

Couples Portrayed in Prime-Time Television Series

Beth Forst

Sociology

Faculty Advisor: Dr. S. Lynne Rich

Romantic relationships are witnessed by most everyone in their daily life; even if a person is not in a relationship themselves they see others who are, whether it's their friends and acquaintances, or their favorite characters on a television show. Many sitcoms in the comedy genre show characters in committed relationships, and these comedy sitcoms want their couples to be relatable to an everyday person and their relationship with their significant other. Although, it's questionable as to how relatable they are to the viewing audience as a whole. A lack of diversity in the characters that are represented in comedy sitcoms would make it challenging for groups of people to find someone that was similar to them that they could relate to. To look at the diversity in these shows, some questions were posed: How often are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and inter-racial couples represented in popular comedy sitcoms, and how are the individuals in these groups portrayed on screen?

Literature Review

Previous research has investigated the portrayal of relationships in television series. Boelman, Zimmerman, Matheson, and Banning (2010) looked at how couples in comedy series interacted with each other. They found that the majority of the couples did not display criticism, contempt, or defensiveness toward their significant other, and most of the couples engaged in actively listening (Boelman et al., 2010). Overall, this study showed that the characteristics associated with these couples were more positive than negative. There was not a significant difference in the way heterosexual and same-sex couples were portrayed in the television series; however, same-sex couples were not equally represented to their heterosexual counterparts. Gay couples were underrepresented, and lesbian couples were not existent (Boelman et al., 2010). Fouts and Inch (2005) found this same pattern in the representation of gay individuals.

African American, Latino, and inter-racial couples were also not equally represented compared to white and same-race couples (Boelman et al., 2010). There has been a rise in inter-racial marriage; this is evident in that 1 out of 13 marriages in the United States is inter-racial as of 2008. That number is up from the 1% of marriages being inter-racial in 1960 (Lee, 2011). If television represents real life statistics, then there should also be a rise in the number of inter-racial couples depicted on shows.

Holz, Gibson, and Ivory (2009) looked at how television shows portrayed heterosexual and same-sex relationships. They found that, in heterosexual relationships, the male displayed more dominant behavior and less submissive behavior than the female did. They also found that television series “gendered” gay and lesbian couples by portraying one character as feminine and the other as masculine. The “dominant” gay and lesbian individuals were portrayed as the masculine partner in the

relationship and their “submissive” gay and lesbian partners were portrayed as the more feminine partner (Holz et al., 2009).

Stacey and Biblarz (2001) came to the conclusion that there are no differences between heterosexual parents and homosexual parents when it comes to raising children. Lesbian and gay parents scored just as high as heterosexual parents in their parenting styles and investment in their children. One difference in parenting that Stacey and Biblarz (2001) found wasn't based on sexual orientation, but on the gender of the parent. This difference was seen in the closeness and quality of the relationship between the parent and the child.

Looking at variables like the level of investment, closeness, and quality of a parent-child relationship can show the similarities and differences of how couples are represented in television. Holz et al. (2009) coded for actions that characters on television displayed to compare how same-sex and heterosexual couples were portrayed. These actions included when individuals engaged in making decisions, giving orders, working for pay outside the home, performing household tasks, and taking care of children. Variables like these and others are useful in comparing how different types of couples are represented.

Methods

To investigate the way and frequency that heterosexual, same-sex, and inter-racial couples are represented in prime-time sitcoms, a content analysis was conducted for five comedy television series. These television series were *This Is Us* (NBC), *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS), *Kevin Can Wait* (CBS), *Modern Family* (ABC), and *New Girl* (FOX). These were selected based on rankings in the IMDb list of “Most Popular Comedy TV Series,” and other shows on the list were eliminated if they didn't meet the criteria of: (1) being a network show during prime-time (between 8pm-11pm), (2) considered a comedy series, (3) had main characters that were in relationships, and (4) were currently airing a

new season. The first 5 episodes of the current seasons were included in this study.

The couples in each show were divided into categories of heterosexual, gay, or lesbian, and their race was also recorded. They were assigned a *stage of relationship* that they were in (dating, cohabitating, engaged, married), and whether or not they had kids was recorded. They were coded for *satisfaction* which was measured by the number of *arguments* (disagreements between partners concerning any subject, can include raising voices) versus the number of *displays of affection* (puts their arm around, hugs, kisses, holds hands with partner, puts hand on partner's leg or arm).

Another variable of interest is the *gender ideology* of the couples or how much they follow gender norms; this was determined by coding for three aspects: (1) *domestic labor* (cleaning, cooking, decorating, making drinks), (2) *child involvement* (spends time with children, holds or comforts them, meets their needs, answers their questions), and (3) *employment* (showing individual at work, leaving for work, or coming home from work). These three categories are similar to the ones used by Holz et al. (2009).

The last variable that was looked at is *marital power*. In other words, who gets their way in the relationship, and how do they do it. The couples were coded for who *gives orders/makes request* (tells or requests partner to do something and partner does it) using the variable from Holz et al. (2009). Coding for *manipulation* (makes partner think the decision was their own idea, uses sex or looks to get their way) and *apologizes first* (being the first partner to say sorry after having an argument) also contributed to determining which partner has more marital power. All of the couples were coded for these variables to determine if there were any patterns in the representation of the different categories of relationships in the prime-time comedy sitcoms

that were selected. To increase the reliability of the results, each episode was coded twice.

Results

Table 1 displays the descriptions for the sample couples in the study. Tables 2 and 3 display the characteristics of heterosexual, same-sex, interracial, and same-race couples; the count of each characteristic was calculated by an average of the couples in that group.

There were 11 heterosexual couples and 1 gay male couple. Out of these, 9 couples were of the same race and the other 3 were interracial. Two of the inter-racial couples were between a white man and non-white woman (Latino/a and Indian); the other inter-racial couple was between an African American man and a white woman. Out of the 24 individuals in the couples, 22 were employed, 1 was unemployed, and 1 was undetermined. Out of these individuals, 79.2% were Caucasian, 12.5% were African American, 8.3% were Latino/a or Indian. The couples were in different stages of their relationship; nine of the couples were married (75%), 2 were dating (16.6%), and 1 couple was cohabitating (8.3%).

Table 1. Descriptives of Sample Couples, N=12

	frequency	percentage %
Sexuality		
Heterosexual	11	91.7
Homosexual	1	8.3
Racial/Ethnic Composition		
Same Race/Ethnicity	9	75
Interracial/Interethnic	3	25
Race		
White	19	79.2
Black	3	12.5
Other	2	8.3
Employment		
Both Employed	10	83.3
One Provider (Male)	1	8.3
One Provider (Female)	1	8.3
Marital Status		
Married	9	75
Dating	2	16.6
Cohabiting	1	8.3

Heterosexual and same-sex couples

The 11 heterosexual couples had a lower average of arguments and a higher average of displays of affection than the same-sex couple. The same-sex couple was more equal in their domestic labor than the heterosexual couples; they displayed 66.6% equality in domestic labor, while heterosexual couples only showed 42.4% equality (Table 2). In heterosexual couples, the males were coded for employment over three times the amount females were. Their relatively low 30.7% work equality was higher than the same-sex percentage since one of the partners in the couple was never shown at work. Partners in same-sex and heterosexual relationships had high equality percentages for child

involvement, with the same-sex couple having 93.3% equality and the heterosexual couples having 94.2% equality. Neither of the partners in the same-sex couple gave orders or made requests; however, Partner 1 was the only one in the relationship that displayed manipulation to get his way, and Partner 2 was the only one in the relationship that apologized first. In the heterosexual couples, females were more likely to give orders or requests and to use manipulation to get their way. Males and females were equal when it came to who apologized first.

Table 2. Frequencies of Characteristics by Sexuality of Couple

Variables	Same-Sex Couples, n= 1			Heterosexual Couples, n= 11		
Satisfaction						
<i>Arguments</i>		4			1.7	
<i>Displays of Affection</i>		5			6.1	
	Partner 1	Partner 2	% equality	Male	Female	% equality
Gender Ideology						
<i>Domestic Labor</i>	2	3	66.6	1.3	3	42.4
<i>Employment</i>	3	0	0	3.6	1.1	30.7
<i>Child Involvement</i>	14	15	93.3	13.8	13	94.2
Marital Power						
<i>Give orders/make requests</i>	0	0	0	0.1	0.6	14.3
<i>Manipulation</i>	1	0	0	0	0.4	0
<i>Apologizes First</i>	0	2	0	0.3	0.3	100

Inter-racial and same-race couples

Inter-racial couples had slightly less displays of affection and more arguments on average per couple than same-race couples did. Inter-racial and same-race couples had similar equality percentage on domestic labor; inter-racial couples had 40% equality in this area, and same-race couples had 45.2% equality (Table 3). Unlike the same-race couples, none of the partners in the inter-racial relationships were shown at work. There was low equality in the employment of same-race couples, with only 28.6% equality. The child involvement of both groups were almost equivalent; inter-racial couples had 92.3% equality and same-race couples had 97.1% equality in child involvement. In the inter-racial couples, one male gave an order and none of the partners used manipulation or apologized first. The orders/requests and manipulation categories were one sided in the same-race couples. Partner 2 gave orders an average of 0.8 times while Partner 1 gave none, and there was only 25% equality in manipulation. Same-race couples

weren't completely equal in who apologized first; the partners were equal 60% of the time.

Table 3. Frequencies of Characteristics by Racial/Ethnic Composition of Couple

Variables	Same-Race Couples, n= 9			Interracial Couples, n= 3		
Satisfaction						
<i>Arguments</i>		2.2			1	
<i>Displays of Affection</i>		6.2			5.3	
	Partner 1	Partner 2	% equality	Male	Female	% equality
Gender Ideology						
<i>Domestic Labor</i>	1.6	3.4	45.2	0.7	1.7	40
<i>Employment</i>	4.8	1.3	28.6	0	0	0
<i>Child Involvement</i>	14	13.6	97.1	13	12	92.3
Marital Power						
<i>Give orders/make requests</i>	0	0.8	33.3	0.1	0	0
<i>Manipulation</i>	0.1	0.4	25	0	0	0
<i>Apologizes First</i>	0.3	0.6	60	0	0	0

Discussion

This study had results that were similar to previous research, but there were also novel findings. The prevalence of same-sex couples was similar to the findings of Boelman et al. (2010), as was the fact that the only same-sex relationship was a gay male relationship. There was an absence of other LGBT relationships and a lack of racial diversity in the shows that were coded. The racial diversity of this sample was greater than the Boelman et al. sample, but Caucasians were still much more prevalent than other races. The proportion of inter-racial couples actually exceeds the rate of inter-racial marriage in the US population

(Lee, 2011). Not all of the inter-racial couples were married, but the ones that were outnumbered the US percentage reported.

Heterosexual and same-sex couples

The same-sex couple was shown to have more arguments and less displays of affection than their heterosexual counterparts. This made their marriage satisfaction less than that of heterosexual couples' and ultimately depicted same-sex couples as less happy. Both heterosexual and same-sex couples had high levels of equality for child involvement, and they both had low levels of equality in employment. This supports Boelman et al. (2010) finding that there was no significant difference in how heterosexual and same-sex couples are portrayed in terms of child involvement and equality in employment.

Females in heterosexual couples were shown at work much less than men were, even though most of the women were employed. One of the women in a heterosexual marriage had started working part-time in order to take care of the couple's two children; she mentioned that she was close to being able to go back to full-time, but a pregnancy scare had her worried that she would be splitting her time between a "diaper station and a home office" (*This Is Us*). This perpetuates the traditional gender roles of men working and women taking care of the children. It was evident that some men were the breadwinners in the heterosexual relationships; for example, in one couple the woman wasn't employed, in another the woman only worked part-time, and it was mentioned that one of the women who had started her own business was in debt because of it (*This Is Us, Modern Family*). However, there were two couples that the women had the higher income. The husbands mentioned that they had to work harder in bed to make up for their wives making more money than them (*The Big Bang Theory*). The women in heterosexual relationships used manipulation more often than men to get their way. In the present study, men outnumbered women in the employment category, which is considered dominant

behavior. Women exceeded men in a submissive category, domestic labor, and a dominant category, gives orders/requests. These results support Holz et al. (2009) finding that men displayed more dominant behavior and less submissive behavior than women did. Women weren't depicted as dominant as often as men were, but they were seen as dominant more often than in past studies (Holz et al., 2009).

The same-sex couple was more equal in domestic labor than heterosexual couples, but they had less equality in employment. One partner wasn't shown at work at all, and the partner that was shown at work was the one who had a lower income. They were also not equal in who used manipulation and who apologized first. One partner apologized twice and the other one didn't apologize first at all. The partner who didn't apologize used manipulation to get his way. The inequality in the apologize first and manipulation categories show a struggle for marital power. One partner is apologizing first more often, which gives power to the other partner. A partner using manipulation to get their way insinuates that they don't have enough marital power to make a decision unilaterally.

Inter-racial and same-race couples

In inter-racial couples, the partners were almost completely equal in child involvement; the men were slightly more involved than women were. This went against traditional gender roles, but gender roles were perpetuated in the domestic labor category. Females did domestic labor over twice as much as the men did, depicting the women in inter-racial couples as more of a homemaker. None of the inter-racial couples were shown at work, but that doesn't necessarily mean they were equal in employment. Out of the three couples, one of the women worked in the bar that her husband owned, and another woman had started her own small business out of her kitchen, but she was in debt from it. The men in these relationships had jobs and some of them had their own successful businesses. Therefore, men in the inter-racial relationships

were superior in their employment compared to their female partners. In regards to marital power, there wasn't a partner in the inter-racial couples that clearly had more marital power than the other.

Same-race couples had more displays of affection on average than the inter-racial couples. This could be interpreted as saying that same-race couples are closer to each other or are more satisfied in their relationship than inter-racial couples are. The only category that same-race couples were almost completely equal in was child involvement. One partner in these relationships did more domestic labor, used manipulation, gave orders, and apologized first; the other partner was coded for employment more often. They were less equal in marital power than the inter-racial couples.

Conclusion

It seems as though individuals watching comedy sitcoms would have a difficult time finding a character that they could relate and identify with unless they were white and straight. Almost 80% of the characters in these shows were white, and there was only one same-sex couple shown. This is not reflective of real people in our society.

Going back to the research questions: How often are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and inter-racial couples represented in popular comedy sitcoms, and how are the individuals in these groups portrayed on screen? Heterosexual couples and same-sex couples were not equal in their representation in these shows. The same-sex couples were depicted as less happy and satisfied in their relationship than the heterosexual couples. Gender roles were still prevalent in how the women and men were shown in heterosexual couples; the women did more domestic labor and had to manipulate their partner to get their way, reinforcing the idea that women take care of the home and don't have the authority to make decisions on their own. The men were shown at work more often than their female partners, which suggests

that men are the breadwinners in their family. However, in all of the couple's categories, the partners were almost completely equal when it came to childcare. Inter-racial couples were shown to be not as affectionate towards each other as same-race couples were. The jobs of two of the women in inter-racial relationships implied that they had a job because the man they were involved with gave it to them or that they were not good at their job and were in debt because of it. Additionally, both of these women were married to men who made more than them and had more success in their job.

Seeing these depictions of men and women in different types of relationships on comedy sitcoms can be potentially harmful. Research done by Bussey and Bandura (1999) suggested that sources of media, like television, can serve as models for gender stereotypes. Audiences see what is portrayed by characters on screen and apply it to themselves and the people around them. Bandura (2002) asserted that people learn certain behaviors from symbolic modeling stereotypes they see portrayed on television. It would be damaging for audiences to internalize the stereotypes they observe from these shows because they are negative towards certain groups of people and don't represent equality in our society.

Like all research, this study had limitations; a time restraint meant that only 5 episodes from 5 shows were coded. Though the limited number of episodes from these shows influenced the amount of data that could be collected, it was a practical alternative to coding all episodes of every comedy television series. Another factor that limited the study was the lack of available data on same-sex couples, particularly lesbian couples. Having only one gay male couple was not an accurate representation of all LGBT couples, and so the data for those couples was limited.

Looking forward, it would be beneficial to expand on this research by collecting data from a larger sample of television series and

episodes or even movies. Studying different television genres would be useful in comparing similarities and differences in how couples are portrayed in various genres. Would a drama series portray couples in the same way that a comedy series does? Studying these and more topics can contribute to a better understanding of what television shows convey couples to look and act like.

Works Cited

- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. *Media Psychology, 3*(3),265-299.
- Boelman, S. M., Zimmerman, T. S., Matheson, J. L., & Banning, J. (2010). Couple interactions as portrayed in television comedy series. *Journal Of Couple & Relationship Therapy, 9*(3), 223-238. doi:10.1080/15332691.2010.491785
- Bussey, K., & Bandura, A. (1999). Social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation. *Psychological Review, 106*(4), 676-713.
- Fouts, G., & Inch, R. (2005). Homosexuality in tv situation comedies: Characters and verbal comments. *Journal Of Homosexuality, 49*(1), 35-45. doi:10.1300/J082v49n01_02
- Holz Ivory, A., Gibson, R., & Ivory, J. D. (2009). Gendered relationships on television: Portrayals of same-sex and heterosexual couples. *Mass Communication & Society, 12*(2), 170-192. doi:10.1080/15205430802169607

Lee, J. (2011). Interracial marriage and the meaning of multiraciality. *Families as They Really Are*, 192-195.

Stacey, J., & Biblarz, T.J. (2001). (How) Does the sexual orientation of parents matter?" *American Sociological Review* 66, 159-183.

Appendix

Satisfaction

Arguments (disagreements between partners concerning any subject, can include raising voices)

Displays of affection (puts their arm around, hugs, kisses, holds hands with partner, puts hand on partner's leg or arm)

Gender Ideology

Domestic labor (cleaning, cooking, decorating, making drinks)

Child involvement (spends time with children, holds or comforts them, meets their needs, answers questions)

Employment (showing individual at work, leaving for work, coming home from work)

Marital power

Gives orders/makes request (tells or requests partner to do something and partner does it)

Manipulation (makes partner think the decision was their own idea, can use sex or looks to get their way)

Apologizes first (being the first partner to say sorry after having an argument)