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**Working Hard or Hardly Working:**

**How American Sitcoms Create “Realities” about the Working Class**

The topical focus of our research project will be the portrayal of socio-economic class in the United States. At the heart of the American dream lies this promise of moving up the social and economic ladder. Although this promise has been a distant dream for many citizens, our nation’s ongoing recession has reformatted class structure in a major way. Many of those who were at the upper tier four years ago were removed from this status, while those who were on the lower tier have plummeted even further. Our society is also experiencing an increase in class and economic disparity between the have and have-nots like never before; and the social depictions of this growing lower class through mediums like American sitcoms are rarely favorable. “Over a half-century of television, domestic situation comedies have reinforced images of the middle class as better than the working class.” (Butsch, A Half Century of Class and Gender in American TV Domestic Sitcoms)

Our object of study will be focusing on American television sitcoms. This is an important set of data to analyze because television is such an incredibly influential part of our everyday lives. Sitcoms are a mainstay in American television; focusing on and critically analyzing this specific genre is paramount. Representations of social classes (upper, middle, and lower) in sitcoms are troublesome. They construct and reinforce generalizations and stereotypes about each level of these social classes. Sitcoms directly influence the way that we understand many levels of social classes in reality. As Denise J. Kervin describes in her article *Ambivalent Pleasure From Married… With Children* there is a large of amount of power behind these TV sitcoms helping to refine and shape our beliefs about class. Thus leading us to act according to the social class we view ourselves in and treating others according to the social class in which we believe them to belong.

Our dataset includes a wide breadth of information, from scholarly articles to newspaper articles and even clips from American sitcoms themselves. We found these through searches such as class depictions in US media and our knowledge of American sitcom clips through platforms like YouTube. For our project it was important to look at all aspects of how these media portrayals are being understood. Simply looking at scholarly articles is not enough to know how we personally are being influenced by working class depictions.

In analyzing this data it was important for me to take what I read from both scholarly and mainstream media articles then apply them to my own personal understandings of these sitcoms. Before watching a documentary like *Class Dismissed: How TV Frames the Working Class* I may have never understood the potential role of American sitcoms in shaping my beliefs about class. Being a member of the lower class I feel that I am able to compare all these different types of media, mashing together the information from YouTube clips to scholarly articles because I also have a collegiate background. Approaching all the information that we gathered from a multidisciplinary angle is critical towards analyzing its importance.

Some of the major points addressed in all of our scholarly and mainstream articles can be found in one of the sitcoms I focused on *Married… With Children*. Al Bundy the main character in the show is the stereotypical working class American. “It is a comedy focusing on Al Bundy ‘a shoe salesman who hates his life,’ and his interactions with his wife, children, and liberal neighbors he sees as responsible for his misery” (Kervin) He like many other members of working class portrayed in American sitcoms, are uneducated, violent and to blame for their own problems in life. One example of this is a YouTube clip where Al Bundy is only concerned with a proposed tax on beer that would go towards education and ignores all other issues on the ballot. When beer taxes are increased he begins a violent riot, this episodes depiction fits directly with what many articles are saying about the problems of depicting the working class in this way.

Arguably one of the most important pieces of data for our project is the documentary *Class Dismissed: How TV Frames the Working Class*. This documentary stresses from the beginning the importance of taking working class depictions on TV seriously, as stated before this is because the power they hold on our society. One finding that is consistent throughout our data is that while there are some scholarly articles on this issue, they are few and far in between. However the few there are seem to be saying the same thing, “While there have been variations and exceptions across five and a half decades of television the stock character of the ineffectual, even buffoonish working-class man has persisted as the dominant image.” (Butsch, A Half Century of Class and Gender in American TV Domestic Sitcoms)

All of our data points to the importance of analyzing the many labels placed upon the working class, while being able to point out many of these labels may be viewed as important. Understanding why they are able to take hold in our society is also important, simply stating that the working class is portrayed as dumb and uneducated that have earned their socio-economic standing is not enough. In an article by Katherine A. Foss she notes that sitcoms can be used as an insight to our cultural values at any given point in US History, well at least as far back as sitcoms have been around. “It is assumed here that television discourse can reflect and shape prevalent values and ideas in society. Because discourse is socially produced, John Fiske (1987) argued, it ‘works ideologically to naturalize those meanings [of society] into common sense’ (p.14)” (Foss)

This mention of discourse ties directly into the relevance of our data for our class because our TV sitcoms can be viewed as institutionalized creations that play a role in shaping our understanding of our own society and culture. When we see the working class or middle class portrayed in a certain way, then that is what we begin to believe that they actually are. We may balance this with our own experiences of class but often due to a common lack of exposure to society outside our own area we have nothing to compare it to. Using my own experience as an example until I began research into this through a scholarly platform I would have never questioned shows like *Married… With Children,* *Raising Hope* or *Roseanne* and how they are actually bringing down those that they portray.

In conclusion we are focusing on the socio-economic portrayal of class in American sitcoms; the most important findings of our data is that there is a large power dynamic behind the American sitcom that helps shape and form our understanding of class roles in the United States. Not only that but the depiction is often negative in nature and acts as a detriment to those classes which struggle the most within our nation. Of course this is not always initially understood as many people simply write off this genre of TV as simply being comedic in nature, but understanding the deeper meanings is critical to understanding our society as a whole.

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