

KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES: SOCIOECONOMIC  
CLASS REPRESENTATION IN SITCOMS

by

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A THESIS

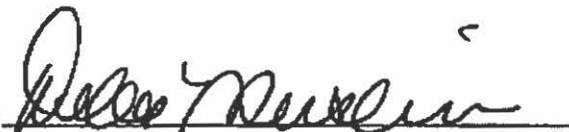
Presented to the School of Journalism and Communication  
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

June 2014

## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

**Alexandra Hicks for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in the School of Journalism and Communication to be taken June, 2014**

**Title: Keeping Up With the Joneses: Socioeconomic Class Representation in Sitcoms**

Approved: 

**This thesis examines the representation of socioeconomic class in situation comedies. Through the influence of the advertising industry, situation comedies (sitcoms) have developed a pattern throughout history of misrepresenting social class, which is made evident by their portrayals of different races, genders, and professions. To rectify the lack of previous studies on modern comedies, this study analyzes socioeconomic class representation on sitcoms that have aired in the last 15 years by taking a sample of seven shows and comparing the estimated cost of characters' residences to the amount of money they would likely earn in their given profession. The study showed that modern situation comedies misrepresent socioeconomic class by portraying characters living in residences well beyond what they could afford in real life. Accurate demonstration of socioeconomic class on television is imperative because images presented on television genuinely influence viewers' perceptions of reality. Inaccurate portrayals of class could cause audiences to develop distorted views of members of socioeconomic classes and themselves.**

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Professor Debra Merskin for inspiring me to examine television in an in-depth and critical manner. I have been fortunate enough to study multiple types of media with Professor Merskin and the ways in which they represent (or rather, misrepresent) various marginalized groups of people. She taught me that all people are not created equal – they each have their own individual qualities as well as obstacles that deserve to be recognized. I am so thankful that she had such a strong influence not only on my academic pursuits, but on the way in which I view my fellow human beings. I would also like to thank Professor Sandler and Professor Prazniak for their support throughout this challenging process. Lastly, I must acknowledge my mother, Rebecca Hicks. Without her (not-so-subtle) push, I would have never entered the Clark Honors College and embarked on the single most rewarding experience of my academic career thus far.

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## Introduction

While television has a significant presence American society, it has not necessarily used its expansive breadth to discuss controversial issues. Recently, however, popular programs have begun to address such “taboo” topics as race, gender, and sexuality. Despite this recent progress, one subject has been notably absent from this representation: class. This is particularly evident in situation comedies. While the earliest situation comedies featured lower- class families<sup>1</sup>, the introduction of advertising and product placement in the 1950s contributed to the construction of a consumer-driven middle class and the notion of the “classless society” that Americans find so comfortable (Leistyna, et. al, 2005). While little formal research has been done on the matter, it is likely that American discomfort in regards to discussing class stems from the concept of the American Dream. This idea, long hailed as the backbone and driving force of our country, implies that anyone can achieve success (which, in this society, is synonymous with economic success) with two simple ingredients: passion and hard work. Acknowledging that there are class disparities goes against the fabric on which this very country was built (Leistyna et. al., 2005). If all people are created equal, does that mean they all have equal opportunities to ascend the socioeconomic ladder? Different groups of people face particular sets of obstacles, whether the result of race, gender, sexuality, or social class – some of which are impossible to overcome without major institutional changes.

As such, money is rarely directly addressed in sitcoms in favor of perpetuating the illusion of the American Dream and a “classless” society (Apler & Leistyna, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “lower-class,” “working-class,” and “middle-class” as used throughout this paper refer only to economic position.

Gerbner's "theory of cultivation" states that "watching a great deal of television will be associated with a tendency to hold specific and distinct perceptions of reality" based on the images projected (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986, p. 17). This essentially means that watching television consistently will ultimately affect the viewer's vision of the real world. Given that Americans watch on average 5.11 hours of television each day (A.C. Nielson Co., 2013), it can be assumed that images perpetuated by situation comedies can genuinely affect the American population's perception of socioeconomic disparity. By primarily featuring characters without any evidence of financial struggle, sitcoms create a distorted representation of the true makeup of American society than genuinely affects viewer's real-world perceptions.

My thesis addresses all of the aforementioned topics, focusing on sitcoms as they were the first programs on television to feature the same characters in each episode with a central location, allowing viewers to get a complete image of their socioeconomic situation (Grote, 12). First I will begin by discussing the concept of "false consciousness" and how misrepresentations on television can have real-world effects on viewers (Jost, 1995, p. 389). I then briefly discuss the background of sitcoms and their origins on television. I then analyze how the advertising industry in the 1950s altered the contents of sitcoms completely, constructing the "middle-class" that dominates television today. I then discuss how socioeconomic class has been constructed since the 1950s. Because economic class is not often directly addressed on sitcoms, I will use three different identifiers to analyze how economic class is presented and whether or not this is consistent with actual U.S. demographics. I begin with race, focusing on African American and Latino characters. Then, I discuss gender, in

particular women and single mothers. Next, I discuss professions presented on television in comparison to actual profession distribution. I then briefly describe the few representations of the working-class in sitcoms. While race, gender, and profession on sitcoms up until the 1990s has been frequently written about, there is remarkably little information indicating class representation on sitcoms over the last 15 years. To rectify this, I conducted my own study in which I analyzed the residences of characters in seven sitcoms that aired in the last 15 years. By estimating the cost of each character's living space through discussions with real estate agencies then comparing these costs to the character's likely salaries, it is then possible to see whether or not the character could actually afford the lifestyle they are maintaining on television, thus revealing whether or not modern sitcoms accurately represent socioeconomic class in the United States. Through research of past studies combined with my individual research, I will ultimately answer the following research questions (1) how has socioeconomic class been represented on sitcoms throughout history (2) can characters on modern sitcoms afford their residences given their professions? (3) how does this frame socioeconomic class on sitcoms and (4) how might these representations this affect members of the working-class? Determining the answers to these questions has significant importance because television genuinely affects people and their societal views. If sitcoms are misrepresenting socioeconomic class, members of each class will have a distorted view of themselves and others, ultimately preventing the awareness necessary for social progress.

## False Consciousness

Before discussing the ways in which situation comedies have inaccurately framed socioeconomic class, it is imperative to first understand why it is that television affects viewers' thoughts on real-life situations and the negative impact it has on their view of themselves. While cultivation theory demonstrates that heavy television viewership can affect one's real-life perceptions, it is the Marxian theory of "false consciousness" that explains the genuine negative affects these distortions can have on viewers' consciousness and actions. The political origins of this theory often lead to skepticism about its validity as a social or psychological theory (Augoustinos, 1995, p. 295). The concept of false consciousness was developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1846 (Jost, 1995, p. 389). Though most widely-known for *The Communist Manifesto*, they wrote about political and philosophical theory well outside the realm of socialism. "Marxist" social theory is in fact defined as "that which is influenced by the method and content of Marx's work and the work of his followers without necessarily adhering to the theory or practice of orthodox Marxism" (Jost 1995, p. 389). While Marx and Engels only wrote about false consciousness informally, they concluded that this concept described the effects of "ideological domination" (Jost 1995, p.389). Through the control of institutions as education, religion, culture, and economic systems, dominant groups and ideas were able to spread, justifying "inequalities of status and power" (Jost, 1995, p. 389). As such, the ideas of those in power ultimately have heavy influence over society. According to Marx, this domination applies specifically to capitalistic societies – without the social class structure (and subsequently, disparity) created by capitalism, this institutional and ideological



influence would not be possible (Eagleton, 1991, p.89). He and Engel further argue that throughout history people “have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are, and what they ought to be” (Marx & Engels, 1846, p.35).

While Marx and Engel did not specifically write about media, and certainly not television, in 1846, this concept could easily be applied to television. Given its roots in capitalistic societies, “false consciousness” has become applicable in modern western societies and their dominant institutions, including mass media (Augoustinos, 1999, p. 297). In this case of sitcoms, the ideas of those in higher socioeconomic classes influence those of working classes, allowing them to believe that there is a much smaller disparity of wealth in America than there actually is.

In order to be defined as false consciousness, certain criteria must be met. A consciousness can only be considered false if it perpetuates inequality by “leading members of a subordinate group to believe that they are inferior, deserving of their plight, or incapable of taking action” against their current situation (Jost, 1995, p. 400). Those in “inferior” parties might deny social injustices, believe that they cannot affect true change, or attribute their oppression to other factors such as bad luck or self-made circumstances. The most clearly defined cases of false consciousness adhere to two set standards: (i) The belief must be ‘false’ in the epistemological sense of being contrary to fact and (ii) the belief but be ‘false’ in the sense that it fails to reflect one’s genuine social interest (Jost, 1995, p. 400). If both of these criteria are met, false consciousness can be defined as “the holding of false or inaccurate beliefs that are contrary to one’s

own social interest and which thereby contribute to the maintenance of the disadvantaged position of the self or group” (Jost,1995, p. 400).

In addition to the base definition of the concept, there are specific types of false consciousness under which a belief can fall. In his article, “Negative Illusions: Conceptual Clarification and Psychological Evidence concerning False Consciousness,” Jost constructs a definition of false consciousness that applies directly to the ideas presented in this paper. He asserts that there are six types of false consciousness: 1. Failure to perceive injustice and disadvantage 2. Fatalism 3. Justification of social roles 4. False attribution of blame 5. Identification with the oppressor and 6. Resistance to change (Jost, 1995, p.398). Although arguments could be made for any of the aforementioned categories, failure to perceive injustice and disadvantage and justification of social roles most accurately describe the effects of socioeconomic misrepresentations in sitcoms.

For instance, when there is a failure to perceive injustice and disadvantage, there is “a tendency of the oppressed and exploited classes in a society to believe the injustice of the social order that oppresses them” (Jost, 1995, p. 403). This is most likely driven by American belief in a just society, meaning the world in which we live operates fairly and as such “one’s own outcomes are safe or under control” (Jost, 1995, p. 403). This would indicate that members of working classes, seeing themselves misrepresented on television or – even worse – not seeing themselves represented at all, will believe that their economic position is deserved because the world operates justly. This further serves to create loyalty to the institution that marginalized them in the first place. Believing in a just world creates a sense of security – everyone will ultimately get what

they deserve. However, this can also breed complacency. By believing they deserve to be marginalized or will eventually be rewarded, members of such groups will not take action to attain the social and economic justices that are inherently their right. “Political mistrust has been identified as essential to group consciousness-raising and the achievement of progressive social change” and without this criticism of our cultural and economic institutions, marginalized groups won’t achieve collective or individual progress (Jost, 1995, p. 403).

Such groups can further deny their misfortune by comparing their current situation to different injustices of the past or present (“There may be enormous economic disparity in this country, but it’s not as bad as the Great Depression!” or “I might not have money, but racial minorities face far bigger obstacles than I do!”) (Major, 1994, p. 293). Consequently, social injustice is “often appraised as legitimate” and is therefore far more likely to be perpetuated, even by the actual victims of injustice (Jost & Banjai, 1995, p. 33). This is particularly the case for those of lower economic classes. Jost states that “just as people fail to perceive injustices, they may also fail to realize that they are materially deprived compared to some absolute or relative standard” (Jost, 1995, p. 404).

This denial, in turn, creates contentment with their own circumstances that would ordinarily be deemed intolerable and warrant some form of action. This phenomenon has been termed “paradoxical contentment” (Crosby, 1982). For example, Biernat and Wortman’s study showed that wives admit to doing more housework but claim they support the unequal arrangement and even had a part in its development (1991). Similarly, low-status groups often subconsciously reinterpret their objective

status, claiming to be an equal part in its creation. While this does lead to a temporary increase in self-esteem, it also leads to long-term social and political disaster as it “stifles attempts at personal or social change” (Jost, 1995, p. 404).

The development of this complacent attitude gives way to another type of false consciousness: justification of social rules. One of the main forms of social consciousness allows people to think that rank in the social order determines individual worth, both of others and of self (Jost, 1995, p. 404). As a result, individuals will form perceptions of others that are “consonant” with their social roles; therefore, these interactions will simply reflect and reproduce social inequalities (Athay & Darley, 1985, p. 232). In terms of a group mentality, stereotypes will then be produced to explain and perpetuate power and status disparities amongst social groups. This in turn gives individuals the impression that their “failures” or even successes are completely dependent on “inherent characteristics about themselves” (Jost, 1995, p. 407). For instance, in his studies Jost found that people came to conclusions about the attributes of others, as well as their own, based on information gleaned about status or wealth (408). For instance, a Darley and Gross study determined that people judged a child’s intelligence as being higher when she was portrayed in a middle-class environment as opposed to a working-class environment, despite their being no difference in the child’s behavior (1983).

The general consensus between each of these works is that misrepresentation can be severely damaging to self-worth. Considering television’s considerable breadth in American society – 99 percent of homes in the United States possess at least one television – it is quite possible that any sort of misrepresentation on television could

create false consciousness within its viewers (A.C. Nielsen Co., 2013). This paper aims to discover if this is true within American sitcoms. Given the format of recurring characters and locations in situation comedies, viewers can get a clear idea of the lifestyles which the characters lead. I hope to determine if these lifestyles match up with the characters' actual economic means and the true demographics of U.S. society. If not, it is likely that the distortion of socioeconomic class could potentially cause detrimental false consciousness amongst viewers, particularly those of lower economic classes.

## Background

In order to better understand situation comedies' representation of socioeconomic class, it is necessary to first understand the concept and history of sitcoms in general. "Sitcom" is an informal term for "situational comedy," meaning comedy created by putting characters in humorous situations (Grote, 1983, p. 12). According to Grote, "the sitcom overturned more than two thousand years of comic traditions and established an entirely new and unique form of comedy" (1983, 12). Each episode runs roughly 30 minutes long with the inclusion of advertising (which is discussed later in this paper). They are often written with the intention of having a tight and resolvable plotline that serves to provide entertainment, as opposed to a drama or soap opera (Grote, 1983, p. 12). Although some episodes contain plot points that are intended to continue throughout the series, the central plot is intended to be resolved by the end of the thirty minute time segment. They typically feature a central area that the characters return to every episode (Central Perk coffee house in *Friends*, Lucy and Rick's apartment in *I Love Lucy*) (Metz, 2008, p. 1).

Sitcoms were originally developed as something of a compromise between theater and radio broadcasting (Mills, 2004, p. 63). Television was increasing in popularity, and networks were searching for a way to bring comedy that was so popular in these two mediums into a new age of media delivery. US television networks saw an opportunity to employ popular comedic vaudeville actors in regular formats and timeslots, allowing for consistent viewership and high ratings.

Situation comedies all drew a fair amount of inspiration from music hall origins. Andy Medhurst and Lucy Tuck, for instance, suggest that "a major part of the pleasure

derived from the sitcom results from its attempt to recreate the music hall experience” (1982, p. 45). This is created through use of the laughter track (the sounds of laughter heard in most sitcoms after an actor delivers a humorous line). This is an attempt to create the “fourth wall” of music halls, being the live audience. Until recent years, most sitcoms were actually filmed in front of a live audience, although the laugh track was still created electronically to maintain sound clarity. While many sitcoms have begun to move away from this method of filming, the laugh track remains as an “electronic substitute for the collective experience” (Mills, 2004, p. 65).

. The first network to publish sitcoms was DuMont Television Network. Established in 1946, DuMont aired 13 programs before eventually going off the air in 1956 (Kurp, 2011, p.1). In these brief ten years, however, DuMont was able to establish its own brand of entertainment (Kurp, 2011, p.1). Multiple genres have emerged from DuMont’s original template including:

- The Family Sitcom (*I Love Lucy, Leave it to Beaver*)
- Non-Nuclear Family Sitcom (*The Brady Bunch*)
- The Dysfunctional Family Sitcom (*Malcom in the Middle, Arrested Development*)
- The Modern Family Sitcom (*The Cosby Show, Everybody Loves Raymond*)
- The Workplace Sitcom (*The Office, Scrubs*)
- The Animated Sitcom (*Futurama, The Simpsons*)
- The Fantastical Sitcom (*Mr. Ed, The Addams Family*)
- The Kidcentric Sitcom (*Saved By the Bell, Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*)
- The Friends Sitcom (*Seinfeld, Friends, That 70s Show*)

While sitcoms were (and have remained) a successful television medium across America, they have also been widely criticized. The most frequent criticism of this genre claims that “in contrast to many other television genres, [it] has developed little since it was first created” (Mills, 2004, p. 63). It has been attacked as reliant upon stereotypical depictions, outdated representation, and “an apparent failure to engage with social or political movements” (2004, p. 63). For instance, the fact that most sitcoms are centered around families is seen as a manner of reinforcing outmoded assumptions about domestic normality, creating a hegemony across American television that isn’t consistent with the audience’s true life experience. Furthermore, whether progressive or not, sitcoms have been criticized for their failure to place representations in a larger social context. Real world inequalities such as race or gender conflicts are presented as “nothing more than personal squabbles” that fail to educate the audience on their genuine implications (2004, p. 64). This is rarely more evident than in situation comedies’ depiction of social class. The beginning of broadcasting started out promising: all the earliest programs featured lower income class families dealing with their typical day-to-day struggles such as *I Remember Mama*, *The Goldbergs*, and *Life with Luigi* which portrayed families of Norwegian, Jewish, and Italian descent. However, in the mid-to-late 50s, sitcoms would experience a shift to whiter, higher income-class characters that would change the course of television, and socioeconomic representation.



## **The 1950s and the Influence of Advertising**

In the mid-1950s, the arrival of advertising in the television industry exponentially shifted the focus of American sitcoms. As advertisers played an increasingly important role in television, their influence became noticeable not only in commercial advertisements, but also in the programs. Advertisers often sponsored television programs, meaning they had control over nearly all factors of the show (Apler & Leistyna, 2005). They were able to select screen writers, hire actors, and even place their products in the shows. This made consumerism present within the actual narrative, as opposed to just in advertisements. The use of product placement on sitcoms created a physical image of the new ideal class – “the middle class,” as it was called. The advertising industry “understood that associating products with certain lifestyles would increase both ratings and sales,” and thus worked to construct “the middle class” lifestyle (Apler & Leistyna, 2005).

The middle class was not defined by income, however, but by consumption of products (Apler & Leistyna, 2005). Advertisers specifically targeted homemakers in this not-yet-strictly-defined social class. Housewives had purchasing power within their families, which meant all messaging had to be delivered to them. Rather than creating advertisements for products, however, advertisers focused on creating an image: the ideal 1950s sitcom housewife. Featured on nearly every program, she was central to the economy of the family, as she made purchasing decisions, but was not valued enough to earn on their behalf. She valued household products above all else – the latest appliance guaranteed the highest social status (Haralovich, 1989). Consumers began to believe that they could achieve desirable status by simply by purchasing these products (Apler

& Leistyna, 2005). For example, in *Amos n' Andy*, Amos' wife, Ruby, wants to purchase a dining room table because the possession of such furniture would ensure that they were surrounded by "intelligent people" (Apler & Leistyna, 2005). Additionally, many shows that started out featuring working class families showed them eventually "moving up" out of these situations as the result of consumerism. Take *The Goldbergs*, for instance. While the show began with the Goldberg family living in the Bronx, by the end of the series they had moved from urban America to the suburbs, and achieved "the American Dream" as a result. Through strategic product placement, "advertisers were able to redefine the meaning of the American Dream from the search for a better life to the pursuit of a consumer lifestyle" (Apler & Leistyna, 2005).

As a result, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, working class families essentially disappeared from situation comedies. Despite the influence of advertisement, however, it was the political and economic atmosphere of the United States allowed this change to remain permanent. The introduction of television advertising coincided with a period of economic boom in the U.S., which gave viewers little reason to question the economic success of the families they saw on television. News broadcasts likely told stories of economic prosperity, which combined with the expensive products viewers saw advertised likely presented the image of financial success throughout the United States, allowing viewers to accept the visions of affluence presented on sitcoms (Apler & Leistyna, 2005). Further, there was significant ideological reason to ignore the working class. The Cold War and the McCarthy era had just begun, which resulted in widespread mistrust among Americans. Unions worked to increase working-class rights by demanding a set of rules protecting their rights as workers, particularly in regards to

payment, which resulted in the economic boom Americans enjoyed, but were now viewed as a threat. Many politicians were framing unionizers as socialists, and any movement to democratize the work place or industry was labeled as communism (Apler & Leistyna, 2005). For this reason, it was beneficial for the television industry to hide the working class in favor of the pleasant, non-threatening, vaguely defined middle class (Apler & Leistyna, 2005).

## Race and Class

As a result of the influence of the advertising industry, working-class families all but disappeared on situation comedies despite a vastly different truth in the actual United States. Furthermore, class in situation comedies has rarely been discussed in academic literature, making it nearly impossible to determine the actual amount of disparity between the image of class presented on television and the real-world demographics. However, multiple other characteristics have been studied on sitcoms including race, gender, and profession. By studying the portrayal of race on sitcoms, it is possible to determine the difference between the representation of each race's socioeconomic class on television and their likely income in the real world. For instance, the majority of minority groups on sitcoms since the 1960s are portrayed as living comfortably – part of the middle-class or higher. A 2000 study by Mastro & Greenberg of 64 television shows on the four major networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX) concluded that there was little to no economic disparity between African Americans, Latinos, and Whites (Fig. 1).

**Table 1**  
**All Characters By Race**

	Caucasian ( <i>n</i> = 452)	Latino ( <i>n</i> = 18)	African-American ( <i>n</i> = 88)	<i>p</i>
Income:				
% middle	60%	56%	63%	n.s.
Age:				
% in 30s	35	61	33	<.05
Role:				
% major	52	44	56	n.s.
Sex:				
% female	38	39	36	n.s.

Figure 1 (Mastro & Greenberg, 696)

This is in stark contrast to the U.S. Bureau of Census' published distribution of wealth based on race (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011). The study measured the income of White, African American, and Latino households for the years 1975, 1985, 1995, 2006, 2010, and 2011. Looking at the year 2006 (the closest economic climate to the year 2000 when Mastro and Greenberg's study was conducted), it is clear that representations of each race's income is vastly different on television than in real life (Fig. 2). According to a U.S. Department of Commerce study, a middle-class family or individual would earn between \$50,800 and \$122,000 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2010). Using this definition, the percentage of families in each race that were portrayed as middle-class on television was significantly higher than in actuality. However, the blatant misrepresentation of economic disparity between the races was even more disturbing. The study showed that 50.8% of White households fell within the middle-class, while only 36.7% of Latino and 32% of African American households did (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011). Sitcom representation would lead the public to believe that there is little difference between the three races (in fact, it shows African American as being the wealthiest of three as opposed to their true position as the poorest).

**Distribution of Household Income by Race**

Income range	White						Black						Hispanic origin <sup>1</sup>					
	1975	1985	1995	2006	2010	2011	1975	1985	1995	2006	2010	2011	1975	1985	1995	2006	2010	2011
Number of households (thousands)	64,392	76,576	84,511	94,705	83,471	83,573	7,489	9,797	11,577	14,354	15,065	15,583	2,948	5,213	7,939	12,973	13,655	14,939
Percent distribution																		
Under \$5,000	2.4%	2.4%	2.1%	2.5%	n.a.	n.a.	5.5%	6.3%	6.2%	6.6%	n.a.	n.a.	3.8%	4.1%	4.5%	3.5%	n.a.	n.a.
\$5,000 to \$9,999	6.8	5.8	5.1	3.7	n.a.	n.a.	15.4	15.0	12.3	9.2	n.a.	n.a.	10.0	9.7	10.1	5.7	n.a.	n.a.
\$10,000 to \$14,999	7.5	7.0	6.4	5.6	11.1 <sup>2</sup>	10.9 <sup>2</sup>	13.4	11.0	9.6	8.6	25.8 <sup>2</sup>	25.6 <sup>2</sup>	10.2	10.8	9.9	7.1	17.4 <sup>2</sup>	16.5 <sup>2</sup>
\$15,000 to \$24,999	14.2	12.9	13.2	11.5	11.1	10.5	18.0	17.1	16.4	15.2	14.7	15.0	20.5	17.9	18.8	15.5	14.8	14.7
\$25,000 to \$34,999	13.5	12.8	11.9	11.3	10.2	10.3	14.7	14.3	13.5	13.5	12.7	12.2	16.7	14.5	14.9	14.0	13.8	14.0
\$35,000 to \$49,999	19.4	16.7	16.0	14.6	13.6	13.7	15.6	13.8	14.8	14.8	14.6	13.5	19.0	16.7	15.8	17.5	15.7	16.8
\$50,000 to \$74,999	21.4	20.7	19.5	18.8	18.3	18.2	12.4	13.3	14.7	15.2	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.6	14.1	17.3	17.2	17.0
\$75,000 to \$99,999	9.0	11.0	11.7	11.8	12.4	12.4	3.5	6.0	7.0	7.7	7.6	8.0	3.7	6.5	6.5	8.9	9.6	9.2
\$100,000 and over	5.8	10.5	14.2	20.2	13.5 <sup>3</sup>	13.3 <sup>3</sup>	1.4	3.1	5.3	9.1	6.5 <sup>3</sup>	6.8 <sup>3</sup>	1.9	4.4	5.4	10.5	7.7 <sup>3</sup>	7.5 <sup>3</sup>
Median income	\$39,463	\$43,100	\$45,496	\$50,673	\$54,620	\$55,412	\$23,691	\$25,642	\$28,485	\$31,969	\$32,068	\$32,229	\$28,350	\$30,221	\$29,079	\$37,781	\$37,759	\$38,624

Figure 2 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011)

While it might seem as though this misrepresentation is harmless – even inspirational – to minority groups, this is not the case. Not seeing an accurate representation of oneself in popular culture can be extremely damaging for a number of reasons. First, as is commonly attributed to the Model Minority stereotype associated with Asian Americans, members of a marginalized group (in this case Latinos and African Americans) can feel like a failure if they do not live up to the expectations of their group. Specifically, Latinos and African Americans could feel intense disappointment with themselves if they do not reach the economic status of those presented in sitcoms. Further, refusing to acknowledge differences between racial groups ignores cultural diversity, instead promoting uniformity that undercuts the dynamic nature of American society (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000, p. 699).

Inaccuracy of representations begs the question: how did these portrayals come to exist? This can easily be traced to the arrival of African American families on sitcoms in the 1970s (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000, p. 699). Until that point, African Americans had almost solely been featured on crime shows. However, during the 1970s and most noticeably by the 1980s, “criminal or deviant portrayals [of African Americans] seemed to largely disappear” (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000, p. 699). On situation comedies, however, they had achieved equal status as Whites, a stark contrast to their previous depictions as criminals.

This can largely be attributed to two specific sitcoms: *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985) and *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992). *The Jeffersons* focused on a popular African American plotline at the time: “movin’ on up.” Created by Norman Lear, a huge influence in bringing African Americans to prime time sitcoms, the show centered on Louise and George Jefferson and their son Lionel. The series was actually a spinoff of *All in the Family*, and begins with the Jefferson family moving out of their working-class Queens neighborhood into a luxurious Manhattan apartment complex (Apler & Leistyna, 2005). The success of George’s dry cleaning business provided the family with enough money to “move up” and out of their working-class position. *The Cosby Show*, on the other hand, depicted a family who was already there. The show chronicles the family life of Heathcliff Huxtable, an obstetrician, his wife Claire Huxtable, a successful lawyer and their five children. While many have commended these shows for illustrating African American families as economically successful, respectable, and intelligent, they have also received a fair amount of criticism as well. Both of these series, and in later years *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, were criticized by African

American audiences as not being “black enough” (Coleman, xii, 1998). While this statement in itself is a form of stereotyping (studios were, after all, looking to rectify the disturbingly racist depictions featured on *Amos N’ Andy*), the sentiment remained: African Americans did not feel accurately represented by these shows (Coleman, xii, 1998). This is likely because, despite the cast and themes of the shows, producers were playing to White audiences. African Americans were still new to prime time television, so producers had to frame them in a way that allowed White audiences to feel comfortable with this progression: in other words, create characters White characters that happened to have black skin (Coleman, xiii, 1998). While this was a significant improvement from illustration as criminals and deviants, “Blacks on television need to be portrayed in the full spectrum of roles and cultural styles existing in our pluralistic society” (Coleman, xiv, 1998). By only showing African Americans as wealthy on situation comedies, White audiences were permitted to ignore civil rights problems that did – and continue to – exist, particularly the issue of economic disparity.

This framing was almost identical for Latinos on television, despite occurring several years later. Only in the past two decades have Latino characters gained prominence in situation comedies, and just like African Americans, have been constructed to please a White audience (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000, p. 699). According to Mastro & Greenberg, “Latinos have been shown to have their own orientation to television shows favored by Anglos” (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000, p. 699). The television industry has used this as an excuse to defend their White-washed illustrations of Latinos...one senior advertising executive interviewed even went so far as to claim “a lot of Latinos live white lifestyles” (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000, p.699). A far cry



from accurate, studios nonetheless do not feel the need to accurately reflect their culture or specifically target a Latino audience; they are just trying to make “White shows” that happen to have Latinos in them (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000, p. 699). Despite the possible positive intentions of eliminating racial differences, “race and racial categories are ever more present in our society...and they need to be” (Esposito, 2009, p.521). This is unfortunately not the case in the popular ABC sitcom *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010). Hailed as one of the first sitcoms to feature a Latina protagonist while also confronting feminist issues, *Ugly Betty* actually does little to present an accurate representation of American Latino families. Betty Suarez works as an assistant editor of *Mode*, a high-end fashion magazine in New York. In addition to this glamorous yet completely unrealistic profession, her father is an illegal immigrant who came to the United States after committing murder on behalf of the woman he loved in Mexico. Once again, we are faced with the plotline of “movin’ on up” which would have any U.S. citizen believe they can achieve elite economic and social status through work and the desire to succeed. Take, for example, the third season episode in which Betty and her white male coworker Mark both apply to the (fictional) Young Editors Training Institute. Mark worked on his application, a sample magazine, more over two months, had celebrity sponsors and numerous letters of recommendation, and had been working at *Mode* twice as long. Betty, on the other hand, found out about the opportunity 48 hours before the deadline. Betty was awarded the position. After Mark confronted her about the situation, she suggested that perhaps the reason she got the job was that she “wanted it more” than he did. This storyline perpetuates the damaging illusion of the American Dream: one can achieve economic success through mere passion. This fails to illustrate

the actual reality that there are unjust circumstances that prevent individuals from achieving a higher socioeconomic status, which results in the failure of White citizens to examine their own situation of White Privilege and prevents minority groups from acknowledging that there are unfair economic disparities amongst racial groups (Esposito, 2009, p. 522). In her analysis of *Ugly Betty*, Esposito asserts that the “color-blind society” America claims to be is actually harmful. While she does not suggest that using race as an organizing system is synonymous with racism, “pretending it is not part of national discourse” does people of color “more disservice” (522). In particular, this discourse is perhaps “especially powerful” within popular culture. By continuing to present minority groups in a way that doesn’t reflect their true circumstances, sitcoms allow privileged individuals to ignore the reality of inequality and encourages those suffering from these unjust circumstances to remain quiet.

## Gender and Class

There is a tragic misrepresentation of women in relation to socioeconomic class on television as well. Beginning with the very conception of the sitcom, women have never been portrayed as working out of economic necessity (Apler & Leistyna, 2005). The classic 1950s and 1960s sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *Dennis the Menace* never feature a working mother, despite the fact that during that period of time there were more women in the work force than ever (Dow, 1996, xvii). For nearly two decades, the preferred representation of women in television series were of “contented housewives,” whose happiness was depended solely on serving their family and household products (xvii). For example, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* all featured wives who did not work outside the home. However, controlling purchasing decisions does not suggest that they were illustrated as valid contributors to the economy; rather, they could frivolously use money earned by their husbands (of which there was always a bountiful) to purchase household items that the man need not be bothered with (xvii). While some critics commended the small acts of feminism committed by “rebellious” housewives such as Lucy on *I Love Lucy*, Alice Kramden on *The Honeymooners*, and Samantha Stevens on *Bewitched*, these “pockets of rebellion...occurred in a social context that lacked public awareness of feminism or of the existence of any organized political resistance to women’s oppression” (xvii). In other words, audiences did not notice any statement beyond simple comic relief. Further, while these female leads had impressive comedic talents and often voiced their

opinions to create humorous conflict, they never had legitimate power in their familial roles, economic or otherwise.

Their portrayal as such was no coincidence. Mary Beth Haralovich argues in her article *Sitcoms and the Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker* that female portrayals in these early sitcoms encouraged the growth of middle-class suburbs and the consumerist role of middle-class housewives (Haralovich, 1989, p.62). As previously discussed, advertisers used product placement as a means to create an entire consumer culture and the material-obsessed, fictional “middle-class” that represents the American Dream. After working as skilled laborers and professionals during World War II, women were forced back into their roles as homemakers. Advertisers saw this as an opportunity. Homemakers were considered to have the majority of the purchasing power in families, so advertisers were looking for a way to target these women and redirect their interests toward material products. The 1950s and 1960s sitcom housewife was simply a tool used to sell audiences on consumerism in general. By showing “normal women” with seemingly idyllic families that perpetuated the “family values” of American society living in large homes and purchasing a number of material products, advertisers were able to sell a certain set of ideals. The American Dream, which had become synonymous with happiness and success, could be achieved through the attainment of material goods (Haralovich, 1989, p.63).

Despite dramatic shifts in women’s roles in American society, the use of female sitcom characters as a vehicle for consumerism continued well past the age of drive-in movies and sock hops. The 1970s saw successful women’s liberation movements. Women began contributing to family income (although the majority of this was out of

economic necessity, rather than simply choice). Regardless of the reason behind this change, becoming a “professional” or “career” woman had become a desirable image, especially in the eyes of advertisers (Lotz, 2001, p.107). Although this was a far cry from the women chained to the kitchen sink that advertisers targeted during the 1950s and 1960s, this was nonetheless another opportunity to perpetuate consumerism. By targeting career women, they could continue to promote a lifestyle based on material goods – only this time, women had their own means to purchase them. Producers and advertisers continue to practice this in modern sitcoms. Of course, the average American woman was unable to afford such items, but by presenting economically independent, affluent women as the norm, audiences were encouraged to buy material products to achieve this glamorous lifestyle (Lotz, 2001, p. 107). Women between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine, according to advertisers, made the majority of consumption decisions (107).

Therefore, this is the group they aimed to target. Rather than directly selling a product, however, they chose to sell a lifestyle. “Television producers and advertisers are not as interested in finding out what appeals to women as in constructing an identity for women that is favorable to what advertisers hope to sell” (Dow, xx 1996). This commodification of characters led producers to perpetuate the “prevailing (and dominant) conceptions of ‘woman,’ particularly as these satisfy certain economic needs” (xx). It was essential that women maintained traditional feminine roles including interest in cosmetics, clothing, and material items such as home goods. However, they also needed to be able to purchase such items. Homemakers no longer constituted the norm in American society, so economically independent women had become the new

valuable image for advertisers. In other words, sitcoms constructed characters that represent the ideal female consumer: White, feminine, powerful, and wealthy.

Perhaps the most pervasive example of this is the rise of single mothers on situation comedies. Although the number of single mothers that were head of household rose dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s, it wasn't until the late 1990s and early 2000s that single mothers began to be featured on popular sitcoms. Series such as *Judging Amy*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Gilmore Girls* were rising in popularity, all featuring single mothers as protagonists. While this was consistent with the increase in single mothers across the country, their actual portrayals were far from accurate. Amy Gray, *Judging Amy*'s title character, works as a state court judge. Working for the state, judges can make anywhere between \$60,000 and \$100,000 per year based on the number of hours worked, which puts Amy comfortably in the middle-class even if she makes the minimum (Cornell University Law School, 2014). Throughout the show, Amy often laments the difficulties of single-motherhood, but never complains of economic troubles. She even runs for state Senate in later seasons, meaning she had earned enough to allow her to quit her job, run a campaign, and support her daughter. Murphy Brown, on the other hand, works as an investigative journalist and anchor for a fictional CBS newsmagazine. Although the show begins with her leaving a rehabilitation facility for alcoholism, she is portrayed as an extremely respected, and quite famous, journalist. By comparing various anchor salaries at real-world newsmagazines *60 Minutes* and *Dateline*, the most similar newsmagazines to the fictional *FYI* we can assume that Murphy Brown makes anywhere between \$200,000 and \$500,000 per year (Fung, 2013, p. 1).

In contrast, *Gilmore Girls* at least attempts to illustrate the financial hardships of single motherhood. The show begins with Rory Gilmore, age 16, getting accepted to Chilton Academy, a prestigious private high school in Hartford, Connecticut. It is Rory's dream to go to Harvard University, which would appear impossible with a small-town public high school education, so her mother Lorelai (who gave birth to Rory at age 16) is desperate to send her to Chilton. However, as the manager of an inn in a small town, she can't afford it. She ultimately asks her wealthy parents, from whom she's been estranged since Rory's birth, for financial help with the promise to have dinner together every Friday night. All in all, this seems to be a realistic representation of a common problem amongst single mothers. Beyond the basic plot, however, her lifestyle shows no sign of economic hardship. Rory and Lorelai live in a fairly large, two-story home with a wrap-around porch, the two often go clothes shopping without apparent necessity, and they dine out for every single meal. On top of that, in the fourth season Lorelai and her coworker Sookie purchase their own inn. The payment for the building alone would be far more than she could realistically afford, not to mention the financial risks of opening a business while still in debt. However, she somehow manages to purchase the Dragonfly Inn, turn it into a success, and even send Rory to Yale without another mention of financial insecurity.

This is a far cry from the reality of single motherhood in the United States. According to the 2012 US Census, 30% of single mothers live below the poverty line (compared to 13% nationally) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). Even of those who technically live above the poverty line, 61% make less than \$30,000 each year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). Only two-fifths are employed full-time, meaning they

work more than one job or simply do not make ends meet. Portraying single mothers on sitcoms as wealthy, or even just comfortable, could allow audiences across America to ignore the genuine crisis that single mothers face.



## **Profession and Class**

Little makes the distortion of socioeconomic class more evident than the portrayal of professions in sitcoms. As opposed to an accurate picture of various professions across the United States, “there are no longer direct representations of the interactions among works on American television...almost solely in police shows and in beer commercials” (Bettie, 1995). The effects have been so detrimental to the working class that “forging a class identity” is all but impossible because the media completely denies their existence – a pattern that began with the earliest sitcoms and continues to hold strong today.

In a 1964 study conducted by Melvin L. DeFleur confirmed the longstanding distortion of occupations throughout sitcom history. DeFleur studied 436 occupational roles presented on prime time shows broadcast in Indiana. If a character was shown at their given profession for a minimum of three minutes, the occupation was considered valid to study. He produced the following data:

## OCCUPATIONAL ROLES ON TELEVISION

TABLE 1  
RELATIVE FREQUENCY OF APPEARANCE ON TELEVISION OF  
24 PROFESSIONAL CATEGORIES AND  
OCCUPATIONAL GROUPINGS

<i>Category or Grouping</i>	<i>Frequency of Appearance</i>
Occupations related to the law	128
Occupations related to the entertainment business	43
Occupations related to health and medicine	39
Owners of small businesses	27
Personal servants	26
Secretaries and office workers	23
Military personnel	22
Executives, managers, and superintendents	18
Skilled workers, technicians, and specialists	13
Semi-skilled workers	13
Occupations related to journalism	12
Educators	11
Taxi, truck, and bus drivers	11
Hazardous or adventurous occupations*	8
Bartenders and waiters	6
Members of the clergy	6
Bank tellers and hotel clerks	6
Unskilled workers	6
Foremen	4
Salesmen	4
Miscellaneous lower professions	4
Artists, writers, and composers	3
Ranch owners	2
Miscellaneous service workers	5
Total	436

\* Includes such occupations as underwater diver, helicopter pilot, and automobile race driver.

Figure 3 (DeFleur, 1964, 63)

It's fairly clear that this list of occupations was not reflective of the actual labor force in America at the time. To emphasize just how different the distributions were, DeFleur created a second chart by comparing the occupations above to the actual distribution of labor force in Indiana.

TABLE 2  
COMPARISON OF THE TELEVISED LABOR FORCE WITH THE ACTUAL  
COMPOSITION OF THE INDIANA LABOR FORCE

<i>Occupational Categories</i>	<i>Per Cent of Workers Shown in Televised Portrayals</i>		<i>Per Cent of Workers Actually in Labor Force</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
1. Professional, technical, and kindred workers	29.8	37.2	8.9	11.8
2. Farmers and farm managers	0.5	0.0	6.5	0.07
3. Managers, officials, and proprietors (except farm)	33.1	7.1	9.1	3.4
4. Clerical and kindred workers	2.5	28.6	6.1	29.6
5. Sales workers, retail and other	1.1	0.0	6.0	8.6
6. Craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers	3.6	8.6	21.0	1.3
7. Operatives and kindred workers	5.5	5.7	24.0	16.8
8. Private household workers	4.9	11.4	0.1	6.0
9. Service workers (except category 8)	13.9	0.0	5.2	15.0
10. Farm laborers and farm foremen	0.0	0.0	1.8	0.08
11. Laborers (except farm and mine)	1.6	0.0	7.0	0.7
12. Occupations not reported (or unclassified)	3.5	1.4	4.3	5.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

SOURCE: *United States Census of Population, 1960, Indiana, General Social and Economic Characteristics*. See Table 57, "Occupational Group of Employed Persons, by Sex, for the State, Urban and Rural."

Figure 4 (DeFleur, 1964, p. 64)

DeFleur concluded that professional workers and managers/proprietors were significantly overrepresented for both males and female. Almost one third of the labor force on television worked in professional occupations of relatively high social and economic prestige, in contrast to the less than one tenth that held these occupations in the actual labor force. Similarly, over one third of workers on television were managers, officials, or proprietors compared to the less than 10 percent in Indiana's labor force (DeFleur, 1964, p. 64). In contrast, less than one tenth of men on television held jobs in commerce and industry (craftsmen, operatives, etc.), while almost half the males in did so in

the actual labor force. The bias towards these careers, which both hold relatively high social and economic prestige, is slightly more dramatic amongst males, but that can largely be attributed to the fact that women on television and in the actual population at this time, as discussed earlier, were mostly positioned as homemakers (DeFleur, 1964).

In addition to studying the occupational roles themselves, DeFleur also took note of the physical spaces in which these jobs were performed, as “physically settings...imply something of the style of life supposedly associated with a given occupation” (DeFluer, 1964). Spaces were classified according to spaciousness, degree of decoration and repair, modernity, furnishings, and level of luxury, then compared to the general class of these settings. After compiling this information, he was able to sort the work settings into three different categories: Category I representing a glamorous or luxurious space, Category II representing an “ordinary” setting, and Category III representing a work setting of a “humble nature” (DeFleur, 1964). He then created a chart presenting the number of times each of 35 professions was shown in each of the categories (Fig. 5).

TABLE 3  
INDEX OF RELATIVE FREQUENCY WITH WHICH PORTRAYED OCCUPATIONS  
WERE SHOWN AT WORK IN THREE TYPES OF BACKGROUND SETTINGS  
(number of settings per 100 workers)\*

Occupational Category	"Glamorous" Settings	"Ordinary" Settings	"Humble" Settings
Personal servants	158	15	
Lawyers	82	50	
Agents and managers (of performers)	60	40	
Owners or directors of entertainment enterprises	57	29	
Salesmen	50	125	
Executives, managers, and supervisors	40	56	
Physicians	38	40	
Adventurous and hazardous occupations	38		
Public performers	35	54	12
Bartenders and waiters	29	57	14
Police officials	25	66	9
Nurses	25	38	
Miscellaneous lower professions	20	100	
Skilled workers, technicians, and specialists	20	33	20
Commissioned military officers	19	75	
Journalists	17	67	8
Semi-skilled workers	15	46	38
Uniformed police patrolmen	14	47	7
Secretaries and office workers	13	70	
Sheriffs, deputies, and police technicians	10	66	7
Owners of small businesses	4	56	48
Foremen		150	
Educators		118	
Public health officials		100	
Judges		100	
Taxi, bus, and truck drivers		73	18
District attorneys		67	
Clergy		67	50
Bank tellers and hotel clerks		67	50
Unskilled workers		50	50
Private detectives and private police		40	30
Artists, writers, and composers		33	
Enlisted military personnel		17	
Ranch owners			50
Miscellaneous service workers			60

Figure 5 (DeFleur, 67)

According to the data, service jobs such as a butler, bartender, and agent were shown in a much more glamorous setting than in which their real occupation would take place. This misrepresentation would lead viewers to believe that they could attain a life of luxury by pursuing one of these professions, which is horribly inaccurate.

Tragically, occupational misrepresentation has only increased over time. A 1992 study by Richard Butsch found that of 262 domestic sitcoms between 1946 and 1990 found that only "11 percent of the shows had blue-collar, clerical, and service workers as heads of household" despite these being the most common male jobs in the United States (Butsch, 1992). Instead, sitcoms such as *The Cosby Show* with a physician/husband and lawyer/wife, *Scrubs* that features only young successful doctors,

or *The Mary Tyler Moore* show with a news producer protagonist are presented as the norm (Bettie, 1995).

In another study conducted by Butsch and Glennon, collected data on the occupational status of spouses and other members of the household in multiple sitcoms throughout the years. According to the study, the independently wealthy and self-employed were defined as upper class, professionals, salaried managers, sales workers (excluding retail clerks), sheriffs, and detectives were classified as middle class, and blue collar-workers were classified as working class. Results showed that over 32 years of television, 63.5% sitcoms featured middle class families, as opposed to the 28.7% in the actual population. Professionals comprised 43.4% of household heads in comparison to 14.5% in the population. The self-employed comprised 13.2% of series, while only 5.1% of heads of household are actually self-employed (Butsch & Glennon, 1983). Yet another study conducted by Butsch showed a large distortion in the ratio of professions displayed in sitcoms; 9 doctors to 1 nurse, 7 professors to 2 school teachers, and 19 lawyers to 2 accountants. Even those without an identifiable profession were assumed to be affluent and live in middle-class homes based on their “lifestyle, home, or furnishings.” Writers and artists with no additional income (such as Rob Petrie on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*) were shown living quite comfortably in homes that were consistent with the furnishings of middle to upper-middle class homes (Butsch, 1992, p. 390). These images presented by sitcoms are detrimental to members of lower socioeconomic classes. First, the overwhelming number high-prestige professions shown creates the illusion that those professions are the norm, whereas the majority of workers in the United States are employed by commerce and industry. This

misconception likely causes viewers to feel they are inadequate, which in turn makes them complacent and unwilling to strive for a higher status. Second, displaying homes that are well beyond the financial means of the characters gives viewers a false impression of the quality of life certain professions guarantee. Both viewers who are currently in the labor force and those who have yet to enter it could retain a false impression of the value of money. For younger viewers in particular, it is likely that they will try to emulate the lifestyle of the characters they see without realizing that in reality their professions would never allow them to attain this. Viewers who are currently in the labor force will once again experience a sense of failure. By comparing their own reality to what is presented on television, it is not surprising that they would become disgruntled and disillusioned by their own circumstances, and will yet again fall into the trap of complacency and false contentment.

## Working-Class Representation

Though not entirely absent, working-class families appeared infrequently at best from 1946 to 1990. Of the 262 situation comedies that aired in that time period, only 11 featured a blue collar head of house, and most appeared only briefly before cancellation (Bettie, 1995). There were three major periods in which working class appearances spiked: the initial years of television in the late 1940s and early 1950s (*I Remember Mama*, *The Life of Riley*), during the early 1970s when CBS (aided by Norman Lear) was trying to attract a younger “urban” audience, and the late 1980s with *Roseanne*, *The Simpsons*, and *Home Improvement*. The most recent peak was the result of heavy competition for ratings in “an era of declining network hegemony” – in other words, a Hail Mary thrown by networks “when ‘normal’ fare was established or sustaining ratings” (Butsch, 1992, p.389). On the rare occasion that (nearly entirely White) members of the working-class were actually shown on situation comedies, the results were nothing short of catastrophic. Members of the working class were completely stripped of their dignity: they became “an inept bumbler and even a buffoon” whose sole purpose is comic relief for those who felt superior – a pattern which has continued into working class representations today (391). Five qualities are consistently attributed to working-class characters almost entirely without exception (Apler & Leistyna, 2005):

1. Unintelligent
2. Lazy
3. Politically Disinterested
4. Possessing poor taste
5. Lacking family values



Rather than addressing the actual reasons for their lower economic circumstances, sitcoms narratives blamed these “inherent, unavoidable qualities” for the characters less than desirable status (Apler & Leistyna, 2005). While these qualities were apparent in the earliest sitcoms (*I Remember Mama*, *The Goldbergs*, *The Honeymooners*), they are perhaps even more evident in modern day series. Sitcoms featuring working class families and characters have emerged sporadically throughout the past 15 years, but have left a lasting, if completely distorted, impression of the working-class. The first, and probably most potent arrival was the animated sitcom hit, *The Simpsons* in 1989. Now the longest running American sitcom at 25 seasons, *The Simpsons* chronicles the lives of the working-class Simpson family: father Homer, mother Marge, and children Bart, Lisa, and Maggie. This family epitomizes the five qualities attributed to the working class. Homer and Marge are both fairly unintelligent – most plotlines revolve around cleaning up some sort of mess Homer has gotten them all into through his sheer lack of common sense. Homer is also unbearably lazy with little desire to anything other than go to the Kwik-E-Mart for yet another pink frosted doughnut. In fact, he frequently falls asleep at his job on the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant. The entire family is politically disinterested. In contrast to other popular animated sitcoms such as *South Park* and *Family Guy*, there is no discussion of politics, even in a satirical sense. Their poor taste is made evident by their choice of clothing and other cosmetic factors. Homer wears an off-white polo that constantly looks dirty and worn-out; Marge chooses to wear bright red pearls with a lime green dress, accented by her electric blue beehive hairstyle that is roughly 75% of her body height; their children, while slightly less disheveled looking, imitate the exact same outfits as their parents,

only with different colors. Their overall appearance is simply tacky, emphasizing the fact that they are working class individuals who fail to live up to the impeccable taste of higher classes. The entire show is a demonstration of their lack of family values – the children are constantly caught up in outrageous situations brought on by their parents’ poor decision making. They are unable to provide a stable household for their children, which, although the root of the show’s humor, paints a disturbing picture of the working-class as irresponsible, inferior citizens.

In his 1992 article “Class and gender in four decades of television situation comedy: Plus ça change. . .” Richard Butsch asserts working class adults are reduced to a childlike form when depicted on sitcoms. By engaging in childlike behavior, they confirm their status as working class because children are seen as less intelligent, less respected, and generally inferior. Disturbingly, this is actually the major source of humor in sitcoms featuring working class characters. It is “built around some variant of the working-class man’s stereotypic ineptitude, immaturity, stupidity, lack of good sense, or emotional outbursts...traits that have been culturally defined as feminine or childlike” (391). De-masculinizing male members of the working class is yet another method of comedy that serves to devalue the entire group. By applying attributes that contradict what is considered masculine in society, sitcoms not only [devalue] them as men, but also [use] gender to establish their subordinate class status” (387). Wives and children are almost always presented as more intelligent, responsible, rational, and more mature than their husbands or fathers, which serves to emasculate and patronize the working class man in one fell swoop. A common story line details the successes of the more intelligent and sensible child juxtaposed with the father’s failures to create

comedy of contrast. Perhaps most disturbingly, however, sitcoms overtly and unabashedly use low socioeconomic status as a source of humor. In most situation comedies, social class is merely a background that goes unnoticed (hence other identifiers such as race, gender, and profession must be analyzed to deduce middle-class imagery). This is not the case for the working class. Their economic position is more often than not the butt of the joke. Their social class isn't simply a backdrop, it is an integral part of the humor created. These characters would not be considered funny if it weren't for their socioeconomic status...the true tragedy of economic disparity in the United States is reduced to a prop, used to entertain the privileged and superior.

## **Research Study: Class and Residence in Modern Sitcoms**

While there is a great deal of research on sitcoms from 1945 to 2000, there is shockingly little analysis of sitcoms that have aired in the last 15 years. In order to get an idea for how class has been represented (or misrepresented) in the last decade, I chose to look at the price characters' residencies compared to their likely income to determine whether or not they could actually afford these living spaces. Over the course of my research (which included roughly 150 hours of viewing), I noticed that there appears to be a discrepancy between the apartments or houses in which sitcom characters live and the amount of money they would likely earn given their professions. To see if this difference was actually a reality, I selected seven situation comedies that have aired in the last 10 years in which the characters' homes were the central area of the series. To be considered for analysis, the homes had to meet the following criteria: (1) location is known (address is known for shows using actual homes, city and neighborhood for shows using a constructed set) (2) clear and set number of bedrooms (3) profession of resident is explicitly stated in the series (and) salary estimate for that profession is available. Using this criteria, I selected the following series: *2 Broke Girls*, *30 Rock*, *Sex and the City*, *F.R.I.E.N.D.S*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *Modern Family*. It should be noted that five of the seven shows take place in New York City (the other two take place in Los Angeles). While a wider variety of locations would have been ideal, the nearly exclusive restriction of television show settings to New York City and Los Angeles made it impossible to find homes in other locations that met the criteria. Furthermore, location does not actually influence the conclusion of my study – the question to be answered is whether or not these characters

could realistically afford their living spaces, and the prices used for comparison are specific to each address. First, I determined each character's estimate salary. Most salaries were public record; however, for those that were not (specifically the Cheesecake Factory and Columbia University), I contacted the institutions and was given the information. Next, I determined the estimated price of each living space by contacting realtors in each city and a) finding the listing price of the actual location b) finding the listing price of a comparable residence (same size, same number of bedrooms) in the same building or on the same street, or c) finding the listing price of a residence most similar to the one depicted (in the case of those filmed at a studio). Then, using the principle that one should never spend more than 40% of their paycheck on rent (as suggested by multiple financial planners I contacted), I calculated whether or not their living situation was actually feasible. After following each of these steps for each of the seven sitcoms, I came the following conclusions:

### ***2 Broke Girls (Max and Caroline)***

*2 Broke Girls* (CBS, 2011-present) follows two women in their mid-twenties, Max Black and Caroline Channing, as they strive toward their goal of opening a cupcake shop. As reflected in the title, Max and Caroline are poor, both working in a low-end Brooklyn diner as waitresses. Max grew up in a working-class family, while Caroline has been left penniless after her wealthy father was arrested for fraud. At the end of every episode, the two girls tally how much money they have earned toward their goal of \$25,000, the supposed cost of opening their shop. Toward the end of the first season, their next-door neighbor Sophie lends the girls \$20,000, allowing them to open

their shop which almost immediately fails. By the middle of the third season, however, they have reopened the business in the back of the diner and both enrolled in the Manhattan School of Pastry.

Before beginning to examine the characters' apartment, the plot alone raises questions about the economic realism of this program. First and foremost, the entire premise of the show surrounds two girls described as "poor" and "broke." If this was actually the case, the more realistic and responsible goal for the two would be to earn a decent living, not open their own business, which is both expensive and risky. Further, their neighbor Sophie, a part-time manager at the diner where Caroline and Max work, would never be able to afford to loan them \$20,000. Even if she could, after the business failed Max and Caroline would never have been able to pay her back immediately as the show depicted. Perhaps most egregious, however, is the claim that \$25,000 is enough to open a bakery without any explanation of the given figure. While the first episode stated that the girls needed \$250,000 (a far more realistic figure), later episodes altered this to \$25,000, most likely to appear as a more realistic goal for two waitresses. With a plot completely centered around money that so blatantly misrepresents it, does their residence remain consistent with these inaccuracies? I discovered the following information:

#### Residence

Location: Greenpoint, Brooklyn (filmed in studio)

Bedrooms: 2

Bathroom: 1

Features: Backyard/garden. Large enough to comfortably fit their pet horse.

Cost: \$1,300 per month, per resident (\$2,600 total) (Corcoran Group)

#### Salary

Occupation: Waitresses at a low-end diner

Salary: Minimum wage in New York = \$7.25 per hour plus tips.  
Multiplied by 40 hours (full work week) = \$290  
Multiplied by 4 weeks = 1,160  
Plus 15% tip = 174 + 1,160 = \$1,334  
Amount available for rent: 1,334 x 40% = \$533.60  
(U.S. Department of Labor)

Is it feasible?

No.

\$533.60 < \$1,300

In fact, even if Max and Caroline spent their entire paychecks on rent, it wouldn't be enough. It appears that their place of residence is just as disproportionate to their paycheck as the plotline is.

### **30 Rock (Liz Lemon)**

*30 Rock* (NBC, 2006-2013) chronicles the life of Liz Lemon, the head television writer for a fictional NBC variety show called *The Girly Show* (TGS), loosely based on creator/writer/star Tina Fey's own experiences as head writer for *Saturday Night Live*. Money is never discussed on the show between "normal" TGS staff members such as the writing staff or Kenneth the Page; however, money is thrown about as if it is no object by TGS's two stars Tracy Morgan and Jenna Maroney. Both live extravagant lifestyles that nevertheless seem consistent with the amount of money a television star would likely earn. Jack Donaghy, who plays an General Motors executive, also seems to live a life of luxury, but once again this seems consistent with salary of a major executive for General Motors. Liz Lemon, on the other hand, is rather frugal. She has no apparent interest in material objects such as clothing, technology, or even taxi transportation. In fact, frequent jokes are made by the three wealthier characters about her stingy nature. While this is certainly refreshing given television's tendency to illustrate lavish lifestyles, her thrifty nature doesn't seem consistent with her estimate

salary of \$1.1 million per year (Writers Guild of America). I was particularly interested to see if her residence was in keeping with her spending habits depicted on the show or if it seemed more consistent with her actual salary. My research resulted in the following information:

#### Residence

Location: 160/161 Riverside Drive, New York City. When her next door neighbor passes away, Liz ultimately buys her apartment and expands.

Bedrooms: 2 (one in each apartment)

Bathrooms: 2 (one in each apartment)

Features: Backyard/garden. Large enough to comfortably fit their pet horse.

Cost: \$4,000 per month (\$2,000 per apartment) (Corcoran Group)

#### Salary

Occupation: Head writer of a fictional NBC variety show, *TGS*

Salary: \$1.1 million per year (Writers Guild of America)

Amount available for rent:  $\$1.1 \text{ million} \div 12 \text{ months} \times 40\% = \$36,667$  per month

#### Is it feasible?

Yes.

$\$4,000 < \$36,667$

Is it realistic? No. With such a large salary, Liz Lemon could easily be living a life of luxury. Instead, she chooses frugality. A wise lesson to learn, but it doesn't help much in terms of accurately displaying social class on television. By showing someone with such significant financial means in an apartment far below her spending ability, it serves to close the gap between the rich and the poor, making it all the easier to ignore.

#### ***Sex and the City (Carrie Bradshaw)***

*Sex and the City* (1998-2004) almost entirely focuses on portraying the Manhattan life of luxury. The show's protagonist, Carrie Bradshaw, is a sex columnist for a fictional New York newspaper, although she appears to spend remarkably little



time working. Her three best friends, Miranda, Samantha, and Charlotte, all seem to have unlimited financial means: Miranda is a partner at a prestigious law firm, Samantha is a public relations executive who caters to celebrities and wealthy businessmen, and Charlotte works at an art gallery before getting married to an extremely wealthy man and subsequently receiving a significant amount of money after their divorce. The four spend most of the show shopping for designer clothes (particularly Manolo Blahnik shoes which cost anywhere between \$400 and \$1300 per pair), eating out at expensive restaurants, and taking cabs to high-profile nightclubs and bars.

While this lifestyle might realistically be achieved by Miranda, Samantha and Charlotte, it seems rather outrageous for a newspaper columnist who makes a mere \$45,000 per year. Her shopping habit alone would be enough to put her in significant debt (spending 4.5% of her yearly paycheck for each pair of shoes) without even considering the cost of eating out for every meal and taking taxis whenever she leaves her house. She never appears to do any freelance work to supplement her income, and only occasionally does she seem to rely on men to finance her activities. It is clear that her lifestyle is completely inconsistent with her income based on the plot alone, but is her apartment in keeping with this discrepancy? Following my research, I compiled the following data:

#### Residence

Location: Show location: 24 East 73<sup>rd</sup> Street, New York City. Actual location: 66 Perry Street

Bedrooms: 1

Bathroom: 1

Cost: Claimed location: \$2,800 per month. Actual location: Sold on the market for \$9,650,000 (Bereznak, 2012).

### Salary

Occupation: Columnist for the fictional newspaper, *The New York Star*

Salary: \$45,000 per year (estimated based on the average salary of columnists for the New York Times)

Amount available for rent:  $\$45,000 \div 12 \text{ months} \times 40\% = \$1,500$  per month  
(New York Magazine Salary Guide)

### Is it feasible?

No.

$\$45,000 < \$9,650,000$

Carrie might have a chance if the apartment she claims to live at was, in fact, her rent-controlled apartment. At half the size and in a much less desirable part of town, 24 East 73<sup>rd</sup> Street would be a feasible living space for a newspaper columnist (ignoring her somewhat dangerous shopping addiction). Unfortunately for Carrie, she would have to save 40% of her paycheck (\$18,000) for roughly 536 years to afford her actual apartment, which seems like a rather unrealistic option.

### ***FRIENDS (Monica Gellar and Rachel Green)***

*Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004), much like *2 Broke Girls*, centers around a group of friends who live in New York City, most of whom claim to make no money. Joey Tribiani spends most of the ten seasons as an out-of-work actor, although he briefly encounters success in the last three seasons as a cast member on *Days of Our Lives*. Phoebe Buffay is a formerly homeless massage therapist who frequently loses her license (most often because of sexual encounters with her patients) and in a season 1 episode loses all of her clients when she teaches a “massage yourself at home workshop” (s.1 ep. 22). During her times of unemployment, Phoebe works sporadically for her friends – the occasional secretary for Chandler, a failed catering business with

Monica, massaging Ross at home, etc. Chandler Bing and Ross Gellar are the only characters who appear to make a consistent living – Chandler as an unidentified businessman and Ross as a museum curator and college professor. Monica Gellar (whose residence I will analyze), on the other hand, works through the first four seasons as a struggling chef who is often unemployed until she finally gets a job as head chef in season four. During this four year span of time she lives with Rachel Green, a waitress at a coffee house who has never had a real job in her life. She comes from a wealthy family but cut herself off after leaving her wealthy fiancée at the altar during the pilot episode.

With the exception of Chandler and Ross, none of these characters would likely be able to maintain his or her lifestyle. While they do eat out nearly every meal and go to the coffee house at least once a day, little is shown of their spending habits besides their apartments. Joey and Chandler live in a fairly spacious two-bedroom apartment in Greenwich Village. Chandler claims to cover most of the bills for Joey, explaining how he would be able to afford to live in such place. Phoebe originally lives with her grandmother in a one-bedroom apartment that has been converted into a two-bedroom, though after her grandmother's death it is unclear how she could afford to continue to live alone in a one-bedroom, non-studio apartment across the street from Central Park. Even if the apartment were rent-stabilized, it would be impossible for Phoebe to afford the place on her own. However, the most mystifying situation is likely Rachel and Monica. Immediately after leaving her fiancée, Rachel moves in with Monica who is working as a cook in a restaurant for the lunch hour. Monica claims she only pays \$200 per month because she is illegally subletting the apartment from her dead grandmother

(s. 3, ep. 6). This cost of the apartment is only briefly mentioned in that one season 3 episode, so viewers could be led to believe that Monica and Rachel could actually afford their unbelievable living space (which has two-bedrooms and even a balcony). I hoped to find what the actual cost of the apartment was to determine if their lifestyle was unrealistic as it seems. I discovered the following information:

#### Residence

Location: 90 Bedford Street, Greenwich Village, New York City

Bedrooms: 2

Bathrooms: 1

Features: Balcony

Cost: Claims: \$200 per month due to rent control. Actual: \$1,500 per roommate (\$3,000 per month) (Corcoran Group)

#### Salary (Monica)

Occupation: During her time living with Rachel, sometime unemployed, then line cook at a 1950's theme diner

Salary: \$12.00 per hour

x 40 hours = \$480

x 4 weeks = \$1,920

Amount available for rent: \$1,920 x 40% = \$768

(Salary based on line cook salary at Appleby's, Appleby's Restaurant)

#### Salary (Rachel)

Occupation: Waitress at a coffee house

Salary: Minimum wage in New York = \$7.25 per hour plus tips.

x 40 hours = \$290

x 4 weeks = 1,160

Plus 15% tip = 174 + 1,160 = \$1,334

Amount available for rent: 1,334 x 40% = \$533.60

(U.S. Department of Labor)

#### Is it feasible?

No.

$\$768 < \$1,500$ ,  $\$533.60 < \$1,500$

There is no feasible way that Monica Gellar and Rachel Green could afford to live in their apartment. The idea that they could continue live in that space for \$200 is completely unbelievable and gives a grossly inaccurate portrayal of what two average

New Yorkers could afford. Coming up with a plot excuse for their remarkable living situation is quite frankly irresponsible: it leads viewers to believe that a) “cheating the system” is acceptable and b) that their kind of lifestyle is achievable for an average American, or even worse, that it is normal.

### ***How I Met Your Mother (Ted Mosby)***

How I Met Your Mother (CBS, 2005-2014), is a sitcom told in flashbacks as the narrator, a grown-up, faceless Ted Mosby, tells his children the story of how he met their mother. The show centers on the adventures of Ted and his friends in their mid twenties and thirties in New York City. The group consists of five people: Ted Mosby (the narrator), Marshall Erikson (Ted’s best friend from college), Lily Aldrin (Marshall’s girlfriend since their first week at college, later his wife), Barney Stinson (a womanizer who loves the life of luxury) and Robin Sherbatsky (originally from Canada, she is both Ted and Barney’s love interest). Most members of the group have somewhat outrageous careers for New Yorkers in their mid-twenties. Barney and Marshall both work for the fictional Goliath National Bank, Marshall as a lawyer and Barney as an executive, whose job is never defined, although he implies that parts of his job are illegal and he is incredibly wealthy. Robin is a news anchor, and although she is unsuccessful at first, working at a morning show on a failing network, she eventually moves up to working as an anchor and foreign correspondent for Worldwide News. Lily is the only one with a somewhat realistic profession – she is a kindergarten teacher, though in one particular episode she mentions that she has a staggering amount of credit card debt due to a shopping addiction, which is never mentioned again and seemingly

just disappeared (s. 3, ep. 7). The group spends nearly every episode in a bar buying drinks and food, and go to the occasional nightclub, which in New York City, would be an extremely unlikely lifestyle given their professions.

Ted's working situation, however, is the most perplexing. Ted originally worked as an architect and successfully designed one building before quitting after disagreeing with his boss. He then tried to start his own architecture firm with disastrous results (he never had a single client). Fortunately, he was offered a position as a professor of architecture at Columbia University, where he works until the end of the show. However, given that Ted only ever received a bachelor's degree (we know he attended Wesleyan University, though he never returned to school for a Master's degree or a PhD). The highest position one can hold at Columbia University is Instructor, which pays significantly less than Associate or Full Professor (Columbia University, 2013). It is all the more suspicious, therefore, that Ted is able to move into a two-bedroom apartment by himself and purchase a home in Westchester country for his future family, although he has yet to meet his future wife at this point. Through my research, I hoped to determine whether or not this apparent discrepancy would exist in real life. I came to the following conclusion:

Residence (apartment)

Location: Apt. 15, 521 West 82<sup>nd</sup> Street, New York City

Bedrooms: 2

Bathrooms: 1-2

Features: Bedrooms located on a second floor

Cost: \$768,750 (the lowest published selling price of an apartment on this block)  
(Corcoran Group)

Residence (house)

Location: Westchester County, New York

Bedrooms: 3  
Bathrooms: unknown  
Floors: 2  
Cost: \$525,000 (the lowest published selling price of a house of this size in this county)

### Salary

Occupation: Claims: Professor of Architecture at Columbia University. Actual: With only a Bachelor's degree, the highest position he could receive is Instructor of Architecture.

Salary: \$136,340 per year (Columbia University, 2013)

Amount available for purchase:  $\$136,340 \times 2 \text{ years working} \times 40\% = \$109,072$

### Is it feasible?

No.

$\$136,340 < \$768,750$ ,  $\$136,340 < \$525,000$

Ted's living situation is completely infeasible. Immediately after being appointed Instructor of Architecture at Columbia University, Ted, in addition to his rent at his current apartment, decides to purchase a house for his future. Only two years after that, he decides to move out of his current apartment and purchase a new one. There is no possible way that this would be possible given his income, as both purchases were well over twice his yearly salary.

### ***The Big Bang Theory (Penny)***

*The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-present) follows the lives of four "nerds" in their late twenties, Sheldon, Leonard, Raj, and Howard, along with their neighbor across the hall, a struggling actress named Penny. All four of the men work as scientists in various fields at California Institute of Technology. Howard lives with his mother, Raj lives alone in a modest one-bedroom apartment, and Leonard and Sheldon live together in a two-bedroom apartment in Old-Town Pasadena, California. It appears that Leonard and

Sheldon live together mostly out of convenience than necessity, as both are wildly successful physicists with a fair degree of renown. They all meet Penny when she moves in across the hall from Leonard and Sheldon in the pilot episode. Throughout the series, Penny is described as an “actress” and frequently goes to auditions, though she never actually gets a part. In order to earn money, she works at the Cheesecake Factory as a waitress, although she claims in multiple episodes that she rarely goes to work. She often eats the boys’ food for free (they take pity on her due to her economic situation), although that does little to explain how she maintains her lifestyle. As an actress, she would need to spend gas money to go to auditions, pay for headshots, keep up with certain beauty regimens to seem attractive to casting agents – all of which would seem impossible given her job. Further, she lives in a one-bedroom non-studio apartment in the same building as two wealthy physicists in a famously expensive area of southern California. After careful research, I came to the following conclusion as to whether or not Penny could afford her lifestyle:

#### Residence

Location: Old Town Pasadena, Pasadena, California (filmed in studio)

Bedrooms: 1

Bathroom: 1

Cost: \$1,200 per month (lowest published listing of one bedroom apartments in Old Town) (Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage)

#### Salary

Occupation: Waitress at the Cheesecake Factory

Salary: Minimum wage in California= \$8.00 per hour plus tips.

x 40 hours = \$320

x 4 weeks = 1,280

Plus 15% tip = 192 + 1,280 = \$1,472

Amount available for rent: \$1,472 x 40% = \$588.80

(U.S. Department of Labor)



Is it feasible?

No.

\$588.80 < \$1,200

Even disregarding the money she spends and hours she misses as a struggling actress (going to auditions, getting headshots, etc.), there is no feasible way that Penny could afford to live in her apartment.

### *Modern Family (The Dunphy Family)*

*Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-present) in many ways broke the sitcom mold of the classic American family that had most frequently been shown up until this point. The program features three different families, all related to each other by blood and marriage. Jay, a white male in his early seventies is married to his second wife Gloria, a significantly younger woman from Columbia, and her son from a previous marriage, Manny. Manny is a unique young boy with an interest in reading, art, and poetry, which certainly breaks gender stereotypes. Jay's son Mitchell is partners with (and later married to) another man Cam, and the two adopt an infant from China late in the first season. This is revolutionary not only because they show an openly gay couple as having a successful, normal, and stable life, but also because their daughter Lily's race is openly addressed, but her fathers refuse to make it a problem. The Dunphy family breaks stereotypes as well. Jay's daughter Claire is married to Phil Dunphy and they have three children: Haley, Alex, and Luke. Phil and Claire break traditional gender roles as well; while Claire is a homemaker and Phil is a real estate agent, Phil is shown as sensitive and emotional while Claire is depicted as somewhat cold and constantly in control. The show does a good job of displaying a family that represents the dynamism

of the real-world American family, so much so that the tagline for the first season was “One big (straight, gay, multi-cultural, traditional) happy family” (IMDB).

However, despite making enormous progress in the portrayal of American family life, one topic is noticeably absent from conversation: money. All three families seem to live comfortable to extravagant lifestyles – Gloria wears expensive designer clothing, Jay and Cam are constantly buying home goods, and Claire and Phil live in a massive L.A. home with three kids to support (they are even putting one through college). Compared to the other programs I studied, the discrepancies between employment and residence seemed much less obvious in *Modern Family*, although still somewhat suspicious. Through my research, however, I found that there is, in fact, a very real difference between the Dunphy family’s cost of living and what they could actually afford. I discovered the following information:

#### Residence

Location: 10336 Dunleer Drive, Brentwood, California

Bedrooms: 4

Bathroom: 4.5 bath

Cost: \$2.35 million, mortgage estimate: \$4,500 per month (Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage)

#### Salary

Occupation: Phil Dunphy is a real estate agent, Claire is a homemaker

Salary: \$100,000 per year (estimated based on the median income of real estate agents in the Brentwood area)

Amount available for mortgage:  $\$100,000 \div 12 \text{ months} \times 40\% = \$3,333$   
(Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage)

#### Is it feasible?

No.

$\$3,333 < \$4,500$ ,  $\$100,000 < \$2.35 \text{ million}$

There is no possible way the Dunphy family could afford to live in their house. With a single income of \$100,000, it would be impossible to pay \$2.35 million for a home, let alone be able to afford the monthly mortgage payments that follow.

## Analysis

After completing my research, I compiled all the collected data into a chart to better compare each program to the other (Fig. 6).

### Comparison of Salary to Residence Cost

Show	Characters	Profession	Est. Salary	Money available for rent	Residence Cost (Fictional)	Residence Cost (Actual)	Could they afford it?
<i>2 Broke Girls</i>	Max and Caroline	Waitresses	\$1,334 per month	\$533.60 per month	N/A	\$1,300 per month, per resident	No.
<i>30 Rock</i>	Liz Lemon	Television Writer	\$1.1 million per year	\$36,667 per month	N/A	\$4,000 per month	Yes.
<i>Sex and the City</i>	Carrie Bradshaw	Columnist	\$45,000 per year	\$1,500 per month	\$2,800 per month	\$9,650,000 for sale	No.
<i>F.R.I.E.N.D.S</i>	Monica Gellar and Rachel Green	Line Cook (Monica), <del>Barrista</del> Barista (Rachel)	\$1,920 per month (Monica), \$1,334 per month (Rachel)	\$768 per month (Monica), \$533.60 per month (Rachel)	\$200 per month	\$1,500 per roommate per month	No.
<i>How I Met Your Mother</i>	Ted Mosby	Instructor of Architecture	\$136,340 per year	\$109,072	N/A	\$768,750 (apartment), \$525,000 (house)	No.
<i>The Big Bang Theory</i>	Penny	Waitress	\$1,472 per month.	\$588.80 per month	N/A	\$1,200 per month	No.
<i>Modern Family</i>	The Dunphy Family	Real Estate Agent (Phil), Homemaker (Claire)	\$100,000 per year	\$3,333 per month for mortgage	N/A	\$2.35 million, mortgage est: \$4,500 per month	No.

Figure 6

Based on the data, it is clear that only Liz Lemon on *30 Rock* could afford to live in her presented residence, which means 85.7% of shows depicted characters living in residencies far more expensive than they could afford. However, the amount of money Lemon would approximately make (\$1.1 each year) indicates that she would actually be able to live in a much larger and nicer apartment, so even her representation is inaccurate. The other six shows featured characters living in residences well beyond their economic means. While there did not appear to be any significant difference in residency based on gender, each character analyzed was Caucasian. Unfortunately, there have been so few sitcoms in the past ten years that featured minorities in lead roles that it was impossible to find a show with a minority lead that fit the criteria. Based on the researched discussed earlier, however, it is unlikely that there would have been any evident difference in resident cost, despite the actual significant economic disparity between the races in the United States.

However, the lack of economic difference between each race does not mean that race should be left out of the conversation. Perhaps one of the reasons that social class continues to be misrepresented in modern sitcoms is because studios are still trying to target a white audience (Havens, 2002). Both nationally and internationally, targeting a majority white audience (particularly those ages 18-35) has consistently proven to be the best economic decision for studios in terms of increasing ratings and resisting cancellation (Havens, 2002). This is likely because even though there is no evidence proving that white individuals watch more television, America is still dominated by white ideology (Havens, 2002). This includes perpetuating an image – through

advertising, product placement, and the programs themselves – of wealth, or at the very least hiding the realities of economic disparity (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000).

By depicting characters living in apartments or houses far more expensive than they can afford, sitcoms are providing viewers with a false illusion class. Further, by showing little to no difference between wealthy characters such as Liz Lemon's apartment and characters making minimum wage such as Penny on *The Big Bang Theory*, it completely eliminates the idea of economic disparity. According to the images presented on television, a waitress, columnist, and a successful television writer could all afford to live in apartments of the same price, which is simply not the case. In this manner, sitcoms are presenting an absurdly unrealistic view of the value of money; by eliminating any illustration of class difference, they are indicating that the world they depict is the "norm" and that all viewers can, and should, be able to afford the lifestyle of the characters presented.

This gross misrepresentation can negatively affect both members of the working-class and members of higher classes. It is likely that working-class individuals could fall victim to false consciousness. Seeing a dominant institution such as the media (in this case, situation comedies) portray a middle-class income or higher as normal will lead them not only to be disappointed in themselves, but to blame themselves for the economic position. They will feel that they deserve to live below who they see on television as a result of a character flaw that they cannot overcome, which will ultimately lead them to fatal complacency (Jost, 1994, 407). Because they feel they deserve their position, it is less likely that they will fight for their right to economic equality, or at the very least a smaller gap between the classes. This complacency can harm

members of higher classes as well. By failing to show the realities of economic disparity on television, privileged individuals can ignore the issue completely. Further, if members of the working-class aren't fighting for themselves as a result of misrepresentation, higher class individuals can comfortably pretend that there are issues with socioeconomic class in this country.

## Conclusion

Through my research, I set out to answer the following questions: (1) how has socioeconomic class been represented on sitcoms throughout history, (2) can characters on modern sitcoms afford their residences given their professions? (3) how does this frame socioeconomic class on sitcoms, and (4) how might these representations affect members of the working-class?

By looking at the literature on advertising, race, gender, and professions, it is that a pattern has emerged as the result of decades of eliminating the working-class from television. Because advertisers create the image of the material-driven middle-class in order to encourage consumerism, they effectively minimized representation of differences between classes. According to the literature analyzed in this thesis, throughout the last forty years, members of every race and gender have consistently been shown living well beyond their realistic economic means, which is only made worse by the unrealistic professions they are pictured to hold.

Unfortunately, modern comedies have not broken this mold, providing little hope that we will ever receive an accurate depiction of social class on television. Through my research of residences on modern comedies, it is clear that they do not accurately represent socioeconomic class in any way; rather they simply continue the pattern of presenting an unrealistic standard of living based on the estimate prices of characters' homes in comparison to what an individual of the same occupation would actually earn. Despite making progress in certain areas (*Modern Family* attempts to show a multi-cultural, non-traditional American family, *2 Broke Girls* features members of the working class that are not presented as fools), absolutely no progress has been

made in terms of accurate portrayal of social class. While these shows do feature professions typical of the working-class, their lifestyles, as evidenced by their homes, do not accurately reflect their economic position. Rather, these shows make excuses for their character's lavish dwellings (Monica on *Friends* is illegally subletting her apartment, Penny steals food from her neighbors on *The Big Bang Theory*), or simply state that the characters are poor but fail to back this up with visual evidence (*2 Broke Girls*). Even characters who have middle-class jobs are living well beyond their means (Ted on *How I Met Your Mother*, the Dunphy family on *Modern Family*). The only character who could actually live in her home (Liz Lemon, *30 Rock*) lives in an apartment far less expensive than she could realistically afford, which only further closes the gap between the rich and the poor on television, veiling the realities of economic differences and disparities.

As with any study, there were certain limitations to my research. For many of the residences, their prices could only be estimated, as with their salaries as well. Further, residence is not a complete guarantee of lifestyle, as individuals may choose to spend over 40% of their salary on rent and limit their spending in other areas. A future study could include an analysis of each character's complete budget, estimating the amount spent on clothes, food, and transportation, etc. to gain a more complete view of the lifestyle projected.

While the inaccuracies displayed on situation comedies might seem harmless, particularly to privileged individuals, the consequences they carry are detrimental to an entire group of human beings. By seeing such misrepresentations of themselves, members of the working-class might develop false-consciousness. Rarely showing



working class characters on sitcoms (or if they are shown, presenting them as unintelligent or lazy, making poverty laughable), enforces the idea that members of the working class are somehow inferior as they are not worth televising. Further, the constant depiction of higher-income families and characters could lead members of the subordinate group to feel that they are incapable of changing their circumstances or even deserving of the where they have been placed in society – if they do not see accurate, positive images of themselves in popular culture, why would they believe they deserve to be treated as such? The distorted images they see of themselves can cause them not only to become disappointed in themselves, but to blame themselves for their socioeconomic positions. The false depictions can rip away their identities, causing them to become disillusioned, disenfranchised, then worst of all, complacent. It is this complacency that threatens any hope for societal progress. If members of the working-class accept their position as inevitable, or even deserved, there is no hope for fighting against the economic disparities that tarnish this country. However, by *accurately* representing all socioeconomic groups without making them the butt of the joke, sitcoms can influence an entire society to not only accept that economic inequalities exist in America, but to become a desperately needed force of change.

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