconventional) and social class (working, middle, and upper classes) in an attempt to determine the prevalence of various family types. Results indicated that 50% of the shows included a couple with children, 14% involved a couple with no children, and 29% featured single parents. Several interesting trends emerged after further analysis. First, the majority (58%) of all single parent characters on television were male, even though less than 25% of all single parents are male in real life (U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistical Administration, 2002). Second, no successful programs featured divorced families until the 1970s, by which time divorce had become relatively common (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). Finally, there was an overall lack of minority family portrayals, with only 7 total featured in a sample of 115 programs. These results call into question the realism of American television programming.

Historical Changes

As mentioned previously, family life has changed dramatically over the past 50 years. At the center of this transformation was television, which chronicled such events as the Civil Rights Movement and the fall of the Berlin Wall. With the changing face of history has come a growing interest in the evolution of how American families are portrayed on network television. One such study (Taylor, 1989b) examined some of the factors that motivated these changes. The article noted that television programming became "bland" during the 1950s, a reflection of the

movement of production teams from New York to California. Another change occurred in the 1970s, when demographics were first incorporated into the scheduling process. With this advancement network executives learned to target programming to the audience most likely to view shows at a given time. Another innovation was the development of the VCR, which allowed viewers control over their program consumption. In response, “episodic series were given more fluid boundaries and were recombined with other genres, so that they approached the more ambiguous, unresolved form of the serial” (Taylor, 1989a, p. 21).

Butsch (2003) noted the role that advertising dollars play in the creation of programs. Networks seek to produce shows that are not offensive to, first, their advertisers, and then their audience. The desire to minimize risk has resulted in the constant repetition of successful formulas, which too often send unbalanced messages regarding the role of fathers. It is only during times of low ratings that networks begin to change their approach, as noted when CBS and Norman Lear developed programs such as *All in the Family* during the 1970s. These statements provide valuable insights about the way in which television programs are developed and transmitted to the masses. Now that the motivation behind these changing portrayals has been identified, attention will shift to an examination of the changing portrayal of family life in the mass media.

Father Knows Best and *The Cosby Show* rank among the most popular family programs of all time (Lackman, 2003). Despite being broadcast in different eras, with *Father Know's Best* airing in the 1960s and *The Cosby Show* shown during the 1980s, each is said to transmit timeless truths about family life, which may help explain their continuous syndication. Recognizing this point, researchers (Frazer & Frazer, 1993) conducted a study of the program's portrayal of family life. One difference emerged in the area of sexuality, a topic that was discussed much more openly on *The Cosby Show*. The programs also differed with regard to gender roles, as *Father Knows Best* features a stay-at-home mother and *The Cosby Show* includes a dual-career household, and location (suburban vs. urban). An even greater number of similarities were identified, a list including family structure (both nuclear), socioeconomic status (middle class), a lack of outside threats, and portrayals of gender. In the latter case, the mother character on both shows was much more likely than the father to be shown working inside of the home. This is especially surprising when one considers the fact that Claire Huxtable is a successful attorney, an occupation that presumably leaves little time for baking and other

household tasks. Based on this information, the authors concluded that *The Cosby Show* represents a return to the gender portrayals of the 1960s, a factor that may help explain the programs' lasting appeal.

An expanded historical and comparative analysis of television programming may be found in the work of Douglas and Olson. Through a series of studies (Douglas & Olson, 1995; Douglas & Olson, 1996; Olson & Douglas, 1997) examined both the similarities and differences between television portrayals of family life across multiple decades. Their first work (Douglas & Olson, 1995) investigated family portrayals on 13 programs rated in the Nielsen Top 20 that aired between 1950 and 1990. A group of student coders (248 female, 132 male) were randomly assigned to a given program and then asked to evaluate three episodes with a group of their classmates. From these findings the researchers were able to track a stepwise advancement towards higher levels of emotional expression, both positive and negative, between husbands and wives. Also, while portrayals clearly changed over time, families did not become more dysfunctional over time. It is worth noting, however, that the sampling measures used in this study may have skewed the final result, as college students are not representative of the general population.

The second study (Douglas & Olson, 1996) focused on two components of the family network: parent-child relationships and sibling to sibling relationships. Three hypotheses were developed. First, the researchers posited that portrayals of television families have changed over time with regard to power and affect, family performance, family satisfaction and stability. Second, it was expected that parent-child relationships would be more positive than that of siblings. Lastly, the presence of the four variables outlined in hypothesis one will hamper child development. A sample of nine Top 20 programs airing originally between 1950 and 1994 were selected for this study. The methodology was very similar to that of the previous study (Douglas & Olson, 1995), with one notable exception: judges were used to assess the typicality of family portrayals on a given episode. From this the researchers selected three episodes from each program that best represented the "typical" episode. Student raters were also asked to compare the family portrayals of a given program with that of their own family of origin; a measure which provided valuable information on the coders' background. Findings lend support to the three research hypotheses. Interestingly enough, sibling to sibling relationships were significantly more conflict ridden than were parent-child relations. In examining differences over time the

researchers were led to conclude that “modern television families appeared to be generally more conflictual, less cohesive, less effective socializers, and characterized by less role distinction” (Douglas & Olson, 1996, p. 92). Such findings lie in sharp contrast to that of the 1995 study, though the validity of more recent work is aided through added controls.

A third study (Olson & Douglas, 1997) focused upon marital relations. In this instance it was hypothesized that current programming would present more equitable forms of family interaction. In addition to the protocol outlined previously (Douglas & Olson, 1996), participants were asked to complete an in-depth post-test that assessed their perceptions of the family portrayed on a given program. Although the extent of stereotyping fluctuated over time, modest improvements were identified with regard to equality—the gap between husbands and wives decreased over time. Results were not negatively skewed, however, as the level of equality actually declined during the late 1990s. In fact, *Roseanne* and *Home Improvement* presented some of the most troubling images of husband-wife relations gathered in the study.

Roseanne is the least desirable family model and the least like our own. *Home Improvement* comes in as the next lowest in family stability and similarity to own family—perhaps a reflection of receiving the highest spousal domination score in the sample (Olson & Douglas, 1997, p. 423).

These findings raise numerous questions about the overall health of the fictional family networks presented on network television. The following segment will examine how well these entities function as a whole.

Family Function

If television programs do indeed serve as a model for real world families to imitate, one must then understand the overall health of the images that are being presented. A study by Bundy, Thompson and Strapp (1997) did just that through an analysis of how well parents met the developmental needs of children. Each team of three coders was asked to examine one of 15 programs recorded that aired during January of 1991. Fictional families were evaluated along five plains of developmental significance: physical growth, attachment, cognitive, autonomy and social. A total of 3,576 parenting behaviors were recorded for this analysis, with an average of 50 per episode, of which two-thirds were positive. The remaining behaviors were classified as negative, meaning that viewers witnessed 20 negative behaviors per 30-minute episode that carried no consequences.

Similar results were found in the work of Douglas (1996). A total of eight Top 20 programs airing between 1984 and 1994 were selected for this study. Using college students as coders, the study evaluated four “typical” episodes of each program. While television families on the whole managed to get along “reasonably effectively” the children were far from healthy.

At the very least, the findings suggest that television promotes a child-dependent model of family life—that is a model in which children construct a relatively hostile environment for each other, and parents exert a compensatory effect, developing relationships with each other and with their children that are supportive and friendly and therefore moderate the family experience (Douglas, 1996, p. 694).

In this the author notes the centrality of the parental role in promoting healthy development, a theme that is true both on television and in real life.

At greatest risk for developmental delays are children, for whom television viewing is a popular form of entertainment (Nielsen, 2000). Although previous studies have revealed high levels of television viewing among youth, the rationale behind their selection of programs remained a mystery until recently. Research by Heintz (1992) examined youth perspectives on the fictional households portrayed on television. A total of 381 students attending Chicago Catholic Schools ranked *Full House*, *Growing Pains*, *The Simpsons*, *The Cosby Show* and *Married With Children* as their favorite programs. After identifying these five programs the researcher taped three episodes of each show during the summer of 1990. The researcher and her students then coded programs across three categories: family structure, ethnicity and career. From this they were able to conclude that positive interactions occurred three times as often as negative interactions. Also, while mothers were more likely to initiate communication than was the father, children were much more likely to take their problems to their father, actions more consistent with Colonial era expectations. Finally, higher levels of conflict were recorded in families containing adolescents, consistent with the storm and stress view of adolescence (Santrock, 2003). It must be noted, however, that the use of parochial school students may prove unrepresentative of the United States population.

One of the most underrepresented aspects of family well being is mental health. When a family member is afflicted with a disorder like depression or generalized anxiety disorder the entire family suffers in numerous ways. Recognizing the significance of this issue, a recent

study (Bryant, Bryant, Aust, & Venugopalan, 2001) delved into the mental health of television families, both in entirety and on an individual level. Two measures (Olson Circumplex and DSM IV) were used to evaluate each family unit. A sample of 86 episodes of family programs aired during a three-year period (1991, 1996 and 1999) was selected for further analysis. Results indicated that the vast majority of family units would be classified as either separated or connected—scores considered to be psychologically healthy on the Olson Circumplex. Most family units also featured both healthy responses to change (flexible or structured) and communication (moderate to high). In addition, the level of family involvement and the quality of parent-child relations were significantly higher in 1999 than in previous years. On an individual level, few instances of mental illness were recorded and these problems were quickly resolved in the few situations where they occurred. Unfortunately, this portrayal is neither realistic nor helpful to those that really are mentally ill. The following section will address the reality of the fictionalized family portrayals that appear on television.

Many experts in the field of communication have questioned the reality of television portrayals. As noted in the studies summarized above, the world of television is often characterized by racial homogeneity and families that are far too perfect to be human. This all changed with the onset of programs such as *Roseanne*, *Married with Children* and *The Simpsons*. Berkman (1993) noted that the creation of these programs, and the incorporation of the FOX network, represents an important turn in the history of television. Despite featuring families that are far from appealing, these programs have enjoyed tremendous commercial success. Of these shows, only *The Simpsons* remains, having aired for well over a decade. The relationship of mutual influence between this program and American society is examined in a recent study (Henry, 2003). Taking a postmodern perspective, the author examined both the importance of this series in the realm of media and the significance of the messages that it transmits. *The Simpsons* is unique in the sense that it combines two formats: the domestic situation comedy and the cartoon. Also, while the characters are realistic, the cartoon format allows them to do zany things that would not be permissible in another form. “Among other things, *The Simpsons* mercilessly exposes the hypocrisy and ineptitude of pop psychology, modern child-rearing, commercialism, consumerism, fundamental religion, environmental abuse, corporate greed, and the deceptions of American education” (Henry, 2003, p. 272). It is for that reason that Henry believed this program represents a major triumph on the part of popular culture, though others

may tend to disagree. At the center of this criticism is the portrayal of fatherhood, through the character Homer Simpson, a subject that will be examined further below.

Fatherhood

Few studies have focused specifically upon the portrayal of fatherhood on domestic situational comedies. Those studies that have tackled this topic offer numerous insights on the role that fathers play in television family life. Among the most popular topics in this field is socioeconomic status, namely how middle and working class fathers are portrayed on domestic comedies. Cantor (1990) offered several important insights on this topic. Among the most important of these is the assertion that television sitcoms are written for female viewers, similar to soap operas and family comic strips. If this is true, it may help explain why males are portrayed as so inept in the home, as this feeds into the natural biases of female viewers. It is also noted that while middle class fathers tend to be portrayed in a positive light, men of the working class are shown in a negative light. Although feminine virtues, such as the nurturing of children, are often upheld in both types of programming, it is generally the woman that wins out in programs about the working class. The peculiarity of this pattern is put to the test below.

Butsch (1992) examined these assumptions in a study of successful domestic sitcoms (five or more seasons or current Top 20 rating) that were aired between 1950 and 1990. Of the 262 programs examined in this study, only 11% portrayed working class families, a figure that is well out of proportion with current demographics, while 70% featured middle class families; the remaining 19% were from upper class homes. The messages presented by these shows proved consistent with the work of Cantor (1990). Whereas the “funny” character in middle class series is often a woman, a reflection of societal biases about stay-at-home mothers, working class series tend to feature father figures that are “dumber” than the children are. Two notable exceptions were identified. The first is Dan Conner (*Roseanne*), who is both a caring father and a likeable character. A second discrepancy is found in *Who’s The Boss*, where the leading male (played by Tony Danza) is employed as a housekeeper, a role that many would consider to be degrading for males. Not only that, but he is shown as more competent than his female colleagues are in completing household tasks. These examples are the few exceptions to strongly entrenched stereotypes about socioeconomic class and gender, messages that may have powerful ramifications. “When success is confined primarily to middle-class series, and failure to the working-class, the failing working-class men are thereby labeled deviants who are responsible

for their own failure” (Butsch, 1992, p. 390). The implications of humor and its role in the family system are explored below.

The term domestic situational comedy implies that such programs will contain some form of humorous content. While this component has always been a part of the genre, Scharrer (2001) was the first researcher to examine this issue. A convenience sample of 136 episodes of 29 television programs from 1950 through 1999 were used to examine the portrayal of humor, which often functions as an expression of power relations. According to this view there are certain types of jokes that are only acceptable when one is in a position of influence; in contrast, when others tell such jokes they may face severe consequences. Using a coding scheme developed specifically for this study, the researcher was able to identify numerous differences between men and women. A content analysis revealed “that female characters on the programs—mothers, female family members (daughters, grandma, etc.), and female nonrelatives—do, indeed, tell more jokes at the expense of the father in later decades compared to earlier decades” (Scharrer, 2001, p. 31). Fathers were also more likely to be portrayed foolishly with each ensuing decade, with the exception of the 1970s. With these changes have come increasingly stereotypical portrayals of fatherhood on television, which may be linked to historical changes in the father role.

Summary

The previous sections provide a close examination of current research relevant to the study of fatherhood on television. In part one, attention was devoted to the evolving role of fathers in the United States. This included both the recreation of this role, along with men’s changing response to these obligations. Part two examined the relationship between television and culture. An attempt was also made to discuss some of the effects television viewing has on youth. Current research on the portrayal of family life on network television was examined in part three. Topics under discussion included gender stereotypes, historical changes in portrayals, family functioning and the father role. In the ensuing chapter a clear explanation of the proposed methodology is provided.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The present study examined the dimensions of fatherhood portrayed on network television during the fall 2004 season. An analysis of the messages that televised programming presents about the father's place within the family network, along with the effectiveness with which fictional characters fulfill the father role, is provided. The domestic situation comedy served as the subject of this examination. With a history of programming that encompasses over five decades, "the domestic situation comedy, or family sitcom, has a rich history of depicting and transmitting American families into viewer's homes" (Olson & Douglas, 1997, p. 409). The previous chapter detailed the lasting impact of such programs on the American psyche, a tradition that continues today with programs such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *The George Lopez Show*. Although a great deal of research has already been conducted on this topic, very little qualitative work has been done, an endeavor for which the case is made below.

A qualitative methodology was selected for this study. "Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). These objectives are consistent with the goal of the present endeavor—to describe the dimensions of the father role presented on current domestic sitcoms. In doing so the researcher sought to identify the deeper meanings embedded within each program and to note the similarities and differences that occur across programs. An inductive thematic analysis was used to accomplish these goals. This method is used to determine the deeper meanings inherent within the larger world through the identification of themes. "A theme is a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4). In the present study the researcher identified themes that emerged from a sample of current television programs.

Sampling

The current study focused upon the portrayal of one specific family construct: the two-parent family encompassing at least one child below the age of 18. These criteria are consistent with those previously applied in the work of Olson and Douglas (1997). Although this family construct is no longer considered typical in the United States, it remains the ideal for the vast majority of Americans, as noted in the work of Coontz (1997). The two-parent family also

remains the family type most commonly displayed on television, even after decades of social change (Robinson & Skill, 2001). Recognizing this fact, along with the important role that television plays in both shaping and reflecting societal standards (Signorelli & Morgan, 2001), the present study examined the dimensions of fatherhood presented on network television, as dramatized through the domestic situational comedy.

To be considered for selection in this study programs had to have met the following criteria: new episode (first run), airing during prime-time (7-10 p.m. EST), with a duration of 30 minutes, on one of the six major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, UPN and WB). Episodes that met these criteria were recorded over a one-month period during the fall 2004 season. Animated programs (e.g., *The Simpsons*) and period pieces (e. g., *American Dreams*) were not eligible for selection; a reflection of the divergent characteristics associated with these genres (Henry, 2003). In addition, the program had to feature a father figure, including both stepparents and foster parents, who played an active role in the story's plot. Single-parent households were eliminated for purposes of homogeneity. For this study the term "active" will be used in reference to instances where the father's relationship with his children (boys or girls) plays a central role in the story line, rather than a bit part. Through use of the *TV Guide* fall preview edition and an examination of network web sites, consistent with the work of Eaton (1998), the researcher was able to identify 13 programs that met these criteria. They are as follows: *According to Jim*, *All of Us*, *Bernie Mac*, *Center of the Universe*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *George Lopez*, *Grounded for Life*, *Listen Up*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, *My Wife and Kids*, *Quintuplets*, *Rodney*, and *Still Standing*. A total of four programs aired on ABC and CBS, three were shown on FOX, one appeared on both UPN and the WB, while no programs were aired on NBC. Each of the programs was rated in the top 100 for the week in which it was aired and most were in the top 50 (see Table 1). It is also worth noting that none of these programs have been studied before. In fact, little work has been done in this field over the past five years. The sampling criteria detailed above combines selection criteria from multiple studies, with the addition of one new twist: the study of all programs airing over the course of one week. A detailed explanation of the procedures that will be used to collect and analyze data follows.

Table 1

Nielsen Ratings for Sample Programs

Program	Network	Rank	Rating/ Share
<i>According to Jim</i>	ABC	38	6.6/ 10
<i>All of Us</i>	UPN	94	2.2/ 3
<i>Bernie Mac</i>	FOX	86	2.7/ 5
<i>Center of the Universe</i>	CBS	32	7.1/ 11
<i>Everybody Loves Raymond</i>	CBS	7	11.7/ 17
<i>George Lopez</i>	ABC	50	5.6/ 8
<i>Grounded for Life</i>	WB	94	2.2/ 4
<i>Listen Up</i>	CBS	32	7.1/ 10
<i>Malcolm in the Middle</i>	FOX	59	4.9/ 8
<i>My Wife and Kids</i>	ABC	48	5.8/ 9
<i>Quintuplets</i>	FOX	76	3.6/ 6
<i>Rodney</i>	ABC	44	5.9/ 9
<i>Still Standing</i>	CBS	29	7.2/ 11

Note: From Nielsen Nov 8-14, Nov 15-21, Nov 29-Dec 5 ratings, 2004, *Journal of Broadcasting & Cable*, 134.

Procedure

The following steps were taken in attempting to complete the study described above. First, a rigorous review of previous literature was undertaken, thus ensuring a solid basis of knowledge upon which to build the study. Reading included studies on the role of fathers, the impact of television and the content of domestic situational comedies, as described in Chapter Two of this report. This extant research informed the proposed study. As a part of this review the researcher studied U. S. Copyright Law in an attempt to ensure the legality of this study. Thankfully, the use of media materials for educational purposes is legal in conjunction with fair

use limitations on copyrights (U. S. Copyright Office, 2004). Having laid the foundation for this work, the focus shifted to the collection of data. In this instance undergraduate students in the field of family studies agreed to tape one episode in exchange for extra credit¹. Additionally, two students were assigned to tape each of the 13 programs in an attempt to safeguard against forgetfulness or error. Two problems occurred over the course of data collection. The program *Malcolm in the Middle* began late due to NFL football and the program *Bernie Mac* was not recorded due to technical difficulty. This left the researcher with a total of 12 programs. Once these programs were obtained, the researcher transferred each episode to DVD format, omitting all commercials. This was done to speed up the transfer of visual to textual data, a task that can be rather painstaking with the use of a VCR, as discovered in prior work. Upon making the transfer to DVD, attention shifted to transcription, the first component of data analysis.

Data Analysis

The term data analysis is used to describe “the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 111). Stage one of this process involved the transcription of the visual contents of television programs to textual format. First, the researcher viewed each program, making note of all instances that involve either the fulfillment or enactment of fatherhood. After this first viewing, programs were then be re-viewed in greater depth on multiple occasions, leading to the creation of a transcript that includes both verbal and nonverbal data for each program. Verbal data were recorded in a format that mirrors that of a dramatic script, while nonverbal data was documented through use of a coding system (see Table 2). All data was then transcribed to a word processing program (Microsoft Word), thus eliminating the need for any paper-pencil transcription. After transferring visual data into textual format each program was reviewed once again, correcting for any mistakes left uncorrected previously. Upon completion of this sequence for all 12 programs, attention shifted to the identification of themes.

A qualitative method known as inductive thematic analysis was selected for this study. The term inductive is used to describe a process by which the principles of organization emerge from the data itself (Patton, 1990). While previous scholarship in the field of fatherhood informs this study, existing research and theory did not limit data analysis. This study instead seeks to

¹ Students in two family studies undergraduate courses (FSW 160 and FSW 162) were asked to tape one program and write a reflection paper for extra credit.

Table 2

Nonverbal Abbreviations used in Transcription

Symbol	Meaning
LT	Laugh track
...	Pause
CAPS	Raised voices
()	Crowd response
[]	Character movements

offer new insights that build upon the foundation of previous research. From here the researcher identified key concepts embedded in the data, information that was used in the construction of typologies or themes. This process should not be confused with content analysis, a process that “involves establishing categories and then counting the number of instances when these categories are used in a particular item of text” (Silverman, 2001, p. 122). While useful, previous research in this area has placed an over reliance on this method, limiting the usefulness of current knowledge. What is needed is an in-depth examination of the topic, the justification for which is provided below.

In using the inductive method researchers are able to work more closely with the data, resulting in a deeper understanding of both latent and manifest content. For example, the application of this approach to Scharrer’s (2001) study of humor and power relations may shed light on the deeper meaning of jokes told between husbands and wives. Although a content analysis is able to obtain objective measures of humor, it fails to explain the significance of these jokes, as all humor is not created equal. Humor may be used in either a playful or a vindictive way, the meaning of which depends on the situation. Indeed, it is one thing to count the number of jokes that appear on a program and quite another to understand the underlying meaning of humor as situated within these programs. Another application of this approach comes in the study of African American and Latino families, particularly the “hidden” messages that

television sends about issues such as race, ethnicity and even gender (Cantor, 1990). Advantages of the inductive method include relative simplicity, consistency with the goals of qualitative research, applicability to numerous cultures and its usefulness to both qualitative and quantitative researchers. Consequently, the inductive approach “may provide crucial insights to scholars in their review of ‘what is known’ to guide their research strategy and design” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 6).

Data analysis for the present study was modeled after the work of Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman and Lund (2003). In this study, which examined images of couples and families presented on feature length Disney films, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted. Data analysis was broken down into five stages, with each stage then repeated on numerous occasions throughout the interpretation process (Miller & Crabtree, 1999). In the describing stage, the researcher reflects upon the current state of the study, its influence upon the interpretation process, and then makes decisions regarding the future direction of research. For the current study the describing stage served as a means of linking the work that has been done with remaining analysis. At the earliest stages of this analysis this process included all of the thoughts that come to mind after first viewing each program—the true beginning of data analysis. These preliminary findings then serve as a point of reference as the researcher begins working with the text and will continue to inform the process as coding becomes more and more complex. This first step, along with the entire research process often “requires long hours of immersion in information collection and even more hours in information processing and analysis before interpretation” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 8).

In stage two (organizing), the researcher began the process of arranging collected data in a meaningful way. For this study data obtained from the 12 television programs, including all instances where fatherhood is either enacted or discussed, was examined in an attempt to better understand the deeper meaning of these portrayals. Consistent with the Tanner et al. (2003) study, the proposed work utilized a technique known as the template style.

The *template* organizing style uses a template or code manual as the organizing system for entering the text and identifying units of interest for further analysis and interpretation . . . The organizing scheme is usually derived prior to entering the text and can come from multiple sources. These include the literature, self-analysis, research team

discussions, prior research, or the results of earlier analyses in the present study using other organizing styles (Miller & Crabtree, 1999, p. 135).

In this instance, the researcher applied Lamb's (1998) description of the father role to the images of fatherhood presented on television programs. This work lists six major roles for fathers: to provide financially, to offer support for the mother (emotional and instrumental), to teach, to provide care and to play (Lamb, 1998, p. 50). Although these six components provided a useful description of the fathering role, they only served as a starting place for the analytic process. It was expected that other themes, including that of disciplinarian, would be identified over the course of this study. Through remaining grounded in the data and taking time for reflection the researcher was able to identify additional themes over the course of this process.

The third stage is referred to as connecting, a process that involved the discovery of themes, noting connections between categories, developing models, and possibly generating new theory. In this stage a disorganized set of data was translated into a series of themes that present the research findings in a meaningful way. Emergent themes on fatherhood embedded in each program were also examined and compared to previous research, a hybrid technique known as the phased style (Miller & Crabtree, 1999). Over the course of this process the researcher sought to understand the messages that current television programs transmit about fatherhood. From there the researcher compared this model with that of previous research, looking for points of agreement and discord. Along the way new or neglected aspects of fatherhood were discovered, resulting in the development of new theory. The use of such an approach is recommended as it contributes to the reliability of the study, as does the use of a consistent, clearly defined coding technique (Boyatzis, 1998).

The connections identified in stage three were then reevaluated in the corroborating stage (stage four). This stage involved double checking research findings in an effort to ensure the study's reliability and validity

The corroborating/ legitimating phase consists of re-viewing the texts after initial or later analysis, seeking to corroborate the initial "truths" or perspectives voiced in the texts and by the analysts to confirm internal consistency of interpretation and to explore the relationship of the interpretations to the empirical world as experienced by all research participants (Miller & Crabtree, 1999, p. 136).

These aims were accomplished by returning to the data with the hope of controlling the influence of personal bias and eliminating errors. Following corroboration, the researcher repeated stages one through four until all data had been sufficiently analyzed. Analysis then concluded with representation, the sharing of one's results for the advancement of scientific knowledge. In this case the researcher composed research findings in proper thesis format and then presented these results to committee members.

Limitations

As with all scientific endeavors, the proposed study presents several limitations. First, the methods used for sample selection present few opportunities for generalizability. Only one week of programs were selected for this study and it is possible that these programs may prove unrepresentative of a typical week of programming. This study instead seeks to provide a glimpse of the messages that television transmits about fatherhood during one small window of time. Luborsky (1994) noted that themes change across time, an observation that is particularly true of fatherhood. "Successful fatherhood must surely be defined relative to the specific socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic and historical niches in which individual men and women together define their needs and roles, where in or out of enduring relationships" (Lamb, 1998, p. 50). The study is also limited by the technique used for sample selection, which did not include hour-long programs, dramas or animated programs. Generalization is not a stated goal of qualitative research, however, which seeks instead to provide an in-depth analysis of a novel situation. While this study will not provide a universal understanding of how fatherhood is portrayed on television, it will provide an in-depth analysis of how the father is shown at one distinct point in time, which is an important contribution. Indeed, it may be argued that no two situations are ever the same, leaving plenty of room for variation.

The use of inductive thematic analysis also presents several challenges to the researcher, as noted in the work of Boyatzis (1998). The first of these is projection, or the tendency to read one's own values and experiences into the coding process. "The challenge to the qualitative researcher is to use thematic analysis to draw the richness of the themes from raw information without reducing the insights to a trivial level for the sake of consistency of judgement" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 14). This was controlled for in three ways: creating a personal statement that discloses the researcher's personal biases (See Appendix), maintaining a close relationship with the text and through the use of the outside rater. In this last instance another researcher familiar

with the proposed study reexamined the codes in an attempt to verify the research findings. Individual characteristics, such as mood and style, represent another potential stumbling block. For example, a tired or frustrated researcher may be unable to objectively sift through the seas of data. Such issues are prevented through taking care of oneself, knowing when to stop coding and by following the guidelines detailed previously.

In conclusion, the previous sections have provided a detailed account of the methodology used in this study. Section one addressed the issue of sampling, providing specific criteria that would be used in the selection of television programs for this study. This was followed by a description of the procedure that may be used in this analysis. Following data collection attention shifts to data analysis. The current study applied an inductive thematic analysis, with the template style organization process. In addition, several limitation and ethical concerns were examined, with corresponding techniques for preventing such errors. Results of this process are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The present study examined the dimensions of the father role portrayed on network television during the fall 2004 season. A sample of 12 domestic situational comedies, with duration of 30 minutes each, was obtained from the six major networks over a one-month period. Programs were recorded onto videocassettes and then transferred to DVD format. From there the researcher conducted a thorough analysis of each program, transcribing all scenes where fatherhood was either demonstrated or else served as a topic for conversation. Both verbal and nonverbal behaviors were recorded during this process. An inductive thematic analysis was then conducted with the assistance of a template that incorporated Lamb's (1998) work on the father role. This template informed the development of themes regarding television fatherhood. Fathering occurred within the following five dimensions: breadwinner, household-based activities, interactions with the mother, interactions with the children and interactions with individuals outside the nuclear family network (see Figure 1). Several other themes emerged from the data regarding the representation of fatherhood on network television. An overview of each theme and the subthemes within these categories is provided below. This is followed by an exploration of racial and socioeconomic differences in fatherhood portrayals.

Breadwinner

As noted previously (Daly, 1996; Lamb, 1995), the breadwinner role remains a central component of the father role today. At the heart of this role is the father's desire to take care of his family. In this study fathers took care of their family by earning sufficient income, provide a safe environment, offering access to recreational opportunities and securing quality health insurance. Although many would consider the breadwinner role to be a primary component of fathering, it takes on a secondary role in the plot of current domestic situational comedies. In fact, the fathers presented on these programs spend little to no time at work, with work involvement appearing in only five of the 12 programs included in this study. If these programs are a representation of reality, one might conclude that real life fathers spend most of their time with the wife and kids. Realistically, fathers spend most of their waking hours away from family members (Hofferth, 2003). One must also consider the deeper meanings of the breadwinner role within the context of fictional families. Two themes emerge from this analysis:

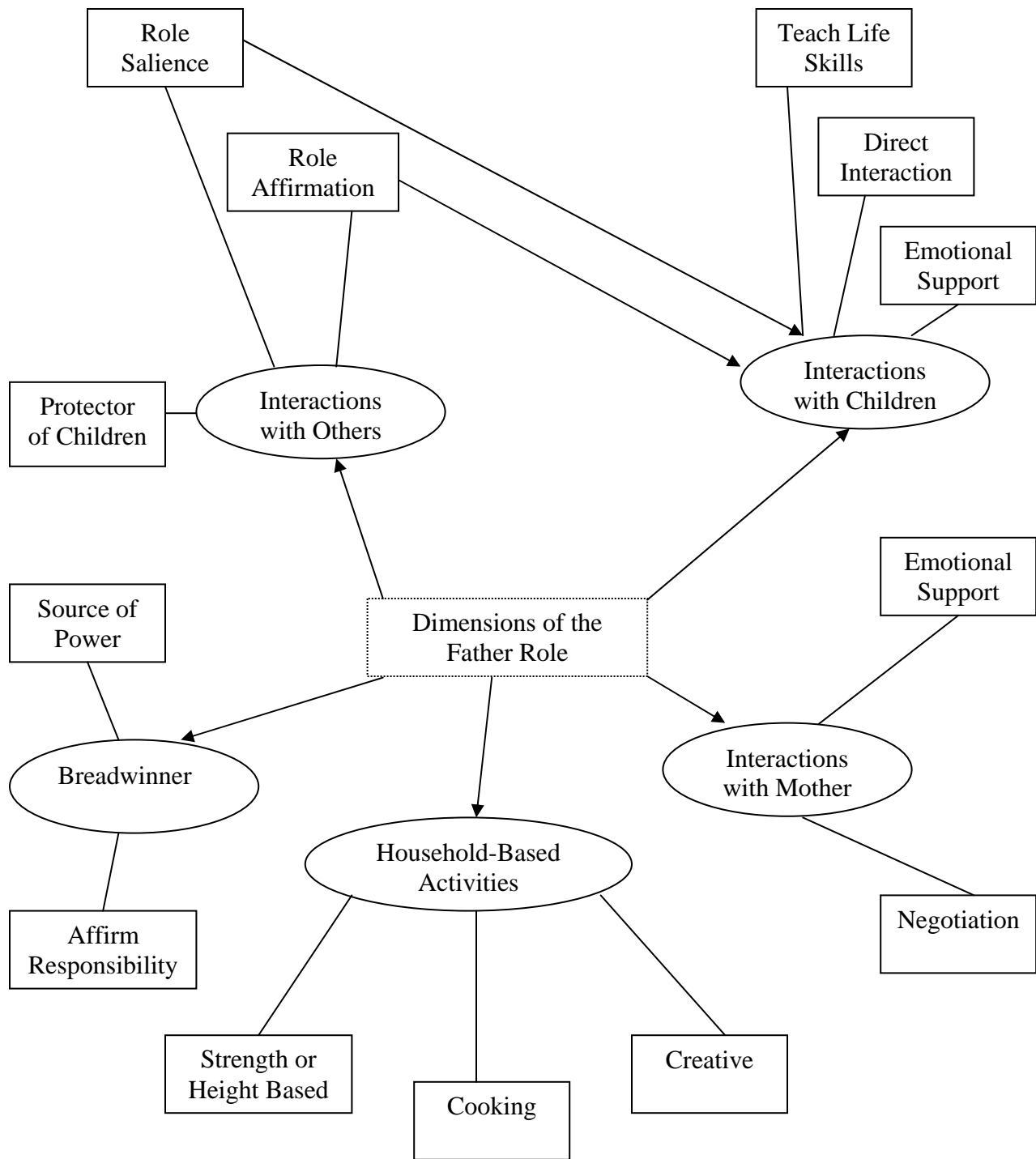


Figure 1. Dimensions of Television Fatherhood

provider role as an affirmation of paternal responsibility and breadwinning as an avenue for gaining influence.

Sense of Responsibility

In four programs the breadwinner role was used as a vehicle for demonstrating men's notion of paternal responsibility. This makes sense, given the large portion of time that fathers devote to earning an adequate income. For Sean Finnerty (*Grounded for Life*) the provider role takes on added significance due to the pregnancy of his wife. Severe nausea has limited Claudia's ability to work, while the bar that Sean co-owns (The Red Boot) is struggling to generate a profit. These concerns reach their breaking point when Sean receives an unexpected medical bill from Claudia's gynecologist.

Sean *[walks in holding the mail, closes door behind him, approaches Eddie]*
 Ed how come I keep getting delinquent notices from Claudia's doctor? I
 thought [sorting through mail] uhh our insurance at the bar covered her
 pregnancy.

Eddie *[stunned] That'd be great. (LT)*

Sean *[confused look] What do you mean "That'd be great"? [turns to face*
 Eddie] I thought you said we had a \$200,000 policy.

Eddie *No, that's the deductible. [continues reading newspaper] (LT)*

Sean *We need better insurance.*

Eddie *Well we can't afford it. The bar's not exactly hoppin'.*

In this situation Sean is placed in the difficult position of trying to keep his family financially afloat while at the same time striving to maintain a stable home for his Claudia and the children. In later scenes he elects to avoid discussing finances with his wife, presenting only subtle hints that something is wrong, while quietly exploring more profitable career options. This decision tests family loyalty, as the business is co-owned by his brother Eddie, similar to the case presented below.

As the owner of a small security firm, John Barnett (*Center of the Universe*) has the opportunity to provide a middle class lifestyle for his wife Kate and their son Miles. He is also in the position to help his brother Tommy, whose poor work habits make him nearly unemployable. These obligations come into conflict when John is forced to confront his brother upon learning of his affair with a major client.

John *I believed in ya. [stands, arms crossed] You wanted my respect, I give you*
 my respect. [frowns] And what did you give me? Lies.

Tommy *John you're missing the good parts here*

John [uncrosses arms] *Oh, I saw the good parts—she was standing in front of a lamp. (LT) {pans to Tommy, who looks up} [John gesturing] She’s a big client. What happens if this love affair blows up? What kind of damage could that do to my business? You know my business—it feeds my family and the families of 50 other people! [voice rising] Where’s the good part for them?*

From these comments one may gather that John’s first priority is to take care of his family and his employees. Although some might consider his disregard for Tommy’s feelings to be inconsiderate, his response comes within the context of a larger commitment to the nuclear family. It is this notion of family responsibility that motivates John’s workplace decision making, though in other instances the provider role may also serve as a vehicle for selfish intents, as noted below.

Source of Power

Four programs provide examples of how the breadwinner role can be used to achieve selfish ends. In *According to Jim* the lead character, played by Jim Belushi, appears to be emotionally needy. There are several instances where Jim attempts to force his oldest daughter Ruby into the role of emotional encourager. In one scene Jim goes upstairs to get his daughter for dinner, only to be rudely greeted by Ruby, who is talking to a friend on the phone.

Jim [walks over, takes phone, addresses Ashley] *Huh huh huh Goodbye Ashley. [turns phone off, addresses Ruby] You can’t talk to me like that! I’m your father, I’m not your Uncle Andy (LT)*

Ruby (scowling) *Well youu can’t just walk in here any time you feel like it!*

Jim *Since when?*

Ruby [walking over to Jim] *Since I said—this is my room!*

Jim *Well, thth this is my house (LT) and therefore all the rooms are mine [Ruby rolls eyes] And another thing—tomorrow you’re going to kiss me goodbye at school again*

Ruby *No I’m not*

Jim *Yes ye are*

Ruby *You’re not the boss of me.*

Jim *Inothe I certainly am the boss of you . . . I put food on the table. [motions with arms] I buy you those Justin Timberwolf albums (LT) [Ruby looks at Jim in disbelief, Jim continues, now pointing phone at Ruby] So you’re gonna listen to me young lady and your going to start loving me.*

Ruby *Hucchh [Walks out and shuts the door behind her] (LT)*

Jim *Hucchh [turns around, raises voice] I WAS GONNA BUY YOU A PONY, BUT NOT NOW (LT) . . . GOLDFISH FOR YOU YOUNG LADY!*

Note how Jim subtly reminds his daughter that he controls the family finances; implying that she must comply or he will stop buying her things. From these comments the message is conveyed that he is the boss because he earns the money to buy Ruby the things she wants; actions that display an incomplete understanding of the parental role. These comments continue when Ruby exits the room, leaving Jim to launch into a ridiculous tirade. In each case Jim views his access to the parental role is viewed as a product of his wage-earner status. Similar messages emerge when fathers attempt to use the children in a competition against the mother, a theme that will be explored in a later section.

In other instances the provider role may be used to prod youth towards parentally acceptable outcomes. An example of is found in the program *George Lopez*, when Max becomes involved with a gang-related fight at the mall. Upon retrieving Max from mall security, Mr. Lopez confronts his son in the backyard of the family home.

<i>George</i>	<i>[upset] All right, that's it! [leads Max over to garden hose] Here, stand right there! Cover your eyes [hoses Max]</i>
<i>Max</i>	<i>WHAT ARE YOU DOING?</i>
<i>George</i>	<i>[upset] Look, those kids are going to end up in prison. {pans to image of Angie, then back to George and Max} I know because I grew up with kids like that and I didn't work my ass off to let that happen to you! [Max looks angrily at George]</i>

Having grown up in poverty, George hopes to provide a better life for his children. In this particular scene he forcefully reminds Max of this intent, hosing him down with a water hose to emphasize the point. These actions are motivated by a desire to keep his son out trouble, recognizing that it is far too easy to head down the wrong path. Later on in this scene George and his wife Angie even consider moving to the suburbs, in an attempt to shield their offspring from harm. The coming segment explores the extent of father involvement with domestic chores.

Household-Based Activities

With the growing number of dual earner families has come a push toward heightened levels of father participation in domestic chores (Kimmel, 1996). While fathers were once only expected to complete such “manly” tasks as mowing the lawn and making minor repairs, a growing number of fathers have begun to take part in an ever broader array of tasks. These new “enlightened” expectations of fatherhood are mostly inconsistent with the images put forth by contemporary domestic sitcoms. Of the 12 programs reviewed in this study, a total of 10 acts of

home maintenance were recorded, with most instances situated within relatively few programs. The following example provides a summary of the overall message conveyed by the present sample. In the program *Still Standing*, Bill is asked to write a letter to his wife detailing his tasks around the house in the case that he or his wife Judy would pass away. While Judy spends an entire tear-soaked afternoon explaining her work, along with her feelings for her husband, Bill responds with a very blunt assessment of his role.

<i>Judy</i>	<i>Do you have nothing to say about the life we've shared together? We're just kinda, what hangin' out on this couch until one of us drops? [waves arm toward Bill]</i>
<i>Bill</i>	<i>[throws arms up in frustration] I didn't know I was supposed to write some big statement about our life. You just told me to write what I do. I do the shoveling when it snows, that's all I do. (LT) [puts hand on head]</i>
<i>Judy</i>	<i>[throws down notepad, stands up] You know what? I don't know which makes me sadder, this letter or the fact that that's all yuh do. (LT)</i>

This scene conveys the notion that Bill is lazy, a message that is confirmed in all the other programs. It is very common for wives to be busily scurrying about the house completing many tasks while the husband sits idly by and watches.

Further analysis reveals that father participation in household chores is confined to the following three categories: strength/ height based tasks, cooking and creative activities. In two programs the father engages in stereotypical male tasks—carrying heavy objects and getting materials down from high places. One encouraging finding came in the area of cooking, with the father preparing breakfast for the family, preparing dinner for the son and his friends and grilling out for family and friends. Fathers engaged in creative tasks on two programs. In the program *Malcolm in the Middle*, Hal erects a Pearl Harbor day exhibit in the family front yard with the help of his son Dewey.

<i>[Dewey seated at kitchen table writing, hears sound, gets up and walks outside to the front yard]</i>	
<i>[Hal standing outside admiring the Pearl Harbor Day decorations he has just finished]</i>	
<i>Dewey</i>	<i>Wow! [Pans around to display, which includes a fake ocean and aircraft carriers] [eyes widen, smiles] Dad, it's beautiful.</i>
<i>Hal</i>	<i>Well [throws up arms] I did what I could on my own.</i>
<i>Dewey</i>	<i>Yeah . . . sorry. [looks down] [Hal swats arm to indicate that it is ok, smiles, puts arm on Dewey's shoulder]</i>

Even though Dewey is unable to help complete the exhibit, Hal accepts his praise and later incorporates him in later escapades, providing an opportunity for father son bonding. Although

fictional father involvement has yet to extend to household chores, there are an abundance of cases where fathers, in conjunction with the mother, take part in the upbringing of children. The following section will examine the father-mother relationship and the role it plays in the overall parenting dynamic.

Interactions with the Mother

Interacting with the mother of one's children represents another important dimension of fatherhood. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine fathering without some form of interaction with the mother figure, as the mother-child relationship is central to children's upbringing. All of the programs in this study feature a mother and father figure, and all but one includes an intact family; *All of Us* involves a blended family. In studying the mother-father dynamic researchers must consider the intent of such interactions. Or, to put it more succinctly, how do mothers and fathers resolve the tasks of parenting? Previous efforts (Lamb, 1998) have noted that fathers provide emotional support to the mother figure. Actions within this domain include behaviors ranging from verbal encouragement to offering to take on a larger share of household tasks. This theme appears among fictional families as well, with emotional supportive behaviors found in the majority of programs. There also appears to be a great deal of dialogue between parents, an area that has been neglected in previous studies of the father role. Further discussion of these two themes is provided in the following sections.

Negotiation of Parental Duties

In many ways the parental role is the result of an ongoing and frequently fluctuating relationship between parents. It is this so-called negotiation of the parental role that represents a key component of fictionalized fatherhood. The term negotiation is used to describe the active resolution of parental dilemmas, whether the conflict is over who will take a child to school or how to resolve a disciplinary matter. Appearing in six programs, the ongoing parental dialogue takes many forms. There are some instances in which the father receives advice from the mother, other times when the mother seeks advice from the father, and still other episodes where both parties appear confused. In the program *According to Jim*, the father figure struggles to accept the maturation of his daughter Ruby. Of particular concern is the close emotional bond he has shared with his daughter, which now must be redefined to account for her newly asserted independence. Cheryl seeks to aid this transition, by providing advice and encouragement to the bewildered Jim. An example of this is found right after Jim has had a major disagreement with

Ruby at the dinner table. In a short dialogue the two parties attempt to explain their views on parenting.

Jim *Cheryl we have two different kinds of parenting styles, alright? I'm a busy man. I work all day. I don't have time to ride out a phase!*
 [gesturing with hands]

Cheryl *[approaches Jim] Baby, you need to just leave it alone*

Jim *I tried to, but you weren't there. She called me a dumb ass [gesturing]*

Cheryl *[look of disbelief] She what? (LT)*

Jim *Well, you know, with her eyes (LT)*

Cheryl *[turning from side to side] Look I . . . Jim. I know this isn't going to be easy, but really we just have to ride this out—give here some time*

Jim *Ohh yeah. Time right (LT). . . that's not going to work for me*
 [approaches Cheryl] I have a better idea [begins to walk past Cheryl]

Cheryl *[stops Jim] Hey hey honey, just for fun, you wanna run that plan by me real quick?*

Jim *Cheryl you're gonna to have to watch and learn [smiling] She wants to mess with me, hhhuh I can mess with her [leaves room]*

Cheryl *[clasps hands] Oh yeah yeah yeah, but just think about this one thing—Ruby makes a much better 9 year old than you do. (LT)*

Jim *We'll seeee. [returns to dining room]*

Cheryl *Ahh crap! [follows Jim]*

A close viewing of this episode reveals that Jim and Cheryl have differing notions of parental involvement. Interestingly, Cheryl urges the hands-off approach traditionally displayed in programs such as *Father Knows Best* (Lackman, 2003). Several times throughout the program she urges Jim to be patient, noting that is normal for children to test parental boundaries, asserting a storm and stress view of adolescence (Santrock, 2003). This contrasts with Jim's desire to win compliance in a quick manner. Note how his impatience, a product of the long hours spent in the workplace, results in a sense of urgency—"I don't have time to ride out a phase!" In other instances the roles can be reversed, as noted in the following example.

Traditionally, middle class television fathers have encouraged mothers to adopt a wait and see attitude in dealing with children. Instead of rushing off to resolve children's problems, the traditional TV father has urged parents to first give their children a chance to resolve the problem. Messages along those lines continue in a scene from the program *George Lopez*. The Lopez's adolescent son Max has had trouble making friends at his new school and is now constantly attracting the attention of bullies. The situation eventually deteriorates to point that Max is forced to run home from school each day. While both parents see this a serious problem,

each offers a very different solution. For Angie this involves actively seeking out friends for Max, in this case the son of one of her clients at work, views that contradict George's views.

Angie [at screen door, turns around] *Why didn't I think of this earlier—Deanna's son Kyle goes to the same school as Max. [voice deepens] They should get to know each other! [tilts body] MAX, GET DOWN HERE!*

George *No Angie, kids don't make friends by having their Mommies set em up on blind dates! [Angie throws arm out, looks away] Look, a kid trips in the cafeteria. [gesturing] You laugh so hard that milk comes out of your nose. [smiling] The kid next to you's laughing so hard that he accidentally farts—[squats down] vrrppp. Boom, friends for life! (LT)*

George's comments suggest that friendship cannot be forced upon children, but rather must occur naturally through shared interests. In the following example a disagreement over in-laws provides becomes a means for parental dialogue.

As with real life families, there are times when fictional parents disagree about the right course of action. This may lead to arguing, as noted in a scene from the program *Rodney*, where Rodney and Trina discuss whether or not Jack and Bo should spend time with their grandmother.

Jack [boys come down stairs] *Ok, we're ready*

Rodney *No, you're not. [to Trina] My boys are not goin' over there.*

Trina *Well, mine are*

Rodney *NO THEY'RE NOT!*

Trina *YES THEY ARE*

Rodney *NO THEY'RE NOT*

Trina *YES THEY ARE [Jack and Bo look back and forth with concern]*

Bo *Are you guys getting a divorce like Patsy?*

Rodney *It's not Patsy, it's Grandma. Divorce like Grandma. (LT)*

Trina *No, nobody is getting a divorced. [pointing toward laundry room] Now go get your pool toys out of the bag beside the dryer.*

Rodney *Well, you see they already think we're getting a divorce.*

Trina *Well, we can't, because you won't let me. (LT) All right boys, come on. I want to get to the pool before the truck stop sign starts blockin' the sun. (LT)*

Rodney [throws arms up] *Fine then, take the kids, scar em for life*

From this scene it becomes clear that Rodney and Trina disagree over the role that extended family members play in family life. Rodney worries that Patsy's undisciplined lifestyle will rub off on the children, while Trina believes it is important for children to have contact with grandparents regardless of their current state. Through dialogue these values come into conflict, providing a glimpse into some of the deeper concerns that motivate parental actions. Although

the children eventually do visit Patsy, Rodney expresses his concerns. The ensuing segment provides an exploration of how fathers are supportive and unsupportive of the mother figure.

Emotional Support

Supportive. Affiliative behaviors emerged as a central dynamic of the mother-father relationship. The diversity of these interactions went well beyond previous reports (Lamb, 1998). Matters of emotional support between the husband and wife appeared in a total of eight programs, with seven episodes featuring emotionally supportive behaviors. The term emotional support is used to describe those behaviors that extend beyond tangible assistance. An example of this form of behavior may be found in the program *All of Us*. The plot centers upon a family trip to see a Los Angeles Lakers game. While at the game, Bobby gets lost searching for a cookie salesman. The rest of the show focuses upon Robert (father), Neesee (mother) and Tia's (Robert's girlfriend) attempts to locate the boy. After searching the stadium and coming up empty-handed, Neesee and Robert come back together to exchange information and make further plans.

[Neesee and Robert pacing around in the lobby]

Neesee *[pacing, let hand gesturing] Where is my son? {pans to Robert} Ihh'm startin' to git scared Robert!*

Robert *[walks over to Neesee] Ahh come on Neesee calm down. It's all right. All right? Bobby is gonna be fine. Now let me handle this from here, ok?*

Neesee *Ok. Fine Robert, I'll completely put it in your hands [runs over to security official] (LT) Hey, heh, hey here. What's takin' so long findin' my baby?*

In this case Neesee appears emotionally disturbed, whereas Robert remains calm and in control of the situation. Although Robert attempts to take on the burden of finding their lost son, these attempts are thwarted when Neesee spots the security guard and begins to badger him. Once again, Robert comes to her defense, verbally sparring with the official. In other cases fathers communicate their love through unconventional means, as noted in the example provided below.

Throughout the program *Still Standing* Bill struggles to convey his love for Judy and their two children. It is only in the final scene that Bill's true feelings are fully expressed. Several times in the program Judy has complained that the food processor is too high, asking Bill to come get it down for her. In response, Bill using his carpentry skills to fashion a stool for his wife.

Bill *Because . . . because. [points to stool] Look, do you want the stool or not? [begins to read magazine]*
Judy *I love the stool, I just wish it could tell me what it's feeling. (LT)*
Bill *[looks away] Uhh damn it Judy, I don't even wanna think about it because, you know. Because this [motions around room] ya know is everything and if your not here or ya know [circles hand] I'm not here. [points at stool, resumes reading] Anyway, I made this. (LT)*
Judy *[looks at stool, touches heart] For me?*
Bill *Yeah*
Judy *You made it cause you want to take care of me, even after your*
Bill *[interrupts] Yeah yeah yeah that. (LT) [puts down magazine]*
Judy *[grabs Bill's shoulder, leans on him, low tone] Thank you*

Although Judy initially misinterprets the motivation behind this gift, believing that the stool is just another attempt by Bill to avoid household chores, she eventually sees the larger meaning. In giving the stool Bill sends the message that he wants to take care of his wife, even in the instance that he is no longer alive. Fathering can also translate into emotionally unsupportive behaviors, as illustrated in the following section.

Unsupportive. Emotionally unsupportive behaviors were identified in a total of six programs. To be unsupportive a father's actions must intentionally or unintentionally cause emotional pain to one's partner. Emotional suffering can be inflicted through such acts as criticism, name calling or blaming another individual. Another mark of unsupportive behavior is the lack of empathy, as noted in the following example from *Still Standing*. Bill and Judy Miller are the parents of two adolescent youth (Brian and Lauren), with whom they live in a Chicago suburb. When Bill reveals that he is suffering from sore ribs, Judy brings him along on her visit to the doctor, where it is revealed that Judy has high blood pressure. Thoughts of mortality compel Judy to take an afternoon to compose a letter explaining both her parental duties and continued affection for Bill. Nearing tears, Judy presents the letter to Bill upon his return from work.

Judy *[licks lips, frowns] Thanks um, but I was talking about if I, yuh know [waves hand], God forbid, went first and it was buggin' me all morning. So, I came back right after lunch, and uh [low tone] wrote you this. [lays envelope in front of Bill]*
Bill *[examines letter, begins reading] My darling Bill, what is it?*
Judy *Well, in case something should happen to me I wanted you ta know, ya know, everything about the kids, the house, where we keep the important papers. [clasps hands] And then, as I was writing I started to think about our life together and I had so much that I wanted to tell you [Bill looks*

shocked], if God forbid [Bill expressionless] (LT). Well, it's all in here. (LT) [points to letter]

Bill [folds letter, gets up] Thanks. Good stuff. (LT)

Judy Bill [Bill turns around]

Bill Uhuh

Judy Well . . . don't you wanna . . . say . . . anything ta me about writing that letter?

Bill [walks over, pats Judy on shoulder] Nice job. [turns and walks away]

Judy I was ah kinda hopin' that you would uh write me a letter back.

Bill [points toward wrist] Eww eww eww eww

Judy [upset] Your not wearing a watch, ok! (LT) Come on, this is important to me!

Bill [walks over to table] Ok, ok! I'll I'll give it a shot [picks up notepad and pen, walks into living room]

Judy Thanks [smiles]

From the opening line of this scene it becomes apparent that Judy views this as a very serious situation. By the end of the second sentence her voice begins to crack up and she nearly breaks out in tears. Bill's response demonstrates a lack of sensitivity—his wife is struggling with her mortality and instead of consoling her, he is eager to retreat into the living room. While Judy's pleadings eventually compel him to write his own letter, which eventually proves insufficient, his impatience signifies an unwillingness to deal with emotional content. The ensuing example illustrates how emotional unsupportiveness extends to father-mother parental dialogue.

In other situations television fathers respond critically to something the mother has done. An example of this is found in the program *According to Jim* after Ruby refuses to kiss Jim before school. Later that day Jim rushes home from work and confronts Cheryl in the following scene.

Cheryl Hey honey, how was work? [puts brownies in sink]

Jim My work was fine, it's your work that I'm worried about (LT) [Andy enters] What did you do to Ruby?

Cheryl What are you talking about [backs against counter]

Jim Uhh she's moody, she's surly and her attitude stinks!

Cheryl Oh I didn't do anything [smiles and walks past Jim]

Jim Well I'm not the bad parent, because I'm never around here. (LT) [Cheryl rolls eyes] She would not kiss me goodbye today at school!

From this scene it becomes apparent that Jim views parenting as the mother's responsibility. Following this logic, Ruby's sudden refusal to kiss Jim is a reflection of Cheryl's incompetence as a parent, refusing to consider other possible alternatives. Jim further links these comments

with the fact that he spends relatively little time with his family, implying that family matters are not his responsibility. While the motivation behind Jim's actions are relatively clear, other situations offer mixed messages about father's emotional competence, as noted below.

Mixed Meanings. It has often been said that the best laid plans of mice and men are often doomed to failure. The same is true of some father's attempts to provide affirmation to their wives. The program *Grounded for Life* provides an excellent example of this dilemma at work. In this scene Claudia reveals that she has lost her job at a Chinese restaurant due to the severe nausea associated with her pregnancy.

Claudia *I'm sorry babe, I know we could use the extra money. [takes seat] But, at least the bar is doing all right, isn't it? [Sean takes seat across from Claudia]*

Sean *[understanding tone] Awww, yeah! The bar is doin' great. (LT) Yeah, yeah, yeah don't worry about it. You know all you need to worry about is relaxing and taking care of the baby.*

Claudia *Ohh, you're sweet. But, just in case, I got some other job leads.*

Sean *[excited, voice takes on sense of urgency] That's great. [picks up phone and hands to Claudia] You wanna call them now? (LT) Maybe in a hour or two, tomorrow morning is fine. Yep, you can call them tomorrow morning. [stands up, walks toward stairs, Claudia smiles] NO ONE GET ON THE PHONE BETWEEN NOW AND TOMORROW MORNING! YOUR MOM HAS SOME VERY IMPORTANT CALLS TA MAKE. (LT) [turns around] Hey baby—mmhh [blows kiss]. Just rest, for the baby. (LT) [Sean exits] [Claudia smiles, looks down]*

At the beginning of this sequence one may get the feeling that Sean is a caring father and husband who is willing to take on additional financial burdens associated with his wife's pregnancy. By the end of the scene the tone changes, taking on a sense of urgency once Sean discovers that his wife has job prospects. These actions are motivated by the struggles of Sean's business. So, while a quick reading of the text may send the message that Sean is worried about the well being of his wife and child, deeper reflection reveals the insincerity behind this message. What he is really saying to Claudia is that she needs to get a job, and fast. This scene is useful in attempting to understand the continued complexity of husband-wife relations. Similar difficulties may arise in communication, an area that will be addressed below.

As in real life, there are some occasions when fictional fathers unknowingly say the wrong thing. A classic example of this is found in *Rodney* during Rodney and Trina's discussion of Patsy's (Rodney's mother) latest divorce. At first Rodney's comments seem to be headed in a

positive direction, as he affirms that he has no intention of ever divorcing Trina. Rodney's mistake occurs further into the conversation, when Rodney attempts to construct an analogy capturing his wife's faithfulness.

Rodney *[puts down magazine] Look, I'm just sayin' I know you'd never do that. [leans toward Trina] That's what I love most about you—you're steady and predictable and . . . you'd never do anything I wouldn't expect you to.*

Trina *[frowning, looking away] Whoa, baby slow down. You're getting me all sexed up here. (LT)*

Rodney *[laughs] Oh come on, you know I meant that in a good way. Most husbands come home, they got know idea what they're coming home to. I don't have that. I come home, there's no surprises. You're like a comfortable old chair. [nods, smiles] (LT, sighs)*

Trina *[frowning] An old chair?*

Rodney *[looks into Trina's eyes] I love chairs, I'm a chair man.*

Trina *[no-nonsense tone] You keep it up and you're going to be a couch man. (LT)*

From this scene we see how a husband's good intentions can result in negative consequences. Although Rodney is trying to build up his wife, his poor use of language has a negative impact upon Trina's self-image, though they are later able to joke about the incident. Interactions often take on multiple meanings, with interpretations that can vary greatly from one individual to the next. The focal point of these interactions, children, are examined through the lens of the father role below.

Interactions with the Children

Interacting with one's children represents an essential component of contemporary fatherhood. With the current push towards a more involved fatherhood (Kimmel, 1996), today's fathers are taking a more active role in the lives of their children. Fathers spend time with their children in a variety of ways, with involvement ranging from teaching, to emotional support, and even play. Within most of these interactions the father reaffirms their commitment through engaging in activity that shows interest in offspring and their activities. In other cases fathers are unsupportive of their children, acting in ways that alienate themselves and result in a loss of respect. The tensions between these competing messages will be examined in the following section. Among the sample of television families, interactions with children occurred on 10 programs, with family units ranging in size from 1-5 children. Three major themes were identified: direct interactions, emotional support and the teaching of life skills. A discussion of these themes and various subthemes is provided.

Direct Interactions

Among the most easily recognized forms of father involvement are instances where the father engages directly with the children. This form of behavior is illustrated in an episode of the program *Rodney*. Throughout this program the viewer sees Rodney struggling to gain the attention of his two sons. At the beginning of one scene Rodney is hurriedly rushing around the kitchen trying to cover up the train set he has just purchased for his two sons. He makes the final touchups just as Trina and the boys walk in. Excitedly, he calls his sons into the kitchen, resulting in the following exchange.

<i>Jack</i>	<i>What's under there?</i>
<i>Rodney</i>	<i>[leaning on table] Boys, as you grow older you're going to find that you have special childhood memories that stand out from all the rest. I want you to prepare yourselves, because this is gonna to be one of 'em! [pulls away table cloth, revealing train set]</i>
<i>Bo</i>	<i>Cookies! [grabs cookie, smiling] (LT)</i>
<i>Jack</i>	<i>[takes cookie, smiles] Thanks dad.</i>
<i>Rodney</i>	<i>No no no, look it's a train set.</i>
<i>Jack</i>	<i>Aren't you a little old? (LT)</i>
<i>Rodney</i>	<i>It's for you guys. [sits down at table]</i>
<i>Bo</i>	<i>What does it do?</i>
<i>Rodney</i>	<i>It goes forwards (LT) [starts train]</i>
<i>Bo</i>	<i>What else does it do?</i>
<i>Rodney</i>	<i>It goes backwards (LT) [reverses train] [Rodney smiles]</i>

In attempting to understand this scene one must go beyond the lukewarm responses of Jack and Bo in search of Rodney's motivation for giving this gift. We see how Rodney sets this moment up as a special time, likely remembering when he first received a train set as a boy. Later on in the program, as Rodney is shown on the floor trying to get his sons interested in the toy, it becomes clear that he also views this gift as an opportunity to connect with his sons. Although the idea does not work out as originally planned, the message is sent that Rodney truly cares about his sons and wants to spend time with them.

A second example of direct interaction between television fathers and their children was found in the program *All of Us*. After spending much of the program frantically searching for their son, Robert and his ex-wife Neesee are finally reunited with Bobby, who had unknowingly joined another child's birthday party. Note Robert's actions in the following scene:

<i>Neesee</i>	<i>Ohh Bobby! You scared us to death! Sweetie I love you so much! Where were you?</i>
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Bobby [smiling] I was at this party. Mercury Mel was there. [Neesee looks up and sighs] I had cake, ice cream, cookies—I even hit a pinata! I love basketball! [smiles] (LT)

Robert Well, I'm glad you enjoyed yourself, because ye goin' to be going to another game until yer 18 years old. (LT) Since wee here you still want to know what traveling is?

[Bobby smiles, Robert picks him up and they walk to the front of the sky box]

In the scene we see a mix of tough discipline, with Robert threatening never to take his son to another basketball game, and nurturing. Despite his disappointment with Bobby's behavior, Robert lovingly attends to his son, quickly seeking out one-on-one time with his son. The emotional bond between fathers and their offspring is explored in the following section.

Emotional Support

Supportive. An interesting finding occurred in the analysis of conversations between fathers and their children. Whereas traditional stereotypes would suggest that so-called “real” fathers do not deal with feelings, a large number of televised interactions were laden with emotional content, paralleling father-mother interactions. Indeed, fathers displayed positive affect in a total of eight programs, with most containing multiple instances of supportive behavior. An illustration of this point may be found in the program *George Lopez*. The Lopez's middle school aged son Max has struggled to build friendships and is victimized by bullies. Angie responds by attempting to set up a play date between Max and one of his classmates. These efforts fail miserably, leading George to take his son to the Skateboard Park, where Max can enjoy his favorite activity in the company of others with similar interests.

[image of Skateboard Park]
[Max walks in carrying skateboard, followed by George and Ernie]
[note how dirty the skatepark is—trash is everywhere]

Max [grunting tone] Dad, do I have to do this?

George [gesturing toward skaters] Come on. You love skating Max. Now get on out there. [points toward skaters] You might make some friends.

Max This is stupid. [drops board, skates off]

George's comments in this exchange provide an illustration of how fathers can help assuage children's anxieties without suffocating their initiative. Whereas Angie attempts to act as a buffer between Max and the outside world (see “Parental Negotiation”), George's actions reflect the belief that part of parenting involves knowing when to get out of the way.

Similarly, television fathers may provide emotional support during difficult circumstances, including the provision of encouragement. This point is illustrated in *My Wife and Kids* when Junior seeks out his father's advice. It seems that Junior is struggling to get his girlfriend alone long enough to propose to her, leaving him visibly frustrated. In response, Michael recites a line from the song he is rehearsing for karaoke night, resulting in the following exchange.

<i>Junior</i>	<i>[rushes in] Dad, I need to talk to you about Vanessa. It seems like every time I try to talk to her I keep on getting interrupted [gestures in frustration] and all I need to do is get her to focus for five minutes [Michael expressionless], but it seems like everyone in this house is conspiring to keep me from doin' that. And I'm really depressed Dad and I just need some good advice.</i>
<i>Michael</i>	<i>Ok, let me say it like this. [puts arm on Junior's shoulder] Ain't no sunshine when she's gone. (LT) There's only darkness every day. Ain't no sunshine when she's gone. [Junior looks like he's ready to cry] (LT) And this house [removes arm] it ain't no home (LT) any time she goes away. (LT) [Michael turns away]</i>
<i>Junior</i>	<i>[crying, walks away, swinging arms] I know I know I know I know I know I know I know I know.</i>

Although humorous, Michael's comments provide much needed encouragement to Junior. Later on in the episode he gathers enough to propose to Vanessa and she joyously accepts. On other occasions, fathers behave in a manner that is detrimental to their children's emotional welfare, a subject addressed in the coming section.

Unsupportive. Interactions between fathers and children may descend into emotionally unsupportive lines of behavior. In this study situations were recorded that included a general sense of disinterest on the part of fathers, teasing and even manipulation. These messages add complexity to the emotional component of fathering. There is clearly no one set model of how fathers handle their children's feelings. In fact, several different forms of behavior may occur within the same episode. The program *Still Standing* provides a useful example of emotionally unsupportive behavior at work. While Bill is struggling to compose what, if anything, he does as a father, Linda's fiancé Barry and his son Brian begin discussing the art of song writing.

<i>Brian</i>	<i>[holding drink] Yuh know, I'm a song writer too [points to himself], so you're preaching to the choir.</i>
<i>Barry</i>	<i>[opening drink] Oh yeah? What sort of stuff do you write?</i>
<i>Brian</i>	<i>Musicals mostly.</i>
<i>Bill</i>	<i>Here we go. [looks down] (LT)</i>

Brian *[glances at Bill]* Anyway, I'm really inspired by Song Time.

As noted in Bill's response, he does not approve of his son's interest in writing musicals, which he views as boring. In not supporting his Brian's talents, Bill sends the message that he does not value the relationship he has with his son. The next example illustrates the importance of understanding and valuing children's feelings.

In other instances television fathers behave in a manner that embarrasses their children. An example of this is found in the program *According to Jim*, when Jim eagerly informs his daughter Ruby about the father-daughter dance that is coming up at her school. As his oldest daughter, Ruby has a special place in his heart, as noted by his eagerness to spend time with her. Unable to contain his excitement, Jim breaks out into a dance move that Ruby would rather not see in public.

Jim *Come on baby lets go [Ruby exits truck] Hey you see that sign there?
[motioning to sign that says "Third Grade Father-Daughter Dance"]
Father-daughter dance Saturday night—are you ready to buggee [mock
dancing] and partee, with your daddee? (LT)*
Ruby *Could you please not do that [eyes searching around]*

Such behaviors are similar to the mixed messages discussed in mother-father relations. While Jim's intent is to enjoy this moment with his daughter, he winds up behaving in a way that makes her angry. In a sense he is inconsiderate in not considering how his actions will look to his daughter's peers. Ruby expresses her displeasure by refusing to kiss her father, actions that create a rift between father and daughter that the rest of the program attempts to unravel.

Manipulation. Another theme to emerge was one of manipulation, as fathers used varying forms of coercive action to achieve a desired goal. In five programs the fathers act in a way that involves taking advantage of their children. These same messages are transmitted in the program *Listen Up*, where Tony Kleinman (the father) attempts to win a competition with his wife over who can provide the better gift for Tony's father Max. Tony eventually reaches an agreement with Sal (the head of the "All Weather Network") to make an appearance on the set. In exchange, he agrees to provide his son as a male escort to Sal's daughter's school dance. From there Tony persuades Mickey to agree to the date, noting the many contributions made by the men of his grandfather's generation.

Mickey *You wanted to see me Dad? [looks confused]*
 Tony *[stands up, puts arms around Mickey's back] Hey, there's my pal. Heir to the throne. [laughs, leads Mickey over to the table] Come on Mick, sit down right here. [points, begins to pace] Huhh Mickey uhh, have you and I ever talked about uhhm the Greatest Generation? [picks up pie and milk from counter, begins to walk over]*

Mickey *Who? (LT)*
 Tony *[holding pie and milk, walks back over to table] Those brave men [lays down food], some of them not much older than you, [walks behind Mickey, places hands on Mickey's shoulders] fought for this country during World War II. True, when they came back, they gave us McCarthyism, Vietnam and Watergate [takes hands off Mickey, begins to pace again], but (LT) [places hands on chin] when they were storming the beaches they embodied the great principles on which this country was founded [arms extended]: bravery [pounds fist], sacrifice [spreads arms] and family [points to Mickey]. [Mickey still seated, expressionless] (LT) Your grandfather was a member of that generation.*

Mickey *I didn't know Grandpa was in the Army.*
 Tony *He wasn't, he had flat feet. (LT) [Tony sits down, points at Mickey] But he sold ladies hats, so that our soldiers would have something pretty and festive to come home to. (LT)*

Mickey *[nods head] I guess that's doin' your part.*
 Tony *Ohh, indeed it is. And don't you think it would be a great thing if we, and to be a tad more specific, [gestures toward Mickey] you (LT) could honor those great heroes like your grandfather by making . . . similar sacrifices? (LT) [crosses hands]*

Mickey *[leans forward] You want me to storm a beach? (LT)*
 Tony *In a sense [pushes pie over to Mickey, motions for him to eat it]*

These efforts at persuasion are compounded by the fact that Sal's daughter is highly unattractive, thus transmitting the message that women are only to be valued for their beauty. On other occasions fathers are able to persuade their children to act as maids and butlers, as illustrated in the following example.

On the program *Still Standing* Bill is forced out of action for a few days when he injures a rib at work. He eagerly takes advantage of the situation, having his teenage children Brian and Lauren run errands for him. In the following scene Bill is sitting on the couch talking about how great it is to be ill, when Brian returns with the food he has requested.

[Brian enters carrying a bag]
 Brian *And here's your fresh garden salad.*
 Bill *What? [jumps up]*
 Brian *Oh look, he can move. Here's your burger. [drops bag on table next to Bill] (LT)*

Bill *Thank you son. [lays back down] [Brian leaves room] [opens bag] I'll be napping later, come down in an hour and turn me. (LT) [Brian climbing stairs, looks over his shoulder at Bill]*

Although every indication seems to suggest that Bill has now fully recovered from his illness, as he jumps up from the couch without pain, he continues to manipulate his children into completing nominal tasks. Note that in the last line of this segment he requests that his son come and turn him during his nap, actions befitting the king of the household, which obviously perceives himself to be. On other occasions fathers teach their offspring valuable lessons, as noted in the coming section.

Teaching Life Skills

Over the course of childrearing there are numerous opportunities for fathers to impart life lessons to their offspring. These include everything from teaching a child how to ride a bicycle to passing down one's religious beliefs. Among the television programs selected for this study there are numerous examples of how fathers teach their children to live. Appearing in seven programs, television fathers fill a capacity that has long been a part of the father role (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). In the program *Listen Up* Tony is faced with a teachable moment when his daughter Megan changes the family answering machine message without adding the names of other household residents.

Megan *[walking down stairs] Oh Dad, don't answer it!*
Tony *[turns to look at phone, then turns to face Megan] Why not?*
Megan *[smiling] I recorded a new answering machine message and I want to hear how I sound.*
Tony *But what if it's somebody important?*
Megan *[hand out] Shhh! . . . [shifting back and forth from hips]*
Machine *[in Megan's voice] Hi, this is Megan. I'm not home right now but I sure would love . . .*
Megan *[turns to face Tony, talking over message] Ewww! I sound like a chipmunk. [turns to Tony] I don't really sound like that, do I?*
Tony *[hand gesturing toward machine] Who are you asking? According to the machine, you're the only person that lives here. [Megan frowns, exits room] (LT)*

The final sentence represents the crux of the message—Megan must consider how her actions will impact the rest of the family. By changing the answering machine message without considering the needs of others, Megan's actions reflect what is referred to by adolescent researchers as the looking glass self (Santrock, 2003). Additionally, her desire to hear the

message almost results in a missed phone call from Tony's father. On other occasions television fathers may attempt to prepare their children for life outside the family home, as illustrated in the following segment.

On the program *George Lopez* the family is forced to confront Max's problems with bullying at school. The Lopez's respond in opposing fashion, as demonstrated in the following example.

- Angie* [pulls out chair for Max, loving tone] Honey, I know it's tougher in middle school [pulls out chair, takes seat], but just try to think of it this way—bullies are just friends who just don't realize how special you are yet. [touches Max's face] (LT)
- George* [rolls head, looking from side to side, looks at Angie] What kind of crap are you teaching him? [Angie looks up at George] (LT) No wonder kids of all races are coming together to [standing over Max, holds arms over his head] beat up on Max. Wipe the makeup off. [Max gets up, George walks toward door]

As a mother, Angie finds it hard to imagine that other boys would want to pick on her adorable son. She attempts to assuage his battered ego, by suggesting that other boys just don't understand how special her son really is. While sharing Angie's perception, George understands that we live in tough and often violent world. By making his son wipe off the makeup and stand up for himself he hopes to instill a sense of rugged masculinity. These attitudes are taught with the hope that Max will one day be able to stand up for himself. The following section will address the ways in which television father's interactions with others outside the family network shape the viewers perception of their parental aptitude.

Interactions with Individuals Outside of the Nuclear Family

Contrary to popular belief, the household is but one of the many contexts in which the father role is performed. Fatherhood is often intermingled with a whole host of external obligations: brother, friend, neighbor, employee, husband, son, etc. In that sense, much of fatherhood involves effectively working through other activities that compete for one's time and interest. This process is often confusing, as the practice of fathering varies greatly between individuals. "As the norms associated with different forms of fatherhood have grown more diffuse, individuals have experienced greater leeway in constructing their own normative realities without relying on preexisting templates" (Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000, p. 78). Some would even say that contemporary males have greater latitude with which to construct the

everyday practice of fatherhood than previous generations (Kimmel, 1996). This is in part a reflection of the ambiguity associated with the father role (Burr, 1973). The same holds true for the paternal representations included in this study. All episodes included in this study involved some sort of fathering based interaction with individuals outside the nuclear family. In the case of television fathers, several themes emerge as fathers deal with overlapping roles: role salience, affirmation of the parental role and the protection of children.

Role Salience

Limited resources and competing desires often place contemporary fathers in no-win situations. In the business world, efforts to move up the corporate ladder are often predicated on spending ever-increasing amounts of time away from family members. Although men can try to obtain the “good life” that comes with success in multiple domains, far too many face failure in the area that matters most—their relationship with their wife and children. It is this negotiation of priorities (role salience) that represents one of the key obstacles to truly involved fatherhood (Bruce & Fox, 1999; Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1993; Stone & McKenry, 1998). For television fathers these struggles are epitomized by a scene from the program *Quintuplets*. This program is based upon a family with adolescent quintuplets who are struggling to negotiate the demands of high school. The parents, Bob and Carol, do their best to manage the chaotic lives of offspring with a very diverse set of interests. Of particular concern is Pearce, the son who seems more concerned with finding creative ways to not do his homework than actually learning. In a stroke of fatherly inspiration, Bob agrees to help his son write a paper on *The Scarlet Letter*, later revealing the struggles of his high school years in an attempt to provide inspiration.

<i>Bob</i>	<i>Look, I'm gonna level with yah. [holds arms out, gesturing] One of my biggest regrets is that I never got anything higher than a C in high school and to this day people still make fun of me for it, and by people, I mean your mother [frowns]. (LT)</i>
<i>Pearce</i>	<i>[slants head] Really?</i>
<i>Bob</i>	<i>Yeah, she thinks that I'm not smart enough ta tutor yah [throws arms up, takes on a whining tone] just because my old college is now an Indian casino. (LT)</i>
<i>Pearce</i>	<i>Well, you're just gonna have to prove her wrong!</i>
<i>Bob</i>	<i>[smiling] So you're gonna write the paper? [looks at Bob]</i>
<i>Pearce</i>	<i>Oh no [points to Bob] You are! (LT)</i>
<i>Bob</i>	<i>[points to himself] Me? But that would be cheating and and really really hard. (LT)</i>

Pearce *Come on [circling hands] You write the paper, we'll put my name on it, you get to prove to Mom that you're a good tutor and prove to yourself that you can get higher than a C. (LT)*

Bob *[Nods head, points at Pearce] You're right! I'll do it [sits down on bed] I mean I read the book. I'm gonna write a paper that comes back with a big letter A [arranges hands in an "A" shape] on it!*

This scene illustrates a set of competing demands. Bob may choose to help Pearce learn how to write on his own or else do the work himself, and in the process validate his own intelligence. Bob chooses the latter, thanks in part to the manipulative efforts of Pearce. The example provides a clear example of how self-interest can get in the way of paternal responsibility. Bob's desire to prove that he is not stupid compels him to act in a morally unacceptable manner. On other occasions relationships outside the family network can get in the way of father's efforts to place family first.

The real and pressing demands of everyday life may serve as another contentious area in father's efforts to stay involved. Things like one's work schedule, relationships with siblings and the desire for recreation were all observed as areas that compete for fathers time and energy. In the case of *All of Us*, Robert must help reconcile his ex-wife Neesee and girlfriend Tia, who are constantly criticizing one another. For this scene Robert is forced to set aside Bobby in yet another attempt to keep Tia and Neesee from fighting, sending him outside with his friends Dirk and Janelle.

Robert *Hey, uh Bobby. Why don't you go outside and play with Janelle and Uncle Dirk*

Bobby *Play what?*

Robert *Play like you're not inside (LT)*
[Bobby exits, followed by Janelle]

As a noncustodial father, Robert's access to his son is limited. Any time spent as a peacemaker detracts from his efforts to maintain a healthy relationship with his son. In this instance the role salience of fatherhood becomes subordinate to his role as lover and ex-husband. Scenes that depict fathers in interactions with others do not have to be negative, however, as noted in the coming section.

Affirmation of Parental Role

As noted in the previous section, the fathers of current domestic situational comedies face many competing demands. While in certain situations father involvement can be diminished in

response to other expectations, there are other situations where interactions with others can serve as an affirmation of paternal duties. In these situations, fathers always put their obligations to family over their duties as siblings, employees or friends. An illustration of this point may be seen in the program *Rodney*. In this episode Rodney's mother Patsy visits, revealing that she is town to get breast implants. It is also revealed that Patsy has been married six times and will soon be divorced again. These actions do not sit well with Rodney, who strives to provide a good example for his two sons. Feelings of resentment boil over in this confrontation between Rodney and Patsy.

<i>Patsy</i>	<i>[turns to face Rodney, arms crossed] Well, it is my life and I have decided to live it the way I want.</i>
<i>Rodney</i>	<i>[frowns] That's what you've always done. [looks up] You know, it would be nice if you start putting other people first for a change. You're a grandma now.</i>
<i>Patsy</i>	<i>[arms behind back, leaning on counter] I love my grandkids</i>
<i>Rodney</i>	<i>You love spoilin' 'em. Like last night. We did not put that little TV in your room [points toward hallway] so you could keep them up half the night watchin' it with you.</i>
<i>Patsy</i>	<i>[arms crossed] They've never seen The Wild Bunch—[walks forward pointing] now that is just wrong! (LT)</i>
<i>Rodney</i>	<i>They're exhausted today.</i>
<i>Patsy</i>	<i>No come on [throws arm up], they're running around on full engines.</i>
<i>Rodney</i>	<i>Because you fed them candy bars for breakfast and [walks past Patsy] told them it was astronaut food (LT)</i>
<i>Patsy</i>	<i>[frowning] Well ,I was married to an astronaut and that's what he ate.</i>
<i>Rodney</i>	<i>Momma, the carnie who worked the moon bounce does not qualify as an astronaut (LT)</i>
<i>Patsy</i>	<i>Well what's wrong with exercising their imaginations a little?</i>
<i>Rodney</i>	<i>[picks up breast sample] I'm not so sure you left anything to their imagination. (LT) [shakes breast sample] Now I would prefer not to discuss what these are for, or why some people think marriages are disposable. I'm tryin' to run a normal family here, Mom.</i>

From these comments it becomes clear that Rodney is irritated with his mother, both for the failed moral example she has set, and her indulgence of Jack and Bo. In this situation Rodney chooses his wife and children over his mother, though some would argue that these actions are motivated by past hurts. Regardless, Rodney appears to be concerned about the well being of his children.

Another instance of affirmation was found in the program *According to Jim*. Throughout the program Jim and daughter have struggled to redefine the relationship in a way that reflects

Ruby's growing autonomy. These struggles are eventually resolved, when Jim comes to Ruby's rescue at the father-daughter dance, liberating her from Andy's embarrassing dance moves. Ruby then goes off to talk with her friends, leaving Jim and Andy alone to discuss the night's proceedings.

Andy [walks up behind Jim, puts arm on shoulder] Hey! ah ha Ya know I've had 8 of those jello shots (LT) I think they're just jello (LT) So, everything ok with you and Rube?

Jim Ahh for now. [turns toward Andy] You see, I'm the belt . . . And, I'm also the pair of pants see (LT) Then I bend over and ahh . . . You know you gotta talk to Cheryl about this ahh. All I know is I've gotta work real hard at not embarrassing the little girl.

Through his interactions with Andy in this scene it becomes clear that Jim truly cares about Ruby. He seems willing to change his behavior in order to protect his daughter from embarrassment. By presenting Jim alongside the carefree Andy the program's writers and producers send the message that he is good father. The coming section will explore instances where television fathers protect their children from outside harm.

Protector

We live in a world that presents many dangers to children. The nightly news is constantly filled with stories of child sexual predators and information on unsafe toys. Whether the pain is psychological, such as a first breakup, physiological, including broken bones, fathers often play an important role in protecting children from harm. An excellent example of this point is presented in the program *George Lopez*, when Angie tries to arrange a "play date" for her adolescent son Max.

Angie Trust me, it'll be fun. [Shuts door, runs outside] [George and Max stand at door and listening through glass]

Kyle [very upset] No way! Mom, don't make me do that! [beating table] NO! NO! NO! (LT) [Max opens door] No way, I'm not going to hang out with him! Everyone knows he's a loser.

George [Max begins to walk out, George stops him] Hey, you're in my backyard with your Mommy looking at china, so who's the real loser, princess? (LT) [Angie looks angrily, Deanna frowns] (LT) Angie, Deanna how are ya? [straightens collar, walks back inside] [Angie and Deanna exchange glances] [puts arms around Max, leads him inside] Let's go son. [Max looks back and sticks out tongue] (LT)

In this instance George makes the decision to respond to Kyle's temper tantrum. In the process he responds in a childish manner, noting that Kyle is not so cool either. Although these actions

will likely have an adverse effect on Angie's business, as she was attempting to sell Deanna wedding supplies, George makes a clear statement that he stands behind his son. It is also interesting to note that Max follows closely behind him and responds with a taunt of his own, secure in the knowledge that his father will protect him.

A scene from the program *Rodney* provides further illustration of fictional fathers' attempts to safeguard their offspring. Rodney's mother Patsy has just arrived for a visit and she seems eager to share the gifts she brought for Jack and Bo. Given Patsy's questionable moral disposition, Rodney stands by while the packages are opened.

<i>Patsy</i>	<i>[pulls out package, begins shaking] Who needs a candy cigarette?</i>
<i>Jack</i>	<i>Me [begin jumping up and down, Bo follows]</i>
<i>Bo</i>	<i>I do</i>
<i>Rodney</i>	<i>[takes package] Sorry Mom, we ate all our candy ash trays.</i>

In refusing to let his sons have candy cigarettes Rodney hopes to protect from the harmful effects of real smoking. Such beliefs are guided by the notion that play smoking can lead to actual smoking at a later date. The following component will address some of the negative messages about fatherhood in the media that were uncovered in this study.

Negative Messages about Fatherhood

Foolishness

The five themes presented above provide a complex and thought provoking analysis of the fathering behaviors depicted on network television. While these themes present an in depth analysis of the father role, they only begin to scratch the surface of the many different types of messages that are transmitted about fatherhood on television. Several other themes also emerged during the process of analysis. These themes exist in conjunction and are often overlapping with the dimensions of fatherhood discussed in previous sections. The first, depictions of foolish behavior on the part of fathers, occurred in six programs. In these instances the father's actions served as the butt of jokes on the part of family members. An example of this theme may be found in the program *Quintuplets*, when Bob and Carol are asked to speak with Miss Wilcox, Pearce's English teacher. The conference is scheduled in response to Pearce's paper on *The Scarlet Letter*, which was actually written by Bob. It is assumed that the paper is unacceptable, given Pearce's previous record of academic failure. These assumptions color Carol's response at the start of the meeting.

[Pearce seated, Bob and Carol standing behind him]

Miss Wilcox [walks in] Mr and Mrs Chase, I'm sorry to have dragged you down here, but I've graded Pearce's paper

Carol [pointing at Bob, speaking quickly] Bob was the one who tutored him. He comes from a family of idiots. (LT) [Bob looks shocked]

In an attempt to shield her self from criticism, Carol immediately places the blame on Bob. Her comments are particularly harsh given the fact that she places the “idiot” label on Bob’s whole family, implying that stupidity is some sort of family curse. A reading of earlier scenes confirms her view of Bob’s intellectual inferiority. When Bob attempts to help Pearce with his paper the viewer learns that Carol has long ridiculed her husbands intelligence. In considering the magnitude of these comments the reader must first consider whether or not television producers would be comfortable depicting a mother in similar fashion. A reading of previous literature would seem to indicate that such portrayals are unlikely (Butsch, 1992; Scharrer, 2001).

Another example of foolishness on the part of television fathers is presented in the program *Rodney*. In the opening scene Rodney scrambles around the kitchen hoping to conceal the trainset that he has recently erected for his sons. The finishing touches are completed just as Trina and the boys enter the kitchen.

[Rodney in kitchen hurrying to spread tablecloth across the table]

Trina [yelling from other room] Rodney, we're home.

Rodney [pulls tablecloth across remaining uncovered spots] You guys come in here. I got somethin' I wanna show ya.

Trina [boys walk in, followed by Trina] Honey, I appreciate you setting the table, but usually the table cloth [whispering] goes on the bottom [smiles, flattens hand] (LT)

[Rodney nods head in amusement]

Note how Trina’s first words ridicule Rodney’s behavior, implying that he doesn’t know how to use a tablecloth. Although this may be true, given father’s lack of involvement with domestic chores on television programs, such words cast a negative tone over Rodney’s attempts to connect with his sons. Comments along the same lines are made at several other points in the show, as Trina seems intent on pointing out Rodney’s failures as a parent. Such incompetence is explored in greater depth below through an analysis of the immaturity of fatherhood portrayals on domestic situational comedies.

Immaturity

Another message transmitted in recent domestic situational comedies revolves around the relative immaturity of fathers in comparison to other family members. Specifically, several programs put forth the image of fathers as overgrown children who continue to indulge adolescent fantasies. These men are not helpful around the home (see household maintenance) and are incapable of taking care of themselves without the assistance of their wife, who serves as a substitute mother. The theme of immaturity emerges in nine of the programs reviewed for this study. One example is found in the program *Grounded for Life*, as Sean prepares for an initial job interview with T. J. Shenanigans.

Sean *Ok, I'm sorry. [runs hands down body] I just wanted to know if [looks down] it looks all right.*
Claudia *[eyes scanning Sean, takes drink] It doesn't match. Why don't you just wear your suit?*
Sean *Oww, it's in the laundry. [points away]*
Claudia *You mean the dry cleaners?*
Sean *[Looks perplexed] No, the laundry. (LT)*
Claudia *Ok, well I haven't done a load of SUITS yet, so you're gonna have to put on blue pants or a black jacket.*
Sean *[walks toward stairs, runs right hand through hair] Ok, I'll figure something out.*

Although it is common to ask someone how we look, Sean's failed efforts at color coordination only further the viewers image of him as a "bumbling dad" (Butsch, 1992). Note also that he does not even possess a basic knowledge of washing clothing, believing that a suit should be washed with all the other clothes. These messages are reaffirmed in a later scene, when Sean asks Claudia to smell his shirt and she nearly passes out. In other instances fathers behavior may be classified as childish, as noted in the following example.

In certain situations the behavior of television fathers may descent to pure childishness. These situations often contrast the images of fathers and their children, with fathers acting in ways that are less mature than their offspring. For example, in the program *Quintuplets*, Bob is persuaded by his son Pearce to write an English paper on *The Scarlet Letter*. In the process of completing the paper the following exchange occurs.

Bob *[shrugs shoulders] Maybe I should take a little break.*
Pearce *[lowers magazine] Dad, you've already taken two breaks. [leans toward Bob] It's time to focus now. (LT)*

Bob *[mocking tone, angry look] It's time to focus now. It's time to focus now. (LT)*
Pearce *[pointing] Hey, do not get fresh with me, ok. (LT) I am still your son and as long as we're living under your roof we're gonna do things my way. (LT) [Bob looks down] Come on, we're really close here!*
Bob *No, we're not! [stands up] It's crap!*
Pearce *[stands up] Dad, do not panic.*
Bob *How can you say don't panic? It's due tomorrow and it stinks. [throws arms up in frustration] I quit. Look, why don't we just buy a paper. (LT) Whooo are the kids in your class that sell drugs, cause they're usually the same kids that sell papers.*
Pearce *[look of frustration, gestures] I don't know who sells drugs!*
Bob *[mocking tone, gesturing] I don't know who sells drugs. (LT)*
[Pearce looks frustrated]

In this situation the roles of father and son are reversed, with Pearce urging his father to stay focused on the task at hand and Bob playing the defiant son. Whereas the “ideal” father would tell his children to stay away from drug dealers and to avoid cheating, Bob’s actions provide the complete opposite message, asking his son where he can buy an English paper. While this scene may be seen as sarcastic, one must consider what, if anything is humorous about such an exchange. In a world in which father involvement is constantly called into question it is important to consider the ramifications of such negative messages. A final negative theme is explored below.

Overeating/ overweight

It was also interesting to note how often the matter of weight came up with the fathers depicted in television sitcoms. Television families often include overweight fathers and slim mothers, even though in real life both men and women suffer from obesity. Of the 12 mothers included in this study all would be considered at or below their healthy body weight; in other words attractive to the male viewer. Further illustration of this theme occurs in the program *According to Jim*. In an attempt to persuade Ruby to kiss him before school, Jim attempts to make her jealous by surrounding himself with her siblings. When son Kyle agrees to sit on his lap the following exchange occurs.

Kyle *I'll kiss you daddy*
Jim *Of course you will, because I'm your father and its cool baabby (LT)*
 Come on up here and sit on my lap, there's room for two of us
Dana *Yeah, at least (LT) [Kyle gets up and takes a seat on Jim's lap]*

In examining this scene one must first consider the fact that the father figure is not obese, rather he features are quite typical of the average male. By ridiculing Jim's features the program introduces a warped understanding of masculine beauty, implying that only superfit males are attractive. This line of thought may be taken further to suggest that family life makes men unattractive to women.

Similar messages are found in the program *Still Standing*. Bill has been told by Doctor Holbert to avoid heavy lifting and other strenuous activity so that his sore ribs can heal. This vacation from household chores is extended past what Judy believes to be adequate, resulting in the following rebuke when she asks Bill to help out in the kitchen.

Jim	[walks in, looks at Vic] Hey Fitz. Bill, can you get the food processor down for me?
Bill	[spreads arms] I have a condition.
Judy	You know what? You're full of baloney [points at Bill], and I mean that literally. (LT) [motions for Bill to stand up] Now get up! You've been milkin' it for a week.

From this account it becomes clear that two messages are being sent—Bill is fat and he is lazy. No mention is made of how much time has elapsed between the doctor visit and this scene, but the viewer is left to conclude that Bill has fully recovered and is trying to avoid fulfilling his paternal duties. In portraying fictional fathers as obese, the program transmits messages of sloppiness and irresponsibility. Such messages are consistent with programs attempts to humorize the father role. An examination of whether or not these images transcend racial and class boundaries is provided in the following section.

Differences by Race and Socioeconomic Status

Previous studies have noted numerous differences between fathers according to race (Hofferth, 2003; Toth & Xu, 1999) and socioeconomic status (Burbach, Fox, & Nicholson, 2004; LaReau, 2002). These studies can best be summarized by the notion, though there are some areas of divergence, that fathers who are poor and of minority status are less competent overall than white and middle class fathers. Such findings were not confirmed through the study of fatherhood on domestic situational comedies. Few actual differences were recorded, suggesting that the same formula is used to tell the stories of every population group. In some ways these sub-populations are portrayed as more competent in the father role than are white middle class

Table 3

Fall 2004 Television Father Demographics

Name (Program)	Demographics		
	Race	Class	Occupation
John Barnett (Center of the Universe)	White	Middle	Owens Security Firm
Bob ? (Quintuplets)	White	Working	?
Raymond Barone (Raymond)	White	Middle	Sports Reporter
Sean Finnerty (Grounded for Life)	White	Working	Bar Co-owner
Hal ? (Malcolm in the Middle)	White	Middle	?
Jim ? (According to Jim)	White	Middle	Contractor
Rodney Hamilton (Rodney)	White	Working	Factory worker
Robert James (All of Us)	Black	Middle	Television Reporter
Tony Kleinman (Listen Up)	White	Middle	Television Co-host
Michael Kyle (My Wife and Kids)	Black	Middle	?
George Lopez (George Lopez)	Latino	Middle	Plant Manager
Bill Miller (Still Standing)	White	Working	Store Salesman

fathers. An analysis of the similarities and differences that exist among racial and class divisions are provided below.

Socioeconomic Status

Although this study contains a relatively small sample, the relatively diverse sample was obtained (see Table 3). Consistent with the findings of Butsch (1992) there were proportionally fewer working class fathers on television. One-third (four of twelve) of the sample fell within this category, an improvement from previous eras (Butsch, 1992). Differences were identified in the areas of household chores, perception of the breadwinner role, mother-father relations and

the overall message sent about members of each class. All instances where the breadwinner role was used as a source of power appeared among the middle class. In the one scene from *According to Jim* the father attempts to win the affection of his daughter Ruby's affection by showering love upon his other children.

J [reenters, followed by Cheryl] Well, well, well, Cheryl. Everything looks so deliciousss. (LT) From here, from where I'm sitting, it's something else. (LT) Hey Gracie, why don't you come up here and sit on Daddy's lap. [motioning]

G Why? (LT)

J [smiling] Because I love you. [frowning] Come on, sit on my lap [Gracie gets up and walks toward Jim] (LT)

R [eating]

J Hey, Gracie look at this—you like the view? [motioning towards food] Get used to it because one day it could all be yours [Gracie looks unhappy] When in the future you become HEAD OF THE FAMILY. (LT)

These messages contrast with the working class father, who only talked about the breadwinner role in the context of his overall responsibilities as a father. Further differences exist in the domain of household chores. All instances where height or strength-based (“manly”) tasks were required occurred among the working class. It is important to remember, however, that relatively few instances of participation in household chores were recorded among all classes.

The greatest differences were found in the father's relationship with both their wife and the children. Middle class fathers were more likely to engage in dialogue with the mother (negotiation) over the fulfillment of the parental role and provide more emotional support to their children. In the following example from *My Wife and Kids*, Michael and his wife Jay discuss the usefulness of having a family night. Jay wants the family to enter a karaoke contest at a local restaurant, while Michael has serious reservations.

Jay [seated on couch examining a letter, looks up from letter] [Michael enters, shuts door] I think we should have a family night!

Michael [Pan to Mike laying down suitcase] Hey whoa whoa hey. What about I just walked in. Can I get a hello daddy. [Jay gets up and walks over to Michael] How was your day? You look fantastic, as always. [gesturing frustratedly] Can I get somethin'? (LT)

Jay [smiling] Hello daddy. How was yer day? [pats shoulders] You luk ahright. (LT) [pushes hair back, clasps hands] Ahlright, so look, let's talk about family night.

Michael [walks past Jay] Ohh, we don't need another family night Jay. [opens refridgerator, grabs bottle] We see each other too much anyway. You know what? I'm thinkin' we should have a non-family night, huh? That's

where we all pretend we don't know each other and go our separate ways. [Michael sits down, Jay stands next to him] Actually, we should have a non-family year? Wouldn't that be great?

Jay *Michael, would you please be serious. [leans on table]*

Michael *I'm being serious! [turns to Jay, gesturing] Haven't you ever heard the phrase: absence makes the heart grow fonder? [Jay frowns] Imagine how much we'd like each other if we never saw each other again? (LT)*

Although Michael's comments appear insincere at the outset, the viewer later learns that the last time the Kyle's had a karaoke based family night the mother got into an altercation with another woman. Recognizing this context the father's hesitation to take part in this activity seem to be in the best interests of the family. In contrast, working class fathers face greater volatility in their relationships with family members. All instances of foolish behavior recorded in this study, with the exception of those present in the program *According to Jim*, are credited to working class fathers. Furthermore, working class fathers are more likely to be shown as immature, as noted in the scene where Sean Finnerty (*Grounded for Life*) is unable to dress himself. The following section will address differences in the fulfillment of the father role among three racial groups.

Race

A total of three fathers included in this sample were of non-white status (see Table 3). The sample included two African American fathers (*My Wife and Kids* and *All of Us*) and one Latino father (*George Lopez*). Notwithstanding the limitations of this sample, it appears that fathers of minority descent were portrayed in a similar, if not more positive, light than were Caucasian fathers. If true, these findings would represent a significant shift from previous eras. It would also mean that the media is making serious progress in its attempt to debunk stereotypes about African American fathers. Any attempt to understand these differences must take into account the fact that all three fathers held middle class occupations. Nevertheless, these fathers were more positively portrayed than the other middle class fathers included in this study. In the area of household chores, two of the three instances of cooking occurred among minority fathers, as George Lopez (*George Lopez*) made dinner for his son and Michael Kyle (*My Wife and Kids*) made the family breakfast.

[Family seated around table, Michael carries a plate of pancakes over to the table]

Michael *All right, got more cow cakes comin' up!*

Franklin *These pancakes are superb Mr Kyle. [Michael lays plate on table]*

Michael *Thank you! The secret ingredient is onions. (LT) [Franklin drops fork]*

Although his cooking techniques may be rather unorthodox, Michael's pancakes receive rave reviews from the family. Similar to other middle class fathers, minority fathers displayed heightened levels of parental negotiation and emotional support. An example is found in the program *George Lopez*, when George notices that his son has a black eye.

<i>Max</i>	<i>[at counter] I'm late for school—see ya [grabs lunch]</i>
<i>George</i>	<i>[looks over, concerned] Max, what happened to your eye?</i>
<i>Angie</i>	<i>[stands up, walks over to where Max is] Honey, [touches below eye, examines hand] . . . is that makeup? (LT)</i>
<i>Max</i>	<i>The bullies won't pick on me if they think I've already been beaten up. [Bennie looks concerned] They like fresh meat! (LT) [Angie turns to George, looking for him to act]</i>
<i>George</i>	<i>[gets up, walks over to where Angie and Max are standing] Somebody's pickin' on you? Max—I want a name!</i>
<i>Max</i>	<i>Hector Clark, Bobby Garcia, David Chen, Richard Goodman, Tim Sullivan, (LT) Peter Sisco, Privy Kinwani</i>

When George discovers that his son is being bullied he is quick to attempt to act. He shows concern for his son's well being, asking what happened to him, and then attempts to solve the situation by pushing his son for the names of his victimizers. Another area of difference occurred in the areas of foolishness and immaturity. Very few instances were identified where minority fathers were portrayed as either foolish or immature. In such instances minority father compared favorably to the middle class and in the case of *According to Jim* surpassed it. Few differences were found between African American and Latino portrayals. The one instance that was identified came in the area of emotional support, where *George Lopez* was less supportive than the African American fathers. Finally, it is worth noting that the program *All of Us* features a blended family, which adds the added dimension of negotiating the custody agreement.

The coming chapter will explore the results detailed above in greater depth. Contents include a summary of the present findings, comparisons to previous research and implications for future research and practice.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

The present study examines the dimensions of the father role portrayed on domestic situational comedies. This work builds upon research from multiple disciplines (see Chapter Two for a review of literature), including studies of fatherhood and work in the field of mass communication. A sample of 12 half-hour programs was obtained during the fall 2004 season from the six major networks (see Chapter Three for further details on sampling criteria). Materials were then transferred from videocassette to DVD format to abbreviate the transcription process. Scenes that depicted either fathering behaviors or included discussions of the father role were then transcribed, taking into account both verbal and nonverbal behaviors. The amount of material transcribed varied greatly from program to program, with some episodes revolving around parenting, and others barely mentioning fatherhood.

Inductive thematic analysis was selected as a means for analyzing representations of the father role. The pursuit of in-depth knowledge led to the emergence of five primary themes. First, fathers provide financial support to their family. This breadwinner status is then used as either a tool for manipulation or as a means for asserting paternal responsibility. Assistance with household chores represents a second, though very limited, aspect of television fatherhood. Fathers engage in strength/ height based tasks, cooking and creative tasks. A third component of fathering involves interacting with the child's mother, either through marriage or a custody arrangement. In such cases fathers provide emotional support (positive and negative) and engage in negotiation over parental duties with mothers. Fourth, fathers interact with their offspring. This dimension includes direct interactions, instances where emotional support (positive and negative) is provided and the teaching of life skills. The final component of the television father role involves interactions with individuals outside the family network. These exchanges may bring to question the importance of fathering in a man's life (role salience), affirm the importance of parental duties or serve as an avenue for protecting one's children. Refer to Chapter Four for an in depth explanation of each of the themes and subthemes summarized above.

An examination of the differences in fatherhood portrayals by race and socioeconomic status is provided. This analysis revealed several distinct and novel patterns. Overall, television

fathers of African American and Latino descent were portrayed in a similar, if not more positive, light in comparison to European American fathers. Advantages included heightened levels of parental negotiation and emotional support and far fewer instances where they were portrayed as either foolish or immature. In understanding these differences it is important to take into account the intersection of race and class; all three minority group fathers were of middle class status. In contrast, representations of working class fathers suggest lower levels of competence. A disproportionately higher number of cases were identified where working class fathers were shown as foolish or immature. Middle class fathers were more likely to negotiate with the mother and provide emotional support for their offspring. The ensuing section will place current findings within the context of previous research on television and the American family.

Comparison to Previous Research

The current study used a template approach in the development of a model of television fatherhood (see Figure 1). Lamb's (1998) model of father involvement was used as a starting point in the construction of themes. Although several categories from this model were used, including interactions with the mother and the breadwinner role, the explanation proved insufficient in attempting to explain the complexity of fatherhood shown on current programming. Limitations of this model include its inability to account for interactions that occur outside the family network, such as talking to a child's teacher or dealing with one's boss. Another limit was found in efforts to explain the mother-father relationship, which Lamb (1998) believes only extends to when fathers provide emotional support. This explanation failed to account for parental negotiation, which proved to be one of the major themes identified in this study. Upon developing the five major themes the researcher was able to identify additional subthemes, which again go beyond the explanations provided in previous work. These findings highlight the value of applying a qualitative methodology, which seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the subject under research. Remaining stringently tied to any model of fatherhood would have limited opportunities to fully explore the meaning of fatherhood.

Several similarities emerged in comparing television fathers with real life fathers. As noted in the work of Andrews et al (2004), a large percentage of the population is somewhat dissatisfied with contemporary fathering. Similarly, the images of fatherhood put forth by current domestic situational comedies are quite insufficient (See Chapter 4). The representations of fatherhood included in this study do little to dispel the myths surrounding what it means to be

a father. Findings on male and female perceptions of father involvement proved consistent with previous research (Andrews et al., 2004). In several instances uninvolved husbands seemingly quite content with their contribution (e.g., *Still Standing*), while their wives quietly fumed about their lack of participation. Participants in the Andrews et al (2004) study also expressed high levels of satisfaction with father's ability to protect their children from harm. In this study the same proved true, as there were several instances where fathers defended their children from either physical or emotional harm. Current findings indicate that more recent programs present a more balanced image of fathering than that of earlier studies (Olson & Douglas, 1997). Although imperfect, they demonstrate the slow rate of improvement noted in previous studies of fatherhood (Pleck, 1997). These findings suggest that the changes in television representations will likely mirror the pace of social change.

Not surprisingly, numerous distinctions were identified when the actions of television fathers were contrasted actual fathers. Although the breadwinner role emerged as a primary aspect of modern fatherhood (Andrews et al., 2004), the fathers in this study rarely spend time at work and money rarely seems to be a problem. Additional differences emerged in the area of cooperation, as television fathers appear less likely to agree on parental matters. An explanation for this may be found in television's propensity to overly dramatize controversial events. In contrast to previous findings (Wood & Repetti, 2004), number of sons had no effect upon father involvement. This may still prove true, however, as all families in this study had at least one son, allowing few opportunities for comparison. Finally, though this study only includes a one-week sample, fulfillment of the television fatherhood will likely remain consistent over time, in contrast to real life fathering. Television characters live in a parallel world in which all problems are resolved over the course of a 30-minute episode. In contrast, real life fathering is in a constant state of flux, presenting exciting opportunities for social change. Although television fatherhood does not mirror reality, it does seem to capture the complexity of being a father in the 21st Century.

The 12 programs examined in this study present varying images of contemporary fatherhood. In some programs the father presents the image of a committed family man, in other instances the family is viewed as an obstacle to personal satisfaction, while other shows fall somewhere in between. On all programs many duties are presented that could potentially surpass the paternal duties: work, friendships, siblings, divorce, etc. In that sense fathers seem

“to be caught in a dialectical tension between their own phenomenological awareness of wanting to spend time with their children and a set of ongoing time constraints that limited their ability to do so” (Daly, 1996, p. 473). These instances call into the question the importance subscribed to fatherhood within the realm of masculinity (role salience). To some extent these questions may be the product of role confusion, as there are many different understandings of what it means to be a father (Burr, 1973). Research by Daly (1996) notes that some men are highly involved in their children’s lives, while others see providing as the extent of their role. With television fathers most of the plot revolves around the home, which suggests that men spend little time working outside the home, and most role conflict occurs within the context of the family. The demands of siblings and one’s parents were common obstacles to family involvement.

Although there is growing diversity in the representation of fatherhood on network television, there continues to be a lack of minority and working class portrayals. If one were to use television as the sole instrument for understanding fatherhood, they would be left to believe that most Americans are white, middle-class suburbanites who rarely have to work. The image of minority fathers is far more constricted, as all three families were from the middle-class, despite the fact that poverty rates are considerably higher among African Americans and Latinos (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). Similarly, overall portrayals of minority fathers were more positive overall, when in reality these families have equal to higher rates of problems in comparison to white fathers (Hofferth, 2003; Toth & Xu, 1999). Divergence may be found in television father’s provision of emotional support to children. African American fathers were portrayed as highly supportive, when in reality they provide lower levels of emotional support to their children. Findings were consistent with previous work on working class families, as Lareau (2002) also found lower levels of emotional support among the working class. In addition, previous studies on television families have noted the overall foolishness of working class father portrayals (Butsch, 1992)

Any attempts to compare present findings with that of previous studies must be taken with a note of caution, however, as the present study does not compare portrayals across generations. The current effort instead seeks to provide an in-depth examination of current programming. It is useful to compare the current findings with previous work, if only to show the advantages associated with the inductive approach. When taken in its entirety, current programs’ representations of the father role are mixed. Consistent with previous work (Butsch,

1992; Heintz, 1997), television sends many negative messages about fathering. These include a lack of participation in household chores, manipulation of wife and children, unsupportive behavior and a higher number of foolish/ immature portrayals, particularly among the working class. What has not been captured in previous research is large number of positive messages that television programs send about fathers, possibly a reflection of improved portrayals in recent years. This study has recorded many instances of supportive behavior and a continued dialogue between father and mother. Such findings add much needed complexity to the understanding of media and the messages that it sends about family life.

Several distinct differences emerged in the comparison of current programming with that of previous eras. Current portrayals seem to include higher rates of dialogue between parents than was evident in Down's (1981) research. Current programs place a greater emphasis is on the emotional bond that exists between the father and family members, a continuation of Douglas and Olson's (1995) work. The relationship between husbands and wives also appears more equitable than that of previous studies (Olson & Douglas, 1997), with few instances where husbands dominate household decision-making. We see the continued foolishness of working class fathers (Butsch, 1992), but we also see many positive contributions. The lines are blurred further by instances where middle class fathers, most notably Jim in *According to Jim*, are portrayed in similar fashion. Furthermore, when taken in context of numerous interactions, foolishness is only a small, though important, part of the message that is sent about fathers. These findings shed light on the work of Scharrer (2001), which focused solely on negative messages. An exploration of the current study's relevance to practitioners in the field of family studies is provided below.

Implications for Future Practice

The mass media represents an important and often understudied medium in the field of family studies. The sheer volume of television viewing that occurs in the United States (Nielsen, 2000, 2004; Roberts & Foehr, 2004) should make this area a matter of serious interest for individuals that work with families and children. Regardless of whether television has a direct influence on individual behaviors (Chesebro, 1984), or is instead the product of a gradual buildup of messages (Signorelli & Morgan, 2001), social service professionals must understand the messages that television transmits about family life. Such understanding is of particular importance in dealing with children, who watch the largest quantity of television (Chayko,

1993). “Children learn about the responsibilities of family members, care giving and different approaches to parenting by being parented” (Jacobson, 2003, p. 111). A significant number of youth in the United States grow up in single parent homes (Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistical Administration, 2003) and far too many of these youth have little to no contact with positive male role models. In a world in which media consumes such a large portion of individuals free time, it is only logical to assume that television provides instruction on family life, including the father role. Social workers, teachers and family life educators must recognize the content of these messages and then provide instruction that counteracts negative stereotypes about put forth about fathering. Furthermore, there is a real and urgent need for quality parenting education in our nation’s high schools and universities. In a nation with high divorce and child abuse rates, individuals need to learn basic child development and proper parenting skills if scholars and practitioners are to hope for a better, more family-friendly future.

In working with adults it is important to remember that domestic situational comedies are still very popular (13 programs in the top 100 for the week of this study), despite the growing popularity of crime dramas and reality programming (Nielsen, 2004). If family life education is grounded upon the notion of forming partnerships between practitioners and parents (Jacobson, 2003), then educators must make the effort to understand culture and the messages it transmits about parenting. Television programs remain an important reservoir for shaping parental attitudes and in cases where fatherhood is represented the messages are often negative (Butsch, 1992, 2003; Scharrer, 2001), though the results of this study are more balanced than previously efforts. Parenting course must work to debunk societal myths about fatherhood, while at the same time presenting a new more balanced construction of father involvement. Television sitcoms can serve as an important tool in this process, fueling discussion and possibly even encouraging more fathers to attend classes. In an era where fatherhood is undergoing significant changes (Kimmel, 1996), there is a growing need for parenting courses specifically tailored to meet the needs of 21st Century fathers. Areas that should be discussed include role salience and the development of a positive father identity (Daly, 1993, 1996). An agenda for future research on the representation of fatherhood on domestic situational comedies is provided in the following section.

Implications for Future Research

As noted by the volume of work reviewed in Chapter Two, there has been a great deal of research on how media represents family life. This study provides a unique contribution in the sense that it is qualitative, contemporary and focused entirely on fatherhood. Nearly every previous study has used content analysis, a technique whose limitations are discussed in Chapter Three, whereas the current study involves an inductive thematic analysis. This allows for a more in-depth analysis of how programs represent the father role. It is also worth mentioning that the current effort is the only study done within the last five years. The programs examined in this study have not been studied previously, providing an updated report on fatherhood representations. In addition, few studies have focused entirely on fatherhood (Butsch, 1992, 2003; Scharrer, 2001) and none of these studies is qualitative.

Future work should continue the theory development begun in this study, seeking to provide a more succinct understanding of the complexity of fathering in a new millenium. These efforts should include larger and more complex studies of how television defines the father role. Additional work is needed in the area of diversity, where researchers should focus solely on African American, Latino and working class families. Another area of interest is family structure, with studies possibly comparing intact, single-parent, and blended families. Expanded efforts are also needed on how children are portrayed and the interworkings of family dynamics on television programs; specifically, are programs child-centered? Next, researchers should interview real life children and fathers to determine how television viewing shapes parental identity development. Such research is consistent with Daly's (1993) findings, which details the difficulties that fathers have in developing notions of parenthood. Work along the lines of Fisherkiller's (1997) study is highly recommended, meaning that researchers must develop long-term contacts with community members before collecting data. Finally, researchers should expand upon Popenoe's (1996) effort to chronicle the benefits of fathering. Efforts must be made to promote father involvement as a means of bettering the lives of both current and future generations.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the present study has identified multiple dimensions of fathering, as represented in domestic situational comedies. Television fathers engage in a variety of actions that transmit both positive and negative messages about their place within the family network.

These messages are consistent with the difficulty associated with fathering in modern times, a role whose definition is rather ambiguous.

No single definition of 'successful fatherhood' and no ideal 'father role' can claim universal acceptance of empirical support. Rather, father's expectations about what they should do, and their effects on children must be viewed within the contexts of family, community, culture and current history (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000, p. 133).

As the Twenty-First Century progresses researchers must continue to efforts to unravel the mystery of fatherhood and in the process seek a better and more involved future. It is hoped that the current study provides a useful contribution to this effort.

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APPENDIX

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Research Influences

As with any study, the current work is influenced by the researcher's experience and personal beliefs. In order to understand my perspective one must first understand the role that faith plays in my personal journey. I am a Christian who believes in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These beliefs guide my perspective on the human family and the raising of children. I believe that the two-parent intact family remains the ideal and that children are a gift from God to be cherished by loving parents. Having said this, I recognize that high divorce rates are a reality and that with this efforts must be made to improve the lives of blended families. Along with these views, I believe that parents should take an active, though not stifling, role in the lives of their children. My understanding of fatherhood is situated within the context of these views.

I am of European American heritage; having grown up in a lower middle class/ working class home situated in a relatively diverse medium-sized midwestern city. My parents are quite traditional in their interpretation of gender roles, with my father serving as the primary breadwinner and my mother having served as a homemaker. I was raised in a Post-World War II era suburb situated between rural and urban areas. The majority of youth in this community would be considered at-risk, having grown up in divorced homes or economic depravity. These experiences have greatly impacted my understanding of this world and its many inequalities. I believe that we live in an imperfect world and that it is job of every person to seek out a better existence for all of humanity.

I have a Bachelor's degree in psychology and am currently working on a Master's degree in family and child studies. My interests include youth development, faith-based nonprofits, male rites of passage and the mass media. These concerns are reflected in both my service work and the topic chosen for this thesis. Although I don't plan on becoming an academic, I plan to pursue a Master's Degree in public administration upon the completion of this program, I have come to appreciate the role that research plays in the creation of knowledge.

Television viewing has always been a part of my life, though I watch relatively little programming currently, and most of my favorite programs have been family sitcoms. Favorite television family portrayals include: *The Cosby Show*, *Family Ties*, *Full House*, *Growing Pains*,

The Wonder Years, *Boy Meets World* and more recently *Listen Up*. I believe that I was drawn to these programs both for entertainment value and as a reflection of the importance that family plays in my own life.

I first became interested in this topic as a result of my work with youth. Previous work includes serving as an assistant youth track coach, camp counseling for two summers, participating in and later directing a mentoring program, interning with a youth center and serving as a tutor for impoverished youth. Much of this work has been with at-risk youth and I anticipate that this population will serve as the focus of my future career. After working primarily with children and adolescents that come from divorce homes I became interested in how they developed a parenting identity.

I, like most men, am torn between the many different expectations placed upon contemporary fathers. This general state of confusion is the reflection of the diverse messages put forth by parents, educators and the media. All in all, I favor a more balanced construction of fatherhood that strikes a balance between direct and indirect involvement. Work will always be a part of men's lives, but it should not consume the best of their time and energy. That is instead the place of family. I view the diversity of father involvement as a positive, but believe that more involved fatherhood is to be desired and encouraged by civil society.

Research Process

The idea and motivation for this project may be traced back to a graduate level course on qualitative research. In the fall of 2003 I stumbled upon the idea of studying the culture of fatherhood for a class project. Since that time I have never seriously considered another topic, though some have urged me to reconsider. My early work focused upon a single episode of the program *Everybody Loves Raymond*. From this project I gained valuable expertise on how to construct a qualitative experiment. These insights largely a reflection of the valuable advice offered by Dr. Freysinger, along with the many mistakes made along the way. In the spring of 2004 I continued reading, including a valuable conversation with Dr. Hennon, and searched for a committee chairman. Once Dr. Stone agreed to chair my committee I began seriously considering methodological issues. This pursuit was aided greatly by Dr. Brubaker during a summer 2004 course on research methods. I continued reading throughout that summer and was able to generate a research proposal during the fall 2004 semester. Upon approval I began collecting data, with the assistance of students from FSW 160 and 162, followed by the transfer

of programs to DVD. In December 2004 I officially began data analysis with the transcription of all scenes that included active portrayals or conversations about fatherhood. This process continued throughout the early spring semester, followed by the (expected) defense in April of 2005.

Research Aims

The present study is motivated by the pursuit of five goals. First, an attempt was made to better understand the messages that television transmits about the father role. In seeking understanding the researcher sought to obtain a deeper knowledge of television fatherhood than any previous study. Second, the present study sought to generate theory and provide direction for future research. Much of the previous work in this area has been confined to content analyses of portrayals across multiple generations. Although valuable, there is much work remaining to be done. Learning qualitative research and applying it to a novel field represents a third aim of this study. Through many hours of toil I think I have been somewhat successful in this measure. Fourth, the current study attempted to compare current fatherhood portrayals with that of past programs and real life fathers. In that regard the findings of this study are limited; a reflection of the homogeneity of the sample population. Finally, the researcher sought to bring attention to mass media and the messages that it transmits about the father role. These efforts would then ultimately lead to heightened levels of involvement on the part of real life fathers.

Notes on Research Findings

The results obtained in this study (see Chapter Four) differed significantly from any speculated outcome. I entered the research process expecting to find very negative portrayals of fatherhood among television fathers. Surprisingly, the portrayals were rather mixed, with both positive and negative elements identified. This may be traced to the fact that we are much more likely to remember negative aspects of family life than the positive (Gottman, 1994). Another unexpected finding came in the lack of differences identified by race and class status. It was especially interesting to identify more positive portrayals of minority fathers. These findings may coincide with changes in our society, where diversity is increasingly accepted and ridiculing minority groups is considered taboo. In putting forth more positive messages television producers may be attempting to change our negative stereotypes about minority groups.

Despite these surprise findings, television programs continue to present fatherhood in a highly stereotypical format. Such messages must be altered in an era of increased confusion over

the meaning of fatherhood. Producers should create more balanced portrayals of family life that take into account the real life struggles of fathers. It is also worth noting that this study has benefited greatly from the use of qualitative methodology. Use of quantitative techniques, such as content analysis, would have limited the researcher's freedom to explore the intricacies of fatherhood that exist in the present era.