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*Raising Hope*: A New Generation of Social Class

Portrayals in American Television Sitcoms

For this research project, our group decided on the topical focus of socio-economic class portrayals in the United States. The hope to move up the social and economic ladder is still a dream for many Americans, even though the gap between the affluent and the poor is as wide as ever. The myth that “the United States is a land of economic opportunity where anyone can become anything through industry and persistence” (Freeman, 405) is still powerful and widespread. “This focus on … individual agency rather than structure … place[s] nearly all the blame on unsuccessful individuals rather than the social structure” (Freeman, 405). The class stratification of the United States has immense implications for the citizens involved, and attention needs to be paid to the consequences and influence of this structure, and not just the faults of an individual. The ways in which these socio-economic classes are portrayed contribute to the widespread understandings and stereotypes about each one, which in turn influences the way that they are treated.

The object of study we will be focusing on is American Television Sitcoms. This is an important set of data to be analyzing in light of our decision to focus on media content because television is an incredibly influential part of our everyday lives in America, and sitcoms are a mainstay in American television. The representations of social classes (upper, middle, and lower) in sitcoms are troublesome because they construct, as well as reinforce, generalizations and stereotypes about each level of social class. They do this “by shaping our ideas and attitudes about what kind of family life is desirable, interesting, serious, or funny; they can show us how husbands and wives are supposed to behave and how parents and children are expected to relate; and they can present to us which kinds of family members should be taken seriously and which are only to be seen as fools” (Glennon, 264). Sitcoms impact the way that we understand levels of social class in reality; we act according to the social class we see ourselves in, and we treat others according to the social class in which we believe them to belong.

As a whole, our group’s data set includes a range of primary sources in the form of American television sitcoms, and secondary sources in the form of academic texts, news articles, and video analysis’. We divided the analysis work between group members, with two members analyzing pre-1990’s American television sitcoms and related texts and videos, two members analyzing particular American sitcoms from the 1990’s and related texts and videos, and myself focusing on post-1990’s American sitcoms and their accompanying texts and videos. In particular, I will be looking at three related academic texts written from 1982 – 2003, an essay from The Encyclopedia of Television, three news articles written in 2010, and the American television sitcom *Raising Hope* which premiered on FOX in September of 2010 and is currently in-between its second and third season. For the purposes of this project, I reviewed about four full episodes of *Raising Hope*, all from the first season. Academic texts are limited on the topic of social and economic class in relation to American television sitcoms; the few I choose to include in my research were the ones that would give me an understanding of the history of class portrayals in these sitcoms, and the trends and patterns throughout time. The essay from The Encyclopedia of Television gave a helpful overview of a broader range of opinions on the topic from other academic texts, and helped to solidify my understanding of the other academic texts I was analyzing. The news articles were necessary to grasp the influence of *Raising Hope*, and to see a more recent view on the topic of class and American sitcoms. Included in my data set was also my viewing of episodes from the actual show, *Raising Hope*, which took place online over the matter of a few days. It was important that I take note of how I understood class to be portrayed through this show, and that I was able to compare the trends and patterns outlined in the academic texts to a more recent manifestation of an American situational comedy.

To analyze this data, I examined the content of the sitcom Raising Hope. I took note of the biographies of the characters, the way they interacted with each other, the setting of the show, the storylines that the characters follow, the way they structure comedy into the narrative, their overall lifestyle, and the class level that their family seemed to portray. In reading the academic texts and the essay I looked for themes and patterns that had been found throughout the history of American sitcoms, and the ways in which this coincided with class stereotypes in society. I also looked for ways in which *Raising Hope* was similar to the shows that had been analyzed, as well as the ways in which it was different. Using the news articles I evaluated the reception of the show, as well as its influence on audiences to date. This “textual criticism gives depth … to the understanding of television” (Butsch). For this reason, I included primary and second sources in my data set and examined them both as a part of my method of analysis. This allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the class structure and stereotypes that play out in *Raising Hope*.

There were a few key findings in the academic texts I analyzed. The first was that television sitcoms were incredibly influential in our lives in America, and that they had the ability to shape our understandings of the world and people around us. Lynda Glennon points to the fact that among sociologists, there is a “consensus that television has a great influence in our collective life” (264).Television and media have been prevalent throughout the last few decades of American life, and they surround us and impact our lives today on a greater scale than ever before. This cements the need to take the portrayals of television characters, and the stereotypes they perpetuate, seriously. Richard Butsch, in his essay titled “A Half Century of Class and Gender in American TV Domestic Sitcoms”, also points to the impact of television on stereotyping, stating that “the pervasiveness of network television and the persistence over five decades have contributed immeasurably to reproducing … stereotypes” (16). Situational comedies (or “sitcoms” as I’ve been calling them) are a mainstay in prime-time television, which makes them particularly culturally influential. Their grounding in comedy also allows them to shine light on popular understandings and treatment of class in America; as Lewis Freeman notes, “comedy is a logical site for exploring class issues” because “it plays on deviations both from socio-cultural norms, and from rules that govern other genres” (400). To make us laugh, television sitcoms address social and cultural stereotypes that may not be as obvious in other genres of entertainment.

A second key finding from the academic texts I compiled was that television sitcoms in the United States perpetuate the popular notion of American individualism; they reinforce the myth that each person is alone responsible for their socio-economic status. “Thus, one’s status is an indicator or one’s ability, character and moral worth” (Butsch). This finding rang true throughout all of the academic texts I analyzed. Freeman’s statement summarized the general findings the best:

“Television comedies take an egoistic approach that charges the individual with the responsibility for his or her position and personal social salvation. This focus on individuals and individual agency rather than social structure and process favors atomized or psychologized explanations of the action” (405).

In other words, the blame for “being working class” in television sitcoms is placed solely on the individual faults of the characters, and disregards the class stratification system in the United States that disadvantages people of lower economic classes, and makes it difficult to move out of one’s current class level. These faults are displayed in a variety of ways, but the most striking and persistent are the common elements of the male working class character.

The working class man in American television sitcoms is most often shown as “incompetent and ineffectual, often a buffoon, well-intentioned but dumb” (Butsch). All the academic studies I examined confirmed this as being the popular male portrayal (See Glennon, 267-268). Although these studies do not reach to present day television, I was able to see the same character play out during my viewing of *Raising Hope.* The father figure in this sitcom is for the most part well-intentioned, but does not accomplish most of what he sets out to do. His foolishness and lack of intelligence are the center of many comedic moments on the show. For instance, he is shown to not have been able to graduate high school, and though he dreams of becoming a musician, he makes his money cleaning pools. To further demean the male working class “head of the household”, he is often depicted as child-like or feminine (Butsch). This is often done by showing the female lead as the voice of reason, and “act[ing] as mothers” (Butsch) for the male characters. This also plays out in the show *Raising Hope*. In the first episode, the father is shown to enjoy child-like behavior such as pushing people over while they are urinating. The female mother character is often the voice of reason when the male lead is doing something silly or child-like. This portrayal is particularly problematic because the father’s “ineptness appears to be the reason for the family’s economic condition … thus, working classness becomes equated with a condition caused by limited individual ability” (Glennon, 268). This ties back into the common television sitcom theme of the individual being at fault for his or her class status.

The last key finding from my readings was that historically, the working class has been underrepresented in American television sitcoms, compared to their prevalence in reality. As an example, Butsch points to 1970’s when television showed “only 8% (25 series)” depicting working class families, “compared to 45% of actual American families” (19). This trend of underrepresentation has even persisted until today. When Raising Hope premiered in 2010, a review in the Guardian called it “a rare American sitcom whose characters are profoundly blue collar, or lower [class]” (Harris).

To come to these conclusions, out research project focused on socio-economic class portrayals in the United States within American television sitcoms. As a modern day example, I related my findings from academic texts on the topic to the American television sitcom *Raising Hope,* which centered on the daily life of a working class American family. In reviewing the previously mentioned academic texts, articles, and sitcom, I found that television sitcoms and the stereotypes they perpetuate influence the way that the working class is understood, and consequently treated, in our culture. It also became clear that these sitcoms, particularly ones focusing on the working class, perpetuate the myth that each individual is personally responsible for their socio-economic class standing in the United States. These personal faults are realized in a variety of ways in television sitcoms, particularly in the depiction of the unintelligent and child-like father figure. Finally, this research pointed to the underrepresentation of the working class in comparison to their actual prevalence in American society. Even today, American television sitcoms focused on the working class are few and far between.

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