

**Today's "Modern" Family: A Textual Analysis of Gender in the Domestic Sitcom**

by

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## Abstract

This thesis utilizes a textual analysis with an emphasis on gender to analyze the Emmy award-winning sitcom, *Modern Family*. The program's overwhelming popularity among television audiences and media critics alike gives reason for scholarly attention. This study answers the question, in what ways does the sitcom, *Modern Family*, communicate our culture's dominant ideology about family. The textual analysis revealed that regardless of the illusion of modernity, each of the families within the domestic sitcom supported the traditional, nuclear family.

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## Introduction

A family portrait takes place in suburban California. A perfectly groomed backyard is the backdrop and all of the family members are dressed in white. The unity of color mimics the many American family portraits that came before this one. The mothers adjust their children's clothes, fixing stray hairs, and situating family members into the perfect positions. The fathers are in the background waiting for direction from the mothers; after all, this portrait was their idea. To the naked eye this appears to be a typical day in the life of an American family, but if we use a cultural lens to zoom in on this scenario a little closer we begin to see this is no ordinary family photo. In fact, the parents of the Vietnamese toddler are a Caucasian gay couple, and the older man next to them is married to much younger, scantily-clad Colombian trophy wife. It doesn't end there—we've only scratched the surface.

This is a scene from the Emmy award winning sitcom, *Modern Family* (2009). *Modern Family* falls within the genre of American domestic sitcoms. Blending the domestic sitcom with a humorous mockumentary style has gained this show much success among critics and television audiences. As the title suggests, the show attempts to portray modern families, but what exactly does that mean? The word "modern" suggests a stray from the normative, something new, something innovative. Some believe the word modern has a positive connotation, a positive progression away from the normative.

If we apply this definition to family we arrive at a new family, a family that has progressed from the traditional, nuclear family. At the surface, this is exactly the type of interrelated families that *Modern Family* creates on screen. There is a blended

family made up of an older white male, a *much* younger Colombian trophy wife and her son from her first marriage. There is also a nuclear family consisting of a bumbling dad, an over-controlling mom, and their three children. Lastly, there is family of gay co-parents and their adopted Vietnamese child. These three families make up a larger and seemingly modern family. It is certainly not the traditional family structure that we once saw in nearly all-domestic sitcoms.

Although the family structures appear to be modern, the gender roles within the structures communicate something different. In the example above, we see traditional family roles played out. The mothers are concerned with family, their children, and capturing a memory that they will cherish forever. Overall they are nurturing, feminine, and devoted to raising their children. The fathers are unwilling participants forced into the portrait without a care as to how it turns out. They are emotionally controlled, masculine, and devoted to their professional lives outside of the family. These behaviors reflect the dominant beliefs our culture shares about the role of the mother and the father.

The success that *Modern Family* created raises interesting questions regarding the messages communicated by the program and ultimately what those messages mean for audiences members in present day America. In what does the sitcom *Modern Family* communicate our culture's dominant ideology about family? To answer this research question I first review the evolution of the family unit and define the present-day American family. I then give a summary of the dominant beliefs regarding gender and gender roles within family. Research by scholars Wood (2008), Bem (1993), and Hochschild (1997) are outlined in this section. Next, I situate

*Modern Family* within the television situational comedy, specifically, the domestic situational comedy. To do this I provide a review of the situational comedy and describe the evolution of the domestic sitcom genre. I include discussion of popular domestic sitcoms over the last six decades as well as related research done by communication scholars.

Following the literature review, you will find a methodology chapter in which I describe the tools I use to assess my artifact, *Modern Family*. The beginning of this chapter situates culture as a product of our communication. Carey's (1989) work offers a greater understanding of the ritual process of communication. This leads into my decision to use cultural studies as my method of analysis. Next, I provide a general overview of American Cultural Studies as well as key terms such as ideology, hegemony, and power. These terms give breadth and depth to my study. Lastly, I include a section devoted to the sitcom itself. I describe the background of *Modern Family*, information about its writers and producers, and end with a summary of the show's media attention and critical reviews.

The analysis section begins with a description of the three families involved in the sitcom, *Modern Family*. Next, I dissect the mother and father figures looking specifically at their gender roles. Following that, I describe and explain the families at large and as a product of these gender roles. The analysis section serves to answer the research question, in what ways does *Modern Family* communicate our culture's dominant ideology about family? This question is answered by an explanation of which familial ideologies are supported or rejected as well as critique of the message

communicated to American audiences. My analysis reveals that *Modern Family* supports our Culture's belief in the traditional family structure.



## **Literature Review**

### *Family*

Who is your family? Is it your immediate blood relatives, such as your mother, father, and brothers or sisters? Suppose you and your spouse have no offspring—are you still a family? What about your new stepmother and her children? Are they your family? And if so, who decides? Defining the American family is more difficult than ever before, considering the recent changes in marriage legislation and the increase of adoption and divorce. The changes that we see within the family unit should neither be viewed as an indication that the value of family has plummeted in America, nor that one's stepfamily is any less real or loving than one's biological family. Rather, we need to reconsider the archaic definition of family and embrace the changes that make each and every modern day family unique.

The legal definition of family is deeply based on blood ties or state-sanctioned relationships (Holtzman, 2008). Policymakers on the state and federal level generally classify individuals as families if they are related to each other by virtue of blood, marriage, or adoption (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Chrisler (2003) claims this is a traditional definition of family and one that is held by the majority of people within the United States. Consequently, the cultural conception of a family has long since followed the above definition that included two married parents and biological children (Coontz, 1992; Gillis, 1996; O'Keefe, 1991). Smith (1993) argues that the dominant family structure in the United States is the Standard North American Family (SNAF) which is similar to the traditional or nuclear family (Hareven, 1991; Skolnick, 1991; Stacey, 1991).

SNAF is comprised of a married male-female couple oriented toward bearing and raising children. Smith (1993) argues that this is the most pervasive type of family seen in popular culture. Meyerowitz furthers that SNAF places sexuality and gender “at the heart of family ideology, being both heteronormative and dependent on a gendered division of labor oriented around production” (1994). Smith (1993) proposes that SNAF has two dimensions, nurturing and traditional. In the nurturing family ideal, both men and women have similar roles in the family. On the other hand, the traditional ideal holds a belief that men and women are fundamentally different in nature and their roles in the family (child-bearing and financial provisions) communicate that ideal.

Research reveals that the structure of family evolved significantly over the past few decades. All over the world, family life changed shape as we altered the way we live and work (Neil, 2003). Within the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century, the definition of family was no longer confined to the traditional family, but also included the normative family. Normative is a sociological concept that, according to Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban, "are agreed upon societal rules and expectations specifying appropriate and inappropriate ways to behave in a particular society" (1999, p. 53). Families with at least one parent and one child are viewed as a normative definition of the family in most if not all societies (Angus Reid Group, 1996; Bibby, 1995; Levin and Trost, 1992; Reiss, 1965; Rothberg and Weinstein, 1966). However, multiple definitions of family were formulated from particular theoretical perspectives (Doherty, Boss, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993).

Those defining the family from a feminist perspective assume that there are broad differences among marriages and families, meaning that no family across the board shares the same sexual orientation, gender role assignment, or inclusion of offspring. The feminist perspective proposes not only that there are differences across the board, but that these differences are greater than the similarities. Feminists reject the traditional definition of the family and, instead, focus on change and diversity (Thompson & Walker, 1995). However, following the traditional perspective, family members occupy socially defined roles such as mother, father, daughter, and son (Klein & White, 1996).

Additionally, the cultural conception of family changed along with the changes in society. Social changes such as divorce and remarriage, cohabitation, and gay and lesbian marriage and parenting created more diverse definitions of family over the years (Marsiglio, 1998). Nearly a half-century ago, divorce was uncommon and considered socially unacceptable. Individuals who separated or divorced from their spouses were shunned and lived as social outcasts. However, nearly all studies suggest that the likelihood of divorce in the United States is between 40-50% (Raley & Bumpass, 2003; Schoen & Standish, 2001; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). The rise in divorce and its aftereffects on the individuals involved often impact our traditional definition of family (Holtzman, 2008). Remarriage and additional offspring are added to the mix thus creating a change in the way we view a traditional family. Step-parents, step-siblings, and the possibility of half-siblings can be seen as additions to family that many would not have considered a few decades ago. All of these individuals may reside under one roof and

may be related through either blood or marriage, constituting them as a family. Furthermore, the controversial introduction of same-sex marriage is one that is slowly changing the way many view a traditional family. Recent studies show that just 38% of people accept same-sex couples and adopted or surrogate offspring to be included in the definition of a family (Chrisler, 2003). According to Altman, homosexuality represents the most clear-cut rejection of the nuclear family, and is persecuted because of the need for our culture to maintain the hegemony of the nuclear family concept (1979).

Although research shows change in the cultural conception of family, it confirms that the dominant definition of family is rooted deeply in the legal and traditional influences. The expansive and broadened definition of family encompasses much more diversity, but it is not without protest. In recent years, a plethora of political anti-same sex marriage initiatives surfaced. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, as well as the governments over which they presided, supported antigay marriage legislation and constitutional amendments during their time in office (Eskridge, 2008). Studies show that definitions of family unrelated to blood or marriage relations are seen as less meaningful and less supportive (Marsiglio, 1998). More specifically, step-relationships consistently are viewed to be less permanent and more stigmatized than biological relations. This concept also applies to same-sex couples, research about which consistently proves to be viewed as socially unacceptable and to foster more social hardship than traditional family experiences (Marsiglio, 1998). Overall, the stigmas associated with non-biological

and step-family relationships further prove that biological and marriage ties are fundamental shared meanings of what it means to be a family.

That is not to say that all research agrees that a loose definition of family exists throughout cultures. Contrary to the above research, Lorber and Farrell (1991) suggest that there is no such entity as “the family.” “As an institution, family has common features throughout the world, but in particular times and places, families are diverse” (p. 77). That is, throughout varying cultures, a common belief about families is that they are a nexus of production and procreation. However, no single definition accommodates all the possible beliefs about what truly is a family.

### *Gender*

Within a family, each individual has a certain socially and culturally prescribed role. Just like the definition of family, all of these roles are influenced by the shared meanings that a culture holds. Gender is one construct that influences family roles. Gender, just like family, has seen many adaptations and changes in its definition.

The words gender and sex are often used simultaneously, but the two are different distinctly. Sex is a designation based on biology, while gender is socially and psychologically constructed (Wood, 2005). One cannot choose her or his sex as it is determined during the early stages of conception. Gender, however, is acquired through social interaction and is viewed to be less stable than one’s sex. One’s gender may change over time as he or is exposed and influenced by interaction in the social world. Conversely, it is argued that while sex is biologically determined,

cultures outside of western thought believe gender is formulated in the psyche and is predestined at birth (Spade & Valentine, 2007).

From the moment we are born, we are socialized into our gender, meaning it is taught to us. This process is considered Gender Schema Theory and it suggests that gender is learned by a child through communication. The theory further claims that very early on, individuals learn to place themselves and others into clear-cut gender categories that make understanding those around us seem much simpler. At a young age, girls are taught to be feminine and to behave in ways that correspond with society's agreed upon definition of femininity—attractive, deferential, unaggressive, emotional, nurturing, dependent, and other-oriented (Wood, 2005). Likewise, boys are encouraged and socialized to be masculine—strong, ambitious, rational, emotionally controlled, dependent, and self-oriented (Wood, 2005). Fagot, Leinbach, and O'Boyle (1992) tell us that the year between a child's second and third birthday is the time during which gendered stereotypes for toys, clothing, household objects, games, and work are acquired. It is during this time that children begin to place themselves as well as others into gendered categories. Although there have been changes made to our culture's definition of femininity and masculinity, the basic blueprint remains relatively constant (Cancian, 1989; Riessman, 1990; Wood, 1993a).

Gendered identity begins during childhood. Throughout the rest of our lives, gendered communication plays a primary role in shaping gender identity (Stewart, Cooper, Stewart & Friedley, 1998). The interactions we have with others shape how we understand masculinity and femininity, what is acceptable, and how our own identity supports or challenges those beliefs. Wood (1994) states that although it may

seem that gender is influenced by intense social pressure, it must be sustained with one's own consent. Our gendered identity is constructed throughout a lifetime of interaction. We accept or reject some of the shared meanings about gender in order to make sense of ourselves and our place in society. We actively participate in reinforcing or altering cultural norms to an extent. However, the majority of our gendered identity is rooted in our culture's own ideologies about how men and women should behave. The social pressures of members in our culture, communicated as shared meanings through interpersonal, group, and mass media channels, explain why we act according to these preset gender roles. A cultural studies analysis will be helpful in examining this idea more fully.

Bem (1993) argues that three lenses of gender, or hidden assumptions about sex and gender are embedded in cultural discourse, social institutions, and individual psyches. These "lenses of gender"— biological essentialism, androcentrism, and gender polarization—systematically reproduce male power generation after generation. According to Bem (1993) Western culture attributes the differences between men and women on biology. Biological theorizing dates back to the mid to late 1800s in response to some of the first historical accounts of the women's rights movement. Biological essentialism is the widely-held belief that men and women are different as a result of biological differences. Biological essentialism argues that men and women are inevitably different in their biological and emotional makeup, and this influences how men and women feel and act. For example, biological essentialism argues that women's hormones and physiology result in women being naturally more nurturing and gentle because they are built to breed and care for children. Conversely,

men are naturally more competitive, aggressive, smart and powerful because of testosterone. Thus, from this perspective, gendered behaviors are the “natural” and “normal” result of biology.

Essentialism normalizes the dominant ideologies regarding gender and reduces everything to binary oppositions with minimal room for change or improvement. As a result, men and women are placed in two distinct categories creating negative social implications for individuals who deviate from those categories. Biological theories regarding gender are so deeply rooted in our culture that many of the beliefs remain today. Fortunately, many were rendered unscientific and Bem asks us to reconsider our initial response to attribute differences in gender to biology.

Androcentrism is the second lens that assumes the belief that males are at the center of our culture. Bem (1993) describes it as “males looking out at reality from behind their own eyes and describing what they see from an egocentric point of view” (p. 36). Androcentrism regards male values and practices as norm, and in doing so, regards female values and practices as deviations from the norm. As a result, the androcentric lens accomplishes two things—first, Western culture defines everything as dissimilar or similar from males. Second, Western culture defines all things in terms of meaning or significance to males. Androcentrism is omnipresent in Western culture everyday life and often goes unchallenged and unnoticed. One example, restroom symbols, make a clear distinction between male and female. However, “neutral” signs such as pedestrian, elevator, and exit signs are represented by the male symbol. In addition to nonverbal communication, verbal communication is inundated



with androcentric speech. The words policeman, chairman, fireman all favor the male perspective yet refer to positions held by both men and women. Conclusions drawn from medical research on men are assumed to represent women's health too. By bringing to light several androcentric examples, it is clear that females' experiences in Western culture are lacking and often unaccounted for.

The third and final lens is gender polarization, which is the ubiquitous organization of social life around the distinction between male and female. Gender polarization, however, is an effect of patriarchy. Patriarchy is an ideology, too, that is manifested and communicated through gender. Gender is displayed in reaction to the structural demands of patriarchy, which relies on a marking system that distinguishes males from females (Rodino, 1997). Gender performances are part of this marking system. Bem (1993) attributes this lens as the sole reason that people in Western culture only see two sexes, and work to exclude any varying definitions of gender such as transgendered or nongendered individuals. The gender polarization lens has two negative impacts on Western culture. The first impact is that this lens defines mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female. The second negative impact is that gender polarization causes a culture to be quick to judge any gender deviant behavior as "problematic."

Homosexuality, although gaining social acceptance, falls within the category of gender deviant behavior. Dominant ideologies regard heterosexual relationships as the accepted and preferred behavior. Western culture views homosexuality as taboo and unnatural, thus creating negative implications for those who engage in same-sex relationships. The gay and lesbian communities challenge traditional gender roles

constructed by society because their sexualities fail to fit neatly into the prescribed heteronormative categories. Their existence threatens the world view of the culture and its members.

### *Gendered Family*

As biological essentialism, androcentrism, and gender polarization developed, one way in which their growing significance found expression was through definitions of “family”. Because role differentiation was functional, meaning that it was implemented and accepted, it was institutionalized over time (Renzetti and Curran, 1999). Hence, this type of role assignment is known as the functionalist perspective. Role differentiation is embedded deeply in our culture, thus creating and shaping our idea of the gendered family.

Over the years, many studies found that women do not have important roles in divisions of responsibility within the family (Erkal, 1993; Sivacioglu, 1991; Williams, 1990). In the traditional view of family, a women’s role is limited to fulfilling her responsibilities as a wife and mother, and ultimately the caretaker. Aulette (1994) supports this claim and argues that in the nuclear family, the wife/mother typically assumes the expressive family role which means she does the housework, cares for the children, and ensures that the relational and emotional needs of those within the family are met. She is fragile and dependent on her husband and expects and allows him to make the majority of the household decisions. The father’s role includes having a professional career and ensuring that the financial and safety needs of the family are met. He is emotionally controlled and puts his needs and career above his family’s. The traditional roles of the mother and father are gendered

constructs, resulting from dominant ideologies and belief systems of a culture. Research shows that division of labor based on gender roles results negatively in financial dependence on the full-time male caregiver (Sullivan, 1996). In the instances of divorce, the “displaced housewife” in the traditional roles is at a disadvantage because she acquired few occupational skills to place her competitively in the labor market. As a result, these women find themselves struggling to support their family financially (Weitzman, 1985).

Interestingly, the number of traditional, nuclear families decreased over the last 50 years. In fact, the nuclear family represents a minority of households in the United States. According to Sullivan (1996), the increased availability of alternative insemination services for lesbians and the allowance of second parent adoptions resulted in an increase of lesbian co-parent families. Research shows that within same-sex parent families, the division of labor is split equally among partners (Sullivan, 1996). A qualitative analysis of 34 lesbian co-parents found the majority of them to take equal share in all family duties from household care to financial provider. The division of labor was not reliant upon traditional gender roles seen within the nuclear family, rather split up according to what worked best for each parent’s schedule seeing as how both women worked full-time to support the family.

However, even though women are employed in the workforce more than in the past, this does not necessarily equate a change in the gender roles regarding family and home life in the traditional nuclear family. There is a definite increase in the shared responsibility at home, however, even in common two-earner couples, “the commonly held belief is that housework is still women’s work no matter what other

demands wives have on their time” (Shelton, 1992, p. 77). Hochschild (1997) reports that as greater numbers of women moved into the economy, families experience short-handedness in work and family life. This short-handedness refers to the decrease in time that women spend at home and the increase in housework and child caring that still needs to be done.

To make sense of how men and women come to play out gender roles, Hochschild (1997) introduces gender strategy, which is a plan of action for solving a problem based on what we know about our cultures notion of gender and its corresponding normative behaviors. Men and women can each take a gender strategy based on what they have been taught, how they understand their gender to be, and how they ultimately they act in response to society. Through acting on gender strategies, Hochschild (1997) studies suggest that there are three possible gender ideologies pertaining to marriage—traditional, transitional, and egalitarian. Hochschild follows multiple families as they struggle with the dilemma of managing work and family, each taking a different gender ideology. The woman who partakes in the traditional gender ideology works, but chooses to identify most with work at home, such as mother or wife. The traditional man wants the same and finds his focus to most align with that of professional work and power over the marriage. The choices that men and women make are undoubtedly influenced by the dominant gender ideologies of their culture. Women feel most comfortable identifying with work at home and men at work because the traditional gender roles practiced by their culture encourage that identity. A woman who considers herself part of the transitional gender ideology wants her focus to be on both home life and professional

life, yet still holds some traditional values about her husband's role in the family (Hochschild, 1997).

Lastly, the egalitarian gender ideology is one where both wife and husband work outside the home and earn money to support their family as well as share home life duties (Hochschild, 1997). Within the egalitarian gender ideology, the wife and husband take equal part, or at least strive to, in the cleaning, cooking, and raising children. The traditional gender roles for males and females do not apply here—for instance, the husband may cook all of the meals and do the laundry and the wife may bathe the children and mow the lawn. In essence, the home life duties know no gender in the egalitarian gender ideology. A household task such as dusting would be performed by either male or female as each take equal responsibility in caring for their house and children after their professional work day ends (Hochschild, 1997).

Hochschild (1997) makes note that the gender ideologies are not as simplistic as they seem. Often, an individual's desired gender ideology will not match with their actual gender ideology in the family. For example, a female may believe her gender ideology to be egalitarian but in reality, she is in a relationship where her husband acts according to the traditional gender ideology leaving all home duties left undone for her to complete. When this happens, Hochschild (1997) found men and women will try to change the marital roles at play, especially when women found themselves struggling to keep up with the second shift—the shift that includes house and family duties long after their public nine to five shift has ended. Women “supermom” their way through the day, taking on more than humanly possible, leaving them dissatisfied with life, work, and their marriage. Women would also consider cutting back at work,

such as taking a time off to while their children were young. This decision often led to feelings of defeat by women as they lost a sense of professional identity, something regarded highly by most modern day women (Renzetti and Curran, 1999). Other options to cope with unsatisfactory marital roles included women cutting back on housework, self, and children. This meant that if their finances could not afford hiring a maid or caretaker, than the cleaning and to some extent, the childcare, went undone for long periods of time.

Through Hochschild's (1997) research, it is apparent that women were often the ones finding alternate strategies to cope with the changing times that reflect both spouses participating in the workforce fulltime. It is ultimately the women who end up working the second shift, as they are both wage earners during the day as well as unpaid workers at home for the remainder of the day. Walzer (1996) adds that not only do women do more of the primary childcare and cleaning, but they also do more of the mental work, such as worrying, advice seeking regarding their children and family. Some scholars (Walzer, 1996; Stacey, 1990) argue that the second shift, or the kinkeeper role, is the most important and most valuable role for an individual as they are able to build close bonds with their children as well as shape generations to come.

Although much of the above research has pointed to the notion that women were and still are the primary caregivers and take on the traditional gender roles, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that in households where both husbands and wives work full-time, 25 percent of fathers of children under the age of five tend to raising the children. This percentage, however, only applies to families of the blue-collar

profession. Those families considered to be of the white-collar profession still abide by most of the traditional gender roles set in place by Western culture.

Overall, gender roles in families have made many transitions towards less traditional and more egalitarian ideologies. Yet, the structure of the workforce in Western culture does not easily facilitate these changes. In regards to child raising, most employers in the U.S. offer maternity leave for the mother only, whereas some European countries have implemented paternal leave that permits the father to take a larger role in the raising of family, something believed to be intrinsically a woman's role. Our culture's beliefs about gender roles are not only communicated to us throughout our everyday interactions, but also our everyday entertainment.

### *Television Sitcoms*

Within our culture, there are many factors that influence our ideas of the world around us. Specifically, the media are a factor that contribute to our perception of reality as they produce, maintain, repair, and transform it (Carey, 1979). Cultural studies analyzes artifacts specific to a culture to reveal which ideologies hold power and stay in power over time. Since media messages are a hegemonic process that maintain dominant ideologies in power, television is one artifact that may be studied to learn more about a culture and its shared meanings of family.

The television situational comedy boomed in popularity since its transition from radio in the 1950s. According to Marc (2005) the *TV Guide* was the first general publication to coin the term situational comedy in a 1953 article. Later, the phrase "sitcom" was adopted and used by nearly every person and publication in

America. The American sitcom has long since been analyzed for its influence on culture and society.

Hirst argues that “American sitcoms provide its culture with a set of rules—rules on how to engage in relationships, rules on to tell the truth or engage in deception, rules on how to raise your children, rules for conducting a dinner party, and so on” (1979, p. 35). These rules are important to a viewer because a thorough understanding of them will determine whether or not a person is accepted into a society (Piercen, 2005). The American sitcom offers codes of behavior for everyday situations that members of that culture may experience. For this reason, the sitcom may be viewed as a cultural artifact through which dominant ideologies at any particular time period may be viewed, especially those relating to gender, social class, and relationships (Dalton and Linder, 2005).

### *Domestic Sitcoms*

Over the past 60 years American television sitcoms grew to embody a wide variety of sub-genres, such as the workplace sitcom, animated sitcom, and sitcoms directed at children and teenagers (Dalton and Linder, 2005). However, one sub-genre in particular remained popular— the domestic sitcom. The domestic sitcom is one that focuses on home and family life, and the plot centers around members of the family. A brief history of domestic sitcoms in the United States is useful to situate this genre of television within the context of American culture. First airing on May 5, 1951, *I Love Lucy* was the pioneer of domestic sitcom as its plot was structured around the life of a married couple. As with most early domestic sitcoms, the general



theme of *I Love Lucy* was centered on the differences between gender roles and the battle between the sexes on household issues.

Leibman (1995) suggests that the notion of domesticity in the 1950s is made familiar to us most clearly through the sitcoms made and placed within the realm of classic television today. They are the shows still widely shown in syndication and on cable channels like *Father Knows Best*, *Ozzie and Harriett*, and *Leave it to Beaver*. One domestic sitcom, *The Andy Griffith Show* endured in popularity over the years. The themes of friendship and family, coupled with that of innocent plot material contribute to the long term success of this show in American culture. Ideological patterns of race and gender can be found in *The Andy Griffith Show* most notably in the development of characters and plot. However, in the idealized setting of Mayberry, the negative ramifications of such dominant ideologies about race and gender are often overlooked. Vaughn (2004) argues that any hint of racial slur or sexist comment is overlooked in the utopian setting without realistic repercussion. Instead, the episodes direct the focus on happier, more pleasant themes. Vaughn concludes by alluding to the notion that domestic sitcoms are not just a reproduction of our current culture, but often a production of an ideal culture to which we can escape during times of hardship. The lack of minorities ensures no disruption to the status quo. The lack of attention to minorities communicates their role in society—nonexistent.

Leibman (1995) categorizes these shows made from 1958-1963 as domestic melodramas. During the mid to late 1960s, domestic sitcoms expanded to include more than the traditional, nuclear family. Sitcoms such as *My Three Sons* and *The*

*Brady Bunch* showed blended families uniting after a death in the family or divorce. In the 1970s, *All in the Family* took a new route in domestic sitcoms as it addressed social issues that currently affected individuals in the United States. In the 1980s, *The Cosby Show* introduced itself as a domestic sitcom focusing specifically on an African-American, upper-middle class family, while *Roseanne* focused on the life of a working class family. In 1983, *Family Ties* introduced America to former hippie parents, Steven and Elyse Keaton. Steven was the patriarch of the family and worked as a manager at a public TV station, while his wife Elyse worked as an architect. The sitcom focused on the political differences emerging in America during the Reagan-era. *Full House* first aired in 1987 and formed a new view of domestic sitcoms situating around Danny Tanner, a single-father left to raise three daughters after the death of his wife. The century came to a close with the 1990s sitcom, *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Similar to *The Cosby Show*, *Everybody Loves Raymond* cast a stand-up comedian as the main character. The plot centered around family life and domestic issues such as dealing with in-laws and raising children. More recent domestic sitcoms focus on a working class families that still follow traditional gender roles. *Family Matters* first aired in 1991 and centered around a middle-class Chicago family. Amusing family problems were the focus for father Carl Winslow, a policeman, and mother Harriette Winslow, a sharp-tongued housewife. *Home Improvement*, first airing in 1992, was a domestic sitcom where father and handyman, Tim Taylor was the butt of family jokes as he broke more appliances than he actually repaired. His wife, Jill, was a quick-witted school teacher that kept Tim in line all the while raising their three boys.

This portrayal of the father figure is nothing new to television. In nearly every working-class or blue-collar sitcom, the father is cast as dumb, immature, irresponsible, or lacking common sense (Butsch, 1995). The most famous examples are in *The Flintstones*, *All in the Family*, and *The Simpsons*. In most middle-class sitcoms, the buffoon character is absent. Instead, the mother and father work together to raise their children. The most famous examples are *Father Knows Best*, *The Brady Bunch*, and *the Bill Cosby Show* (Butsch, 1995).

#### *Gender Roles in Sitcoms*

Domestic sitcoms portray members of the family in culturally specific gender roles. Scharrer (2001) analyzed the changing definition of family gender roles from the early 1950s to 2000. All domestic sitcoms involving a mother, father, and child that aired from 1950-2000 were considered in the research sample. Scharrer found that from the 1950s to the present, the roles of the sitcom father and mother changed. Domestic sitcoms such as *The Honeymooners*, *All in the Family*, and *Roseanne* portrayed middle-class families with fathers working to support the household. Scharrer argued that in these sitcoms, audiences see the role of the father transition from that of authority and wisdom to one in which their sensibility is mocked and often the butt of many jokes.

One factor that influenced the portrayal of gender roles was that of socio-economic status. Scharrer (2001) found that in domestic sitcoms that portrayed families with upper-class standing, such as *Leave it to Beaver*, the father figure remained the strong head of the family and were not subject to ridicule. One explanation for this change in gender roles on television is that the gender roles in

American culture during this era also were changing (Smith, 2000). The cultural roles of men and women altered by the influence of social factors like the feminist movement in the late 1960s were represented in American domestic sitcoms (Dow, 1990).

*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which first aired in 1970, is one example of the shift sitcoms underwent in portraying women as stronger, more independent females who could lead a happy life without attachment to a spouse or children (Dow, 1990). Dow (1990) analyzed *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* for its portrayal of a non-traditional woman during a time of social change. Mary Tyler Moore was viewed to be a non-traditional female character because the majority of the leading female characters that preceded her were cast as wives or mothers with no identity beyond the scope of the home. A textual analysis of the character of Mary Richards was performed to better understand society's reaction to the changing roles of women. Dow (1990) found that specific hegemonic patterns of feminism and patriarchy existed within *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* narrative, specifically that although Mary was an unmarried, independent woman, she nonetheless fulfilled gendered expectations within the workplace "family" by functioning as a daughter and mother.

*Murphy Brown* (1988) was one of the first 1980s sitcoms to be marketed as a sitcom with feminist implications. Dow (1992) analyzed the television sitcom *Murphy Brown* for its portrayal of womanhood, motherhood, and femininity. Dow considered the sitcom, which followed the life and times of a female journalist on her pursuit of success in the workforce and lacked femininity and maternal nurturing, to be postfeminist. The analysis contests that Murphy was emasculated by her

dominance in the career field and her lack of motherly instincts. Dow argues that *Murphy Brown* portrayed only the extreme feminist perspective that demanded an equal place in the workforce, yet lacked any other critique of gender roles.

On the contrary, the television sitcom *Designing Women* (1986) was analyzed and critiqued for its innovative portrayal of gender roles. Dow (1992) argues that the “private women talk” demonstrated by the four female characters in *Designing Women* challenged patriarchal ideals and empowered women who participated in it. Additionally, the sitcom had empowered women through its modes of communication and its radical analysis of women’s issues. However, Dow argued that although the sitcom placed a crack in the glass ceiling, that crack is tempered by the hegemonic elements embedded within the program. Arguably, those hegemonic elements work against the progressive elements and result in a sitcom that appeases a wider range of audiences. Dow believes this negotiation to still benefit the empowerment of women as its ideals and values reach a larger audience, spreading the empowerment to both male and female viewers.

Shortly after, the television sitcom *Will & Grace* (1998) made headlines for its portrayals of the gay community. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) argue that the mainstream success of *Will & Grace* suggests society’s growing acceptance of the gay community. Battles and Hilton-Morrow take a critical approach to examining portrayals of gay characters on television and reject the assumption that television success equates huge changes in societal attitudes toward the gay community. Instead, they find that *Will & Grace* makes the topic of homosexuality more palatable by situating it within safe and familiar popular culture conventions. Battles and

Hilton-Morrow find several strategies that make this sitcom's treatment of a sensitive topic a nonchalant manner. The authors argue that the program continually positions gayness in opposition to masculinity, pairs its characters in familiar opposite-sex dyads, dismisses character threats by attributing them to heteronormativity, and lastly, emphasizes relationships at the expense of gay politics. Each of these strategies situates an ideology, which strays from the dominant way of thinking, in a normal and acceptable manner. This study attempts to disprove the notion that mainstream success of *Will & Grace* allude to overwhelming social acceptance of the gay community. Although, by making homosexuality feel acceptable to many different audiences, the writer of *Will & Grace* is able to appease the viewer's concerns regarding a potentially threatening ideology.

The above research illustrates the difficulty in defining family as well as understanding an individual's role within the family unit. The current trends in divorce, adoption, and same-sex marriages further complicate an already complex issue. Based on the research, we are moving further away from the traditional definition family towards a new modern family—one that makes it difficult to apply the archaic and prescribed roles. The belief in biologically defined gender roles is outdated. Bem's research introduces a new way to understand and make sense of an individual's place in the world without subjecting them to preset categories complete with ways to interact in society. The progresses we are seeing in family and gender roles are not only apparent in our everyday interaction but are also reaffirmed in various media outlets, specifically television sitcoms. The domestic sitcom has evolved over time in the same way as our cultural perception of a traditional family.

The current family unit, once characterized by a strong male as the head of the household, is now flexible and inclusive of variations in gender roles. Domestic sitcoms, such as *Roseanne*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *Home Improvement*, reaffirm the changes in a once traditional family structure.

Just as scholars in the past have analyzed domestic sitcoms for their cultural implications, I too wish to understand what current domestic sitcoms communicate to our culture about gender roles, specifically ABC's *Modern Family* (2009).

### *Modern Family*

*Modern Family* first aired on September 23, 2009 on the ABC network. The sitcom's tagline sums up the premise nicely—"One big (straight, gay, multicultural, traditional) happy family." Producers and writers, Christopher Lloyd and Steven Levitan, are the masterminds behind this program. In addition to *Modern Family*, Lloyd produced popular sitcoms as *Fraiser* (1994-2004) and *Wings* (1991-1993). Lloyd worked as writer for the aforementioned shows in addition to *Golden Girls* (1986-1989). Prior to joining forces with Lloyd in Lloyd-Levitan Productions, Steven Levitan is most known as the creator of the 1997 sitcom *Just Shoot Me*, starring David Spade that aired until 2003. According to media website *All Business: A D&B Company*, Lloyd-Levitan Productions became official in 2006 when 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television signed them on for a three-year contract to write and produce projects both separately and individually (Andreva, 2006). Lloyd and Levitan's experience in the television industry served them well. Over the years, they learned the recipe for success and in 2009, the sitcom *Modern Family* became their first joint enterprise.

*Modern Family* follows three interconnected families—Jay Pritchett, his daughter Claire Dunphy, and son Mitchell Pritchett. Jay and his younger, Colombian wife Gloria raise her teenage son (Manny) from a previous marriage. Claire and Phil Dunphy have three children of their own, Haley, Alex, and Luke. The final family includes Mitchell, his partner Cameron Tucker and their adopted Vietnamese daughter, Lily. The plotline follows the formulaic structure of domestic sitcoms as it follows each of the families throughout the trials and tribulations of raising and being a family. The day-to-day interactions revolve around the struggles that gay co-parents, Mitchell and Cameron face in their community and their family, Claire keeping reign on both her children and her dim-witted husband, Phil, and finally, Jay's new marriage to his much younger wife and her 13-going-on-30 teenage son, Manny.

As is the case with many sitcoms, the current plotline was not the initial one. Levitan admits that the show's early pitch involved a documentarian, and German exchange student who once lived with the Pritchett family. The student had a crush on Claire while, ironically, Mitchell had a crush on the student (Sepinwall, 2010). The plotline was replaced by the current one, which, based on reviews, was a wise decision.

*Modern Family* received positive feedback from its premiere. *Broadcasting and Cable* reports that *Modern Family* collected 11 million viewers in its Wednesday 9 p.m. slot along with a 4.6/12 Nielsen rating among adults 18-49 (Blundell, 2010). The Nielsen ratings are an audience measurement system that reports findings in terms of ratings points per share. This means that 4.6% of the U.S. population



watched *Modern Family* that night, and 12% of everyone actually watching TV were watching *Modern Family*. These represent a healthy viewing audience for the 2009-2010 television season. The season two premiere drew in 12.6 million viewers and was the night's highest-rated show among adults 18-49, according to overnight Nielsen ratings published by ABC (2011).

The *New York Times* named the show "Funniest new family comedy of the year" for its comedic portrayal of parenthood and family dysfunction (Poniewozick, 2009). A television critic for *The Los Angeles Times* made the steep claim that *Modern Family* "single-handedly brought the family sitcom back from the dead" through its ability to be "sharp, timely, and fresh, complicated enough to be interesting, but with a soft, sweet center" (McNamara, 2011). *The Australian* claims *Modern Family* is the best comedy since the US version of *The Office* attracting 1.5 million viewers for its debut in its country (Blundell, 2010). *Variety Magazine* informed audiences that *Modern Family* was easily the best sitcom of today, describing the program as "smart, nimble and best of all funny, while actually making a point about the evolving nature of what constitutes 'family'." (Lowry, 2009)

Reviews such as these prove that critics are see the show for more than just its impeccable humor, but also for its acknowledgment and treatment of trends in the current family structure. *The New York Times* describes the show to fit one specific trend in today's culture, "the tendency of parents to friend their children rather than discipline them" (Bellafante, 2009). Bellafante is referring to the characters of Claire and Phil who most often look for their child's acceptance rather than respect. A TV critic for *Slant Magazine* praises Lloyd and Levitan for giving each family fair and

equal treatment throughout the sitcom, stating “a lesser show would have focused on the nuclear family with wacky interludes brought on by the secondary characters” (Swanson, 2009). But not *Modern Family*, instead, they make sure that each character is allowed equal time to shine in his or her own right. *Slant Magazine* comments on the sitcom’s semi-formulaic way of resolving family problems within the 30-minute time frame. While other sitcoms design endings that have the “aw” moment intended to pull your heartstrings, the writers of the show make the traditional “cutesy, one big happy family” ending part of their punch line (King, 2010). The sarcasm and humor remains consistent throughout the entire episode and the resolution is no exception. Perhaps the lack of happy endings actually works to make the show appear more “realistic”.

Currently in its second season, *Modern Family* continues to gain acceptance, awards, and viewership. *People Weekly*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Chicago Tribune* all gave the show a critic score of 100, some calling it “a fast-paced mockumentary that perfectly captures the experience of parenthood” (Dietz, 2011). *Variety Magazine* gave the show an 80 out of 100, *Slant Magazine* an 88, and *TV Guide* a 90. *The Montreal Gazette* reported that “*Modern Family* has proven to be the season’s most pleasant surprise: a family sitcom that’s funny” (Strachan, 2011). Additionally, *Modern Family* was nominated for 14 Emmy’s during the 2009-2010 season and won three of those nominations—*Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Comedy Series*, *Outstanding Writing in a Comedy Series*, and *Outstanding Comedy Series* (Morales, 2010). *Outstanding Supporting Actor* was awarded to Eric Stonestreet for his role as the flamboyant and gay Cameron Tucker.

Most recently, *Modern Family* won awards for best comedy and best direction at the first-ever American Comedy Awards in March 2011 according to ABC (2011).

*Modern Family* also received positive reviews for its mockumentary film style and its ability to promote a sense of “realness.” In a 2009 issue of *The Toronto Star*, writers Steven Levitan and Christopher Lloyd found themselves asking, “What’s the real? What are the conversations that we’re having with our kids, with our wives? What are the funny situations that we are witnessing in our schools?” (Salem, 2009). The answers to these questions can be found throughout each and every episode of the sitcom as they all portray familiar family scenarios. From the dysfunctional family vacations to disastrous family portraits, *Modern Family* attempts to bring “real” family situations to the television set.

In addition to the attempts at “real,” the show also incorporates the modern—a gay couple, an older man with a much younger Colombian wife, and a dysfunctional nuclear family. In response to that, writer Levitan was quoted “I welcome criticism from the far-right groups. We just wanted to show three different types of American families. The idea was to have one traditional family and two nontraditional families because I think the family in America is changing” (Strachan, 2010). In another article, Levitan goes on to say that when he and Christopher Lloyd sat down to describe the prototypical American family, they decided there wasn’t one so instead they included three typical families who together created a kind of norm (Blundell, 2010). He goes on to describe the gay couple as the most traditional couple of all noting that Cam is a stay-at-home parent and Mitchell goes to work and that they are fairly conservative.

The show's treatment of current debates in America is raised in magazine and newspaper articles both in and out of the United States. Reviews from *The London Times* claim that within the sitcom everyone is mocked equally. *Modern Family* shows how normal the gay couple can be or as normally weird as the other units in the family at least (Teeman, 2010). In *Slant Magazine's* review of the show's second season, King describes that the writers play with audience expectations by taking common sitcom archetypes, such as the "effete homosexual, the dumb kid, and the loony foreigner" and turning them on their head (King, 2010). King gives the specific example that Cam and Mitch play to gay stereotypes yet break them at the same time. In essence, audiences recognize familiar stereotypes within the program, but the show's treatment of those stereotypes is the modern, refreshing twist.

Not all reviews on this matter are positive ones. *Unreality Magazine* argues that *Modern Family's* treatment of homosexuals does nothing but worsen the stereotype claiming that Cam's character, in particular, is more flamboyant, and effeminate than many women. As a result, homosexuals in our culture are inaccurately and negatively portrayed (Tassi, 2010). Critics from the right-winged perspective viewed season two's much-anticipated onscreen kiss between the homosexual couple as crossing boundaries (Vitrel 2010). According to *Access Hollywood Online*, the gay kiss was a result of public pressure and even a fan-based Facebook page with a hefty amount of viewers campaigning for a kiss (2010).

Interestingly enough, Yalahom of *New York Magazine* interviewed Eric Stonestreet, who plays Cam on *Modern Family*. Stonestreet reported that the Facebook page was a "waste of energy" because Mitch and Cam were already way

ahead of prime-time television in adopting a baby. Despite the star's claims, the show aired the onscreen kiss early on in season two. Ed O'Neill, who plays the head patriarch, Jay Pritchett weighed in on the matter shortly after the controversial episode aired. In response to the kiss, O'Neill says "Who cares? In many ways, Cam and Mitch are the most conservative couple. Mitch is a lawyer, and Cam plays the stay-at-home-dad." (Vitrele, 2010). O'Neill adds that we see the couple live together, we can assume they have sex, at the end of the day, who really cares? Some critics later criticized the actual kiss itself, calling it lackluster and dull (McKinley, 2010).

In addition to television publicity, actors from the sitcom are showing up on newsstands and card stores around the country. Julie Bowen (Claire Dunphy) made appearances in *US Weekly* (2010) and *Women's Health* (2011). Sophia Vergara (Gloria Pritchett) is the new face of the "Got Milk" advertisements. Most recently, *Hallmark* issued a line of greeting cards featuring *Modern Family* characters.

The attention from critics, audiences, and advertisers suggests that *Modern Family* is worth discussion. Although numerous critical reviews from magazines and newspapers exist, this sitcom receives no scholarly attention to date. The raving reviews and controversial plotlines motivate for academic attention, just as groundbreaking shows such as *Murphy Brown* and *Roseanne* have in the past. Thus, this thesis will conduct a textual analysis of *Modern Family*. The analysis seeks reveal the ways in which *Modern Family* communicates our culture's dominant ideology of family. I am interested in the family dynamic and portrayal of gender roles as they play integral roles in the construction of our culture. In the following chapter, the sitcom will be critically examined in order to better understand how ideologies are

both challenged and supported and a critique of the resulting implications will be offered.

It is necessary to understand and familiarize ourselves with the past research on family and gender roles and how they were portrayed in domestic sitcoms over time before a new study can be conducted. We must learn the past trends before we begin to understand and analyze current ones. The way in which scholars conducted previous media research provides insight for this specific study. Their framework and method of analysis guide the way in which I will analyze *Modern Family*. Previous studies applied a cultural studies analysis to various media to yield dominant shared meanings that were a direct reflection of the culture in which they were produced. Before we can apply the same analysis to this study, an overview of culture, cultural studies is necessary.

## Method

### *Communication and Culture*

The present chapter situates my analysis of the television sitcom, *Modern Family*, within the realm of Communication and Cultural Studies. By applying a Cultural Studies analysis, I hope to answer the following question: In what ways does *Modern Family* communicate our culture's dominant ideology about family? First, we consider the term culture.

Definitions of culture are ubiquitous, contradictory, and elusive. Definitions of culture range from the degree of artistic influence on an embodiment of people to the descriptive characteristics of a society. Some scholars believe culture to be social heritage passed on to future generations (Kushnick, 2004). In a behavioral sense, culture can be seen as a shared human behavior, or a way of life (Storey, 1996). In a symbolic sense, culture can be understood as arbitrarily assigned meanings that are shared by a society (Kushnick, 2004).

Since culture and communication are closely tied, understanding that relationship helps researchers to use the concept of culture more effectively. Culture lays the foundation in which communication takes place, how it takes place, and for how long it will remain in place. Likewise, communication is a cultural process. Meanings are produced and reproduced in the process of communication—such as language, discourse, and media. Research shows that we can understand the world around us through the actions and behaviors we see produced in the news, sitcoms and films. Everything from gender roles, language choice, and wardrobe are produced and reproduced in the media.

Carey (1989) explains that reality is produced through the symbolic process of communication, but how does this happen and what does it look like in our society? Carey (1989) argued that communication is “a symbolic process through which reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (p. 23). Rather than accepting the traditional transmission view of communication, Carey introduced the ritual view of communication that focuses on the representation of shared beliefs. Unlike the traditional view in which a sender and a receiver carry messages from one to another, Carey proposes that human communication functions as ritualized behavior through which culturally shared meanings are created and recreated for members. Carey provides one way to see the construction of views of reality through descriptions of the world, such as maps, that orient human behavior.

Carey (1989) also tells us that reality is maintained in the symbolic process of communication. As we look to media culture for examples of reality maintenance, we see it take shape in the form of practicing the cultural productions we see in the media. For example, we see a character play out the role of a wife on television or in movies, and we use that version of wife as the bench marker for how wives in our culture are supposed to act. The reality that Carey discusses can best be understood as a social construct, meaning that reality is created by the people involved. In order for the social construct of reality to remain in place, it needs to be maintained and practiced by those within the culture. For example, the practice of celebrating weddings with ceremony and reception that follows has been around for centuries. As each individual, family, culture, and society continues to celebrate weddings in that way, a certain reality is created—one that deems the celebration of a union between a



man and a woman as an important shared meaning within their culture. Over many years and after much maintenance of this practice, the shared meanings become embedded and thus a part of one's culture.

The third part of Carey's definition states that communication is a symbolic process in which reality is repaired. Reparation often is necessary as reality is a dynamic process that at times invites change. Change, as one could imagine, can come in both positive and negative forms. If a negative change occurs in a culture's perception of reality, that culture may work toward repairing the status quo. At its most basic definition, the word repair hints to fix a problem or mishap, and something as dynamic as reality is constantly broken as beliefs and ideas shift over time. Carey describes reparation as an alternative way to explain a culture's shared meaning without having to revise a shared meaning, or worse, rebuild a new shared meaning. One example of repairing can be seen if a long-held belief is challenged such as the belief that marriage is a union between a man and a woman. A culture, striving to ward off change, immediately begins to repair the belief or idea about marriage. As a result, many people voted for laws and legislation that made marriage between same-sex couples illegal, thus repairing the original definition and keeping the status quo.

The last and final part of Carey's definition of communication states that reality is transformed over time. If we continue with the example that marriage was accepted initially as a union between a man and a woman, we can see the ways in which this social construct of reality transformed over time. Unlike the repairing process, where the current world view is explained but not revised, transforming takes place when an alternate explanation does not suffice and must be revised. As a result,

there were several states in the United States that made it possible for same-sex couples to marry and share in the same financial benefits as the heterosexual couples. In the end, a world view that once existed was transformed and revised to reflect the shifting ideas and beliefs of those people living within that culture.

If we apply Cary's definition of communication to the above definition of culture, then culture can be viewed as the arena in which this symbolic process of communication takes place. It is within culture that producing, maintaining, repairing, and transforming meaning is shared amongst a group of people. Culture is not just a group of people who share ideas and beliefs, rather, it is the set of practices that allows these shared ideas and beliefs to perpetuate and ultimately to exist (Barker, 2000). Members of a society must acknowledge the shared meanings and act in accordance through their behaviors and interactions for culture to form. The goal of this thesis is to examine a collection of episodes from the television situation comedy, *Modern Family*, looking specifically at the shared practices and beliefs communicated about family among the characters.

Shared practices or shared meanings are what individuals view to be the normal, most acceptable way of life. Shared meanings function as the common, "natural" and "normal" communicative actions that people within a culture accept and act upon. Shared meanings feel natural, as though they existed in nature and were around long before the people in the culture ever came into existence. The shared meanings and beliefs are accepted as the right way, and sometimes the only way, because of their extensive embeddedness within culture. As Carey (1989) argues, the shared meanings are produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed by a culture in

hopes of maintaining a sense of familiarity and status quo of the way things ought to be. The set of beliefs become such an integral part of a culture that many times they often go unnoticed and unchallenged. This concept is known as ideology and it is one of the driving forces behind cultural studies. In using the sitcom *Modern Family* as the cultural artifact, I will describe and analyze how the program uses familiar themes and ideas to produce, maintain, repair, and transform the communication practices of its respective culture.

### *Cultural Studies*

Cultural studies is a scholarly framework that informs analyses of cultural as well as important aspects of culture such as power and control. It is a perspective used to reveal and understand the shared meanings and beliefs a culture uses to understand the world. Cultural studies evolved over time with the help of many scholars who contributed along the way. The initial step in the intellectual development of cultural studies came from The Frankfurt School. Founded in Germany in 1923, the Frankfurt School fostered a group of intellectuals who created a critical studies approach to mass culture and communication. Much of their research cultivated from their experiences in Nazi Germany and exposure to the rise of media culture involving film, popular radio, and television (Kellner, 1989). Their research first focused on Karl Marx's theories of capitalism and the divides of social class within culture. Frankfurt School theorists were among the first to examine the effects of mass culture and the rise of the consumer society on the working classes (Kellner, 1989). The Frankfurt scholars coined the term "culture industry" to signify the process of the industrialization of mass produced culture. Analysis of the commodification of

cultural artifacts led these scholars to believe that culture industry has a specific function, which is to legitimize dominant beliefs and to incorporate individuals into that belief system. Several of the Frankfurt studies involved critical analyses of cultural artifacts, such as radio soap operas, popular magazines, and fascist speeches. In their view, mass culture and communication are important agents of socialization and mediators of political reality (Kellner, 1989). For these reasons, the Frankfurt scholars viewed mass communication to have economic, political, cultural, and social effects on a society. Cultural artifacts were no longer viewed as mindless leisure activities, but rather influential molders of ideology. The research conducted during this era led to the many developments in what we know as cultural studies.

Arguably the most influential development in cultural studies came from the Birmingham School in the 1960s. Originating in Britain in 1964, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, later known as the Birmingham School, was a research center founded to study the new field of cultural studies. The Birmingham School viewed cultural studies as representations and ideologies of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality in cultural texts, including media culture (Kellner, 2003). Theorists and scholars involved in the Birmingham School, most notably Stuart Hall, incorporated several methods to study culture, such as Marxism, feminism, and critical race theory. Hall and other cultural studies scholars were influenced by several areas of study such as history, sociology, and media studies.

Understanding the key elements within cultural studies assists in analyzing how the media represent the world in which we live. As mentioned briefly previously, an ideology is a set of beliefs that a group of people come to share which

serves as a framework for understanding the world around them. In essence, the world that we come to know only exists in that way because our ideologies construct it to be so. Reality, or what we perceive to be reality, does not exist on its own, but is an existence created to fit dominant shared meanings. Early Marxist theories referred to ideologies as just that—the illusionary representations of the relation of people to real conditions (Barker, 2000). What we perceive to be real is a product of our relationship to the world around us and our ideological beliefs of how it should function. For example, in our culture we perceive a family to be a mother, father, and a child or several children. We do not consider a family to be a just a wife and husband. This is an example of dominant ideology that our culture holds to be true—to be a reality.

More recently, Hall described ideology to be “those images, concepts, and premises through which we represent, interpret, understand, and make sense of some aspect of social existence” (2003, p. 8). Ideologies come to existence because a group of people accept or view a belief to be just and allow that belief to persist and strengthen through everyday language and discourse. An ideology describes the way a culture thinks about the world around it, and then offers an ideal way of living in that world. Ideologies are also a way in which a culture can justify and explain events. In the United States, we have many ideologies that reflect our culture’s view of the world in which we live. One ideology that exists is in regard to gender. It is our dominant ideology that men should be masculine and emotionless, while women should be feminine, nurturing, and emotional. The communication surrounding this ideology reflects that male gender is the ideal gender in the United States. If we look

to our culture for evidence that support this ideology we will find that most media perpetuate this dominant ideology. Although alternative ideas about gender are present, they are overshadowed by the overwhelming presence of an ideology that constructs and reconstructs the polarization between men and women. In looking at the program, I hope to reveal the ways in which *Modern Family* communicates our culture's dominant ideology about family. I am interested particularly in how a dominant gendered ideology is communicated through mother figures, father figures, and the family structure.

Another key concept of cultural studies is dominant ideologies. Dominant ideologies are those of the dominant group or the majority. Furthermore, not only do the majority of people in a culture believe the dominant ideology to be true, they also believe it to be natural and common sense. As an ideology becomes deeply rooted and understood to be innate, both the dominant and subordinate groups consent to its existence. For example, in the United States the dominant ideology in regard to gender is that men and masculinity are the ideal. If we look to our culture for examples of ways in which this ideology is perpetuated, we find that those in power are typically men, the highest pay is given to men, and that even many women accept this belief, regardless of the consequence, which is an expression of the dominant ideology of masculinity. Ideologies and dominant ideologies find power in their pervasiveness. They seem "natural" and "normal" and offer an explanation as to why the world works the way it does. Although ideologies are social constructs, they are viewed as innate and naturally occurring which is why so many groups consent to an outlook on life that ultimately oppresses them and empowers others (Hall, 1977).

The concept of dominant ideology should be understood fully within its relationship to power. Power resides in a dominant ideology that gains consent from all parties involved, both those it helps and those it oppresses. Oppression takes place when power is used in an unjust or cruel manner. In the United States, homosexuals are a group that faces oppression as they lack the same rights as heterosexual couples. Within a culture, power creates a hierarchy amongst social groups and individuals, who will be categorized as either an oppressor or the oppressed. Factors such as hierarchy and organization guide the use of power and reinforce the idea that illegitimate power will undermine a culture's collective goals and interests (Hamilton & Sharma, 1997.) As the difference in power dominates thoughts, social norms, and ideologies, a gap between social groups widens.

A cultural studies analysis looks within a culture and attempts to make sense of how power is acquired, distributed, and maintained within cultural groups. Power, as seen in cultural studies, can be understood as a force that keeps dominant ideologies in existence, but not a force that works by means of brute coercion. Italian scholar, Gramsci (1971) took Marx's claims regarding ideology a step further by including an explanation for how and why ideologies exist through consent, rather than force. Hegemonic power is that which a ruling group uses to exercise authority over subordinate classes. Gramsci (1971) defined hegemony as the dialectic struggle between the ruling, social, and cultural forces against the resistance of the subordinate classes under domination. The hegemonic model describes the power differences within a culture and shows the ways and means in which power persists and endures over time (Haugaard & Lentner, 2006).

According to Gramsci (1971), the hegemonic process is not rooted in the use of brute force. Instead, the transfer of power takes place through the unconscious consent of individuals to their own oppression. The voluntary consent to one's own oppression is referred to as false consciousness, and is the driving force behind hegemony. The hegemonic process enables groups to place themselves within social classes because the dominant ideology normalizes the concept of "class". In essence, hegemony explains the way in which the dominant class exerts control over the subaltern class by persuading it to accept the dominant as "natural," although that benefits the belief system of the dominant class and disadvantages the subaltern classes. The process of hegemony is not static, rather it is constantly changing and adapting. The ever changing nature of hegemony is the determining factor behind which ideologies are in play, which dominant ideologies persist, who maintains power and control, and which social classes become oppressed as a result.

This idea is closely related to cultural hegemony, a concept that describes the way in which hegemony is maintained through cultural practices (Gramsci, 1971). Media messages are one cultural practice through which the dominant ideology is maintained. If we look to history for an example, popular media constructions during Hitler's reign in the 1930s and 1940s lends itself as an exemplar of the concept of cultural hegemony. The Nazi party shared its ideology about the world around them and acquired dominance over other social groups in part through the hegemonic process in which the remaining social groups willfully contribute to their own oppression (hegemonic process). The desire to feel a sense of belonging to Germany during a time of economic and political turmoil was reason enough for some social



groups to internalize the shared beliefs of the Nazi regime with little understanding that it resulted in their own oppression.

As we look to a culture in hopes of understanding how its members come to know the world, we may look to its cultural artifacts. Cultural artifacts are products of a culture that represent the shared meanings of the world in which a culture lives. Radio, television, and film are all examples of cultural artifacts that may be examined to understand a society. The media are one way in which representations of ideologies are created and perpetuated within a culture. The media play a critical role in producing and reproducing shared meanings, thus further embedding them within the culture. According to Hall (1977) the media are socially, economically, and technically organized apparatuses for the production of messages and signs. Within the realm of television, messages and signs come in various forms such as sitcom scripts, character development, and plot selection. Consumer culture's production of these messages and signs do not create ideology, they reproduce, process, package, and focus ideology for a society (Gitlin, 1979). Looking specifically at television, Gitlin (1979) argues that ideological hegemony is reproduced and focused in the format and formula, genre, setting and character type, topical slant, and solution. The constant changing, modifying, and reinventing of these categories is necessary for a media text to remain both financially profitably and to hegemonically ward off oppositional forms.

It is important to note the difference between a constructed reality and reality. Scholars have since disputed the difference between the two. Carey (1979) views our reality as a socially constructed entity that exists as a product of our communication.

However, there are many other ways of looking at the world around us and our ideology of family. SNAF is just one of the many ways to view family. Statistics and census data are also world views for many members of our culture. I combine the two views, the constructed reality and the statistics to create a fuller understanding of our ideology of family.

To further the relationship between ideologies and the production of cultural artifacts, Gitlin (1979) describes the function of setting and character type. Most often, the most well received settings and character types are those that resonate with the familiar beliefs of the masses. For example, during the 1950s domestic sitcoms focused its attention on happy people with happy problems which was representative of America's Baby Boom era. The 1970s was a time of turmoil and desired change in which sitcoms portrayed by scripting unhappy people finding happy ways of coping with unhappy issues (Gitlin, 1979).

The slant of a television sitcom can be understood as a certain position on a certain public issue. Slant is mistaken for the tilt or bias of a show, but it is the week-after-week angle in which the slant emerges. Slants sometimes manifest in the characters created in sitcoms. Because stereotyped characters are most noticeable and tend to register best with audiences of a culture, a sitcom's slant is most effective when it coincides with and reinforces a culture's dominant ideologies. For example, Gitlin (1979) argues that the fifties domestic sitcom usually ignored the existence of social problems in the world outside of the set whereas the sitcoms of the 1970s more often than not domesticated them. A sitcom's hegemonic style decision to either ignore or domesticate social issues will depend on both internal factors of media

organization such as the writers' and actors' social values, as well as the level of public approval.

The last and final aspect of a television sitcom that Gitlin (1979) deems necessary for textual analysis is the solution. As discussed earlier, the format of a sitcom includes a problem and a solution to that problem. Television sitcom is self-enclosed, meaning that the problem is resolved nicely within a very short period of time. By the end of the thirty-minute episode, the main characters are alive and well and ready to take on the obstacle that lies ahead in next week's program. Gitlin (1979) proposes that cultural hegemony operates through the solutions proposed to difficult problems as audiences look to television for ways in which they can understand and make sense of the world around them. A cultural studies approach to television analyzes the messages in these texts to better understand how ideologies are created and maintained, as well as understand the implications of those ideologies on a culture. Through my analysis, I hope to discover the ways in which the problems of each episode are resolved. An understanding of the problem solving methods will provide insight into our culture's shared belief system and values.

Much research has been done in terms of cultural studies and television sitcoms. Media messages produce shared meanings for the respective cultures and those shared meanings offer insight into how and why a culture makes sense of the world in a specific way.

A qualitative analysis is an appropriate methodology for the study of culture. The present research is qualitative, too, because the television episodes contain information in a narrative form and can be considered cultural artifacts. In this study,

episodes from season one and season two will be treated as cultural artifacts for analysis. The episodes will be broken down and analyzed in regard to their specific treatment of family. I will perform a textual analysis of the characters, general plot, and language used throughout the episodes as this will be helpful in determining the messages communicated in the program and whether they communicate the dominant ideology.

The first step required narrowing episodes from season one and two use for analysis. An initial viewing of season one in its entirety and the available episodes of season two were completed to gain insight on material available. In all, 34 episodes were reviewed for this analysis—24 from season one and 10 from season two. A manageable 16 episodes (12 from season one and four from season two) were chosen from the pool of 34. Although all of the episodes offer family-related themes, the chosen 16 episodes depicted the most recognizable familial themes. These episodes specifically addressed themes such as what it means to be a good dad, resolving family feuds, teenage children going on dates, and disciplinary strategies. Some episodes are referenced in great detail, while other episodes may only be mentioned through brief examples. Nonetheless, all 16 episodes contributed to the analysis whether it be through character development, plot themes, or defining *Modern Family's* family values. The next step involved several viewings of the selected episodes, which included detailed notes of themes, characters, conversation, and overall plot developments. After several viewings and after applying the concepts given to us by Carey, Hall, and Gitlin, themes and ideologies emerged for further analysis.

This study uses a textual analysis with special emphasis on gender within the family. Products of media culture, such as *Modern Family*, require close textual readings to analyze their various elements (Kellner, 2003). This study will analyze the discourse, characters, and gender roles within each family structure. It is important to note that there are many ways to read a text and this study will provide one reading.

## Analysis

Recalling earlier research, Hall (2005) identified media as channels through which ideologies are communicated to a culture. According to Carey's (1989) cultural view of communication, our reality is then maintained in the symbolic process of communication. Scholars, both past and present, analyzed domestic sitcoms for their ideological messages and this study performs a similar analysis. This chapter reveals the ways in which the popular sitcom, *Modern Family* communicates familial ideologies to our culture. More specifically, it is guided by the following research question: In what ways does the sitcom *Modern Family* communicate our culture's dominant ideology about family?

As previously described, *Modern Family* is comprised of three interrelated families. The Pritchetts consist of Jay, his much younger wife, Gloria, and her son, Manny. Jay holds a managerial position at a construction company and serves as the financial provider for the family. He is the only parent to work outside the home and holds very traditional family values. Gloria, a Colombian native, recently married Jay. She is a stay-at-home parent to her son, Manny, from her previous marriage. This marriage is the second for both Jay and Gloria.

Jay's daughter, Claire, along with her husband, Phil and their three children make up the Dunphy family. Phil works as a housing realtor and Claire stays home and takes care of the children. Their oldest daughter Haley is a teenager in the rebellious stage. Their middle-child, Alex, enjoys school and is the self-proclaimed brains of the family. Lastly, Luke is their youngest child and often the focus of many jokes as he takes after his father's dopey ways.

Finally, Jay's son Mitchell is part of the Pritchett-Tucker family. This family includes Mitchell's husband, Cameron, and their adopted daughter, Lilly. Mitchell works as an environmental lawyer while Cameron stays home to take care of Lilly who was adopted from Vietnam at the start of season one. The program communicates many messages about family, but I will begin with the most obvious—the family structure. *Modern Family* works to embed the longstanding dominant ideology of traditional family roles rather than communicate a competing reality.

At first glance, the three families convey illusions of modernity. The Pritchett-Tuckers give of the most obvious illusion of modernity because they are a gay married couple with an adopted Vietnamese baby. Gay marriage is not fully accepted by our culture and adding child adoption to the mix further distances this family from our traditional belief of family. Additionally, their hyphenated last name adds to the illusion of modernity. In the majority of American families, the wife follows tradition and takes her husband's last name. However, this couple follows a new trend by merging their last names with a hyphen. Couples that do so hold the reputation of being progressive and liberal. They project the idea that they are rejecting the dominant ideology and thus this is what we expect from the Pritchett-Tuckers.

The Pritchetts are a blended family made up of a re-married couple with a foreign wife many years her husband's senior. Gloria is Colombian and she references her cultural experience throughout much of the program. Gloria's presence on the show reflects the recent increase in Hispanic populations in our culture. In 1970, the Hispanic population made up 4.7% percent of the United States, now they

make up nearly 16% of our current population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Her son from a previous marriage is also included and reflects the spike in blended families and increase in stepchildren and stepsiblings.

The Dunphys appear to be the most traditional family, and convey no sense of modernity to the average audience member. At the surface they represent the normal, nuclear family seen in domestic sitcoms in years past. This includes a father who provides financially for his family, a stay-at-home mother figure, and multiple children.

Regardless of their claims of modernity, my analysis shows that all three of the families promote our culture's dominant ideology of the family structure also referred in the literature as Standard North American Family (SNAF) (Smith, 1993). SNAF is similar to the nuclear family and is categorized by a provider who works outside the home, a caregiver who tends to the children and household duties, and finally by one or more offspring. Within this family structure, it is widely accepted that the man, or more masculine partner, takes the role of the provider, while the woman, or more feminine partner, takes the role at home as the caregiver. Gender role assignment in the family originated from our culture's embedded belief in biological essentialism—the belief that men and women are inevitably different in their biological makeup (Bem, 1993). As a result, it is believed that men are naturally more competitive, aggressive, and intelligent and best fit for work outside the home in the public sphere. Conversely, it is believed that women are naturally more nurturing, gentle, and best suited for household responsibilities and raising children. Thus, we arrive at the ideological assumption that in a “normal” family, the man



works to provide for the family, and the woman takes on the role of the stay-at-home parent. In this family structure, the man reigns power over his wife and children. His job provides the only income, which was, and sometimes still is, believed to be spent at his discretion. As a result, he makes family decisions, especially those decisions that involve money. With no financial contribution to add, the woman remains powerless. This type of power structure is seen in traditional family units today. Often times, it goes unquestioned and unchallenged for fear of disturbing the status quo. After a while, it is normalized and becomes comfortable.

Likewise, the gendered family construct feels comfortable to audiences, and rightfully so—primetime television first portrayed the nuclear family in sitcoms as early as *I Love Lucy*, and continues to do so in present-day sitcoms (Leibman, 1995). Yet, in the last year alone, the United States saw an increase in families where both partners worked outside the home, commonly called two-earner households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The increase in both partners working outside the home resulted in a historical feat—for the first time in U.S. history, women now make up 51% of the workforce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Furthermore, out of all two-earner households, one quarter of families reported that the father, not the mother, was responsible for raising the children. This is today's reality, yet that is not what *Modern Family* communicates.

In the present analysis, I reveal the traditional gender roles found within *Modern Family*. They communicate messages that support our culture's dominant belief and serve to further embed these ideologies within our society. The mothers,

fathers, and family unit as a whole reinforce the dominant ideology of the traditional family.

### *The Mother Figure*

The Pritchetts, Dunphys, and Pritchett-Tuckers all communicate a family structure in which one spouse takes the role of the mother figure. Inconsistent with the program's title of a "modern" family, the family structure communicates an outdated ideology of the traditional family—one with a masculine breadwinner who holds a professional career, and a feminine spouse who stays at home and cares for the family. I will begin at the top of the family tree with Gloria Pritchett.

#### *Gloria Pritchett*

Gloria Pritchett is married to Jay Pritchett, the patriarch, and mother to Manny, her son from a previous marriage. The Colombian native plays the role of a stereotypical trophy wife, with much emphasis placed on her youth, beauty, ethnicity, and ever-plunging neckline. Gloria does not work outside the home, and there is no mention of a previous career as Jay is the sole financial provider for the Pritchett household. At first glance, Gloria's character appears modern. She is divorced and recently remarried to a man many years her senior. This concept is a novel one to many in our culture and usually comes with negative connotations. The term "gold-digger" refers to young, attractive women who marry men with wealth. The validity of their love is questioned and we see this captured in Gloria's character. She faces criticism from family members and her love for Jay is continually questioned. Gloria's ethnicity is also a focal point. She and Jay's marriage is categorized as inter-cultural which goes against the majority of marriages in the United States. Even in

2011, more than 85% of people in the United States marry a spouse of the same race or ethnic background (Passel, Wang, & Taylor, 2010). The emphasis placed on her youth and attractiveness promotes the current trend of trophy wives. No matter the time or place, Gloria is dressed to the nines with a full face of makeup and perfectly groomed brunette locks. All of these characteristics encourage the belief that Gloria is modern. Yet, further analysis reveals that Gloria promotes the dominant ideology of a feminine and submissive mother figure.

Throughout the program Gloria furthers the traditional belief that women should be feminine. One way she communicates the importance of femininity is through appearance. In attempting to persuade her step-granddaughter to wear a dress, Gloria tells Alex, “One day, you will want a boy to notice you. You will want to feel beautiful and this is when you will wear a dress.” (S.1, Ep. 3, 2009). From this, we learn that Gloria correlates beauty with femininity, and femininity with wearing dresses. In every episode, Gloria is shown with a full-face of make-up, well-groomed brunette locks, and a wardrobe full of skin-tight, figure-accentuating ensembles. In comparison to her daughter-in-law, Claire, Gloria appears to be a supermodel. Claire wears very little makeup and dresses in a muted color palette so as not to call attention to herself. In this regard, Claire gives off the persona of a haggard housewife who devotes her time to her children and allowing little time for personal grooming. This is the very opposite of Gloria’s character who is always put together no matter the time of day.

Gloria continues her dialogue with Alex with a blanket statement regarding her belief in distinct differences between men and women, “Girls like to shop, gossip,

and drink wine. Men are in need of many hobbies, all-adventurous and masculine.” (S.1, Ep. 3, 2009). Gloria’s language promotes the traditional gender constructs that place men and women in two distinct categories, never to overlap. Research shows that children look to their parents and elder family members as models for appropriate gender behavior (Wood, 2008). As a result, Gloria’s step-grandchild and even her own son are influenced and shaped by her gender messages.

In addition to what Gloria says, we also see the traditional role of the mother figure played out in what Gloria does not say. In times of disagreement with her husband, Gloria perpetuates the notion that a feminine person is submissive. Instead of speaking up to Jay, Gloria vents to the mockumentary camera crew. For example, Gloria remains quiet when Jay lies to Manny about the death of his pet turtle. She expresses distaste to the camera crew for Jay’s actions, yet to Jay she offers nothing more than suggestions as to how he should correct this situation. She allows him to consider her suggestions and wait for Jay to tell the truth on his own terms, which takes place neatly at the end of the 30-minute segment. (S.1, Ep. 17, 2009) The message communicated here demonstrates a submissive wife who does not confront her husband or speak her mind. It communicates to audiences the age-old saying that women should be seen and not heard. Gloria reinforces her position as submissive to Jay and hence, continues the hegemonic process that solidifies her powerless role in the family.

Gloria’s verbal claims regarding the role of women within the family are mirrored by her actions. Gloria is the epitome of the stay-at-home mom, as she does not work outside of the home. Through confessional-style monologue we learn much

about Gloria's past, yet there is no mention of a previous professional career. Instead, we see Gloria spending most of her days going on lunch dates. Not once does Gloria appear bored or express discontent with her role at home. Gloria also fits the role of the stay-at-home parent as she takes sole responsibility in caring for her son, Manny. In the event where Manny gets into a fight at school, Gloria is seen in the principal's office addressing the issue (S.1, Ep.5, 2009). When Manny has his heart broken by his crush, it is his mother who nurtures him back to health and provides him with suggestions on how to win back the young girl (S.1, Ep. 1, 2009). Additionally, Gloria fulfills the ideology that a stay-at-home parent is nurturing. When a soccer mom heckles Manny, it is Gloria who stands up for Manny and verbally assaults the other parent (S.1, Ep. 1, 2009). This behavior seems odds with her feminine persona but aggressive behavior in women is considered acceptable if it is a mother protecting her young. The soccer dads, who later have to perform crowd control, frown upon this situation. The behaviors are chalked up to overly emotional women who cannot be trusted to act appropriately in public situation. It is ironic that Gloria can be assertive and voice her opinion to a perfect stranger, yet to her own husband, she remains submissive. Gloria's character supports the ideological assumption that women are emotionally unstable, submissive, and defer power to their husbands. This is characteristic of a traditional mother figure but not what we expect from a modern mother figure.

Gloria's character, packaged and presented as the stereotypical modern-day trophy wife, is consistent with traditional gender constructs that a woman's place is at home where she can focus on being feminine, submissive, and nurturing. Women

who focus on these traits are considered normal and therefore have an easier time being accepted into society. Women who stray from this norm find themselves as outcasts and somehow less desirable. This portrayal communicates the dominant ideology to audiences and urges women to fall into place accordingly, even if it feels unnatural to their true identity. Female audiences see a direct correlation between Gloria's extremely feminine manner and happiness. Her powerless position is cast in a positive light communicating to audiences that voluntary oppression is a good thing. This ensures the dominant ideology remains dominant.

*Claire Dunphy*

As we move along to the next family in this modern family tree, we arrive at Claire Dunphy, another stay-at-home mom. Claire is married to Phil Dunphy, who works outside of the home as a housing realtor. As a result, Claire makes most of the family decisions and projects a persona that is both outspoken and controlling. At the surface, you might even think Claire's character rejects the dominant ideology of the mother figure. She is in control, exerts power over her children and husband, and is not afraid to voice her opinion. However, after careful analysis it is apparent that Claire's character communicates the dominant ideology of the traditional stay-at-home mother—one whose primary duties involve raising children and household chores. Examples of Claire from seasons one and two situate Claire as a traditional mother figure.

Just like her stepmother, Gloria, Claire does not have a professional career outside of the home. She is defined by her position in the home, both literally and figuratively. As a result, nearly all of her daily activities revolve around the lives of

her three children, Haley, Alex, and Luke. Claire's parenting strategy can best be described as a "helicopter mom," meaning that she hovers closely over her children leaving little room for them to make decisions on their own and grow as individuals. For example, when Claire finds out that middle-daughter Alex needs cupcakes for school the following day, it is Claire who forgoes sleep to perfectly bake and ice dozens of cupcakes (S.1, Ep. 18, 2009). When Luke's school needs parents to decorate for their upcoming dance, Claire organizes and delegates jobs to the other PTA moms to ensure its smooth success (S.2, Ep.10, 2010). This middle school dance is Claire's pride and joy and she expresses her excitement for it each year. She was the organizer in years prior and we sense a possessive nature over this specific child function. This specific event exemplifies Claire's desire to be other-oriented, a trait characterized by femininity (Bem, 1994). Claire volunteers her time and efforts to ensure that her children and their classmates enjoy their middle-school dance. In general, Claire's character is selfless as she makes many sacrifices for her family.

Furthermore, Claire keeps a watchful eye on their eldest daughter, Haley's developing relationship with boyfriend, Dylan. Claire reads Hayley's diary, makes Alex spy on Haley, and eavesdrops on telephone conversations between Haley and Dylan (S.1, Ep.18, 2009). Through these actions, it is clear that Claire identifies most with being a parent. Where she does not have a job to consume her life, her family takes its place. She obsesses over her children's whereabouts and judges her abilities as a mother on their successes and failures. This is Claire's life and her children are both a production and reflection of her own life.

When Claire is not hovering over her three children, she often performs domestic household duties. On more than one occasion, the program opens with Claire preparing breakfast in the kitchen or packing the kids' lunches before sending them off to school. Additionally, it is common for Claire's character to tote domestic props such as a laundry basket or dishtowels. As previously mentioned, Phil Dunphy's character forgoes many responsibilities of being a husband and father. In these instances, Claire is forced to compensate by taking on household chores that Phil neglects. For example, Claire repairs the chronically broken middle step to end the constant stumbles both up and down the staircase (S.1, Ep. 24, 2009) and later calls a plumber to put an end to the running toilet that Phil never seems to get around to (S. 2, Ep. 3, 2010). Claire's responsibilities span from her own to now her husband's assigned chores. She "supermoms" her way through the program taking on more than humanly possible which reflects a trend in current day America (Hochschild, 1997). Phil's lack of initiative around the house causes strain on their relationship as she is always taking on more than she can handle. Though Claire continues to do so, allowing Phil to go about his day as his pleases. Just as we saw a powerless mother figure in Gloria, it is communicated again through Claire's character.

Although Claire appears to thrive on her role as the mother figure, we see signs of regret. When Claire runs into her old colleague, Valerie, Claire questions her life as a homemaker (S. 1, Ep., 2009). Valerie is now a successful businesswoman who worked up way up to the top of the totem pole at Claire's old place of employment. She travels the world, manages her own accounts, and makes a hefty



salary. It is briefly mentioned that Valerie does not have children, though her relationship status is not discussed. In a camera confession, Claire shares her regret over giving up her career to raise a family. She questions her abilities and even questions what she has to show for giving up her career.

In an attempt to reassure herself that choosing family was the right decision, Claire invites Valerie over to her house to meet the family she spent the last decade raising. As luck would have it, Valerie visits on the day that the Dunphys are wreaking havoc in full force—Phil gets stuck in the construction worker’s port-a-potty, Haley is caught in her bedroom being too friendly with a boy, and Alex and Luke are fighting in the front yard. Claire is embarrassed and confesses to the camera that she wishes that just this once her family could act like normal family in front of her over-achieving ex-colleague. As the episode comes to a close, we hear Claire’s voice-over as the camera pans the house and exposes the wacky side of her family. They are shown sitting around the dinner table, a typical family scenario, laughing and enjoying one another’s company. It is then that realizes that she does not need “some fancy career” to make her feel worthwhile. Her family, no matter how messy and weird they appear to an outsider, is her pride and joy and she would not trade the time she spent at home for a minute in a successful career.

The resolution at the end of this episode communicates the message that stay-at-home parents, specifically women, should not feel inadequate because they do not have a career to take up their time. In the example of Claire, we see her discontentment eased after she imagines her life without Phil or the kids. In her eyes, having a family to love her and occupy her time overshadows a successful career.

Although this appears to be a positive message, I argue that message conveys the notion that there are only two options—be like Valerie, and have a successful career but forgo a family, or be like Claire, and have a loving family but no career. The trouble with this scenario is that it does not offer the option of having both a family and a career. Instead, the dominant ideology is reinforced by communicating to audiences that women are to identify most with work inside of the home rather than aspire to hold a career. As we see with Claire, the choice to forgo a career did not have negative implications for her or her family. In fact, it feels “right” that the mother figure chose to stay home because it supports the dominant ideology that we as a culture created and work effortlessly to keep in place.

*It is* 2011, surely one can have her cake and eat it too, right? If we look to the research, we see an increase of women who work outside of the home to gain pleasure from a professional career and then come home to joys of raising and caring for a family. Unfortunately, regardless of the changes in the workforce, the decision for women to work and raise a family has consequences. Hochschild (1997) reports that it is ultimately women who end up working the “second shift”—the shift that consists of housework and childcare after they arrive home from work. Women tend to “supermom” their way through the day, taking on more than humanly possible. Research shows this leaves women dissatisfied with life, work, and their marriage. *Modern Family* does not show us the third option, being a working mother, because perhaps the reality of it would make for a messy sitcom—one without a nice, neat, and happy ending. When messages such as Claire’s are communicated to audiences, the ideological implications result in the continued belief that women must choose

between family and a career. As a result, the women who stray from the normative belief and attempt to raise a family and hold a career find themselves struggling to do so. They do not receive support from society and employers who acknowledge and accept the traditional ideology. Unfortunately for audiences, the realistic negative implications are never addressed or mentioned in the Dunphy family.

*Cameron Pritchett-Tucker*

Cameron is married to Mitchell Pritchett, making him the brother-in-law to Claire Dunphy and son-in-law to Gloria Pritchett. Cam has an interesting background, in which he grew up on a farm and played college football, both of which our culture deem intensely masculine. He appears to reject the dominant ideology of the mother figure, as he is male, a former college athlete, and the product of a seemingly traditional upbringing.

Cameron and Mitchell made an addition to their family in the pilot episode—an adopted Vietnamese baby named Lilly. Mitchell works outside the home as a lawyer, while Cam remains at home to raise their daughter. Cam's role as the primary caregiver is especially significant in this gay co-parent relationship, a relationship that screams modernity. He is a gay male raising a child, taking on a not so common role as a stay-at-home mother. It is surprising that Mitchell and Cam are not more egalitarian in the caregiving arena seeing as the research points to shared home and work responsibilities among gay co-parents (Sullivan, 1996). Rather, a clear distinction is made between the roles of the two male characters. We do not see a case of two fathers; rather, the dominant ideology is communicated again with Cam as the mother figure.

Cam's current role in the Pritchett-Tucker family is that of the traditionally feminine stay-at-home parent marked by emotion, feminine behaviors, and child rearing responsibilities. The examples below describe how even the most modern of the three families fall victim to the traditional dominant ideologies of our culture.

Many of Cam's interests and center around traditionally feminine ones, such as cooking and art, especially the stereotypical love of Broadway musicals. Numerous times throughout the seasons, Cam is approached instead of Mitchell for advice on wine pairing and recipes. When dinner guests are impressed with the meal and the table settings, Mitchell looks to Cam to give credit. Cam graciously accepts the kind words and elaborates on "how inspiring Martha Stewart can be for the soul" (S. 1, Ep. 10, 2009). Additionally, Cam's love for the fine arts is a comical focal point. Not an episode goes by that Cam neglects to mention his favorite musicals and idols such as Martha Stewart. When asked to name women he dated in college, Cam recalls female leads from his favorite musicals (S.2, Ep. 18, 2010). Only his partner, Mitchell, catches on after a while and calls him out for being "so gay that he can't even think of girls names that aren't in Broadway productions." (S.2, Ep. 18, 2010)

Through Cam's portrayal, *Modern Family* reinforces our culture's belief in the stereotypical gay character. Cameron Pritchett-Tucker is the epitome of gay with his love for musicals, appreciation of homemaker icons like Martha Stewart, and concern for domestic chores. Cam's character is familiar to audiences in a stereotypical way that induces humor. At its core, a gay mother figure threatens the dominant ideology but when Cam's character is cast as flamboyantly exaggerated and

stereotypical, it is more easily accepted. He is the “other;” he is different, and we are continually reminded of that.

Cam plays the more feminine partner in more ways than his interests; he plays the motherly role to Lilly. He was the partner who decorated Lilly’s nursery (and just so happened to design the colorful mural above Lilly’s crib that depicts Mitchell and himself as angels floating in the clouds holding a newborn baby). He is the parent seen most often holding, feeding, and transporting Lilly from place to place. Most notably, Cam choreographs a Lion King inspired entrance to first introduce Lilly to the family (S.1, Ep.1, 2009). Cam later organizes Lilly’s highly sought-after play dates with neighborhood children (S.2, Ep.4, 2010). He even goes as far as to schedule dinner plans with Lilly’s pediatrician to discuss her progress and growth as a result of having two fathers (S. 1, Ep. 16, 2009).

Cam is the parent who takes care of Lilly, thus supporting the dominant ideology that the mother figure (no matter sexual orientation) is responsible for child rearing. In a show titled *Modern Family*, produced in 2009, one would think that the gay couple would not follow traditional gender roles. However, I argue that Cam and Mitchell’s relationship follow traditional gender roles more so than the traditional nuclear Dunphy family.

It appears that Cameron and Mitchell worked out a nice plan, one partner works and the other stays home to take care of the baby. However, Mitchell decides to give up his job due to dissatisfaction (S.1, Ep. 20, 2009). As a result, Cam takes a part-time job at a greetings card store and Mitchell takes on the role of the mother figure. A few weeks into their role reversal, each partner tells the other that they

absolutely love the change and couldn't be happier with their new role in the family. But in separate confessions to the mockumentary camera crew, Mitchell and Cam express discontent with their job. Mitchell explains he "isn't cut out to be a stay-at-home dad" and "is jealous Cam is at work interacting with adults." (S.1, Ep.20, 2009). Likewise, Cam could not be more miserable. He explains that he really wants to stay home and that he "always imagined himself as the stay-at-home dad/trophy wife." (S.1, Ep.20, 2009). Yet neither partner admits their true feelings to one another for fear that it would upset the other to go back to work or stay at home and raise Lilly. The three mother figures discuss their children growing up and growing apart from them. This scene, though brief, exemplifies the traditional gender roles portrayed in *Modern Family*—Cam, Gloria, and Claire concern themselves with domestic chores and domestic conversations. As a result of the conversation, Cam bursts into tears and tells Mitchell how he really feels. Mitchell is extremely relieved that they both want the same thing and promises to be back at work in the next couple of days. And just like that, the problem that had been irking them so much was solved.

The resolution to this issue communicates an interesting message to its audience. It shows us that Cam, the motherly and nurturing character, identifies most with his role at home and we see him struggle a great deal in the days that he spends away from Lilly. While Mitchell, the more masculine character identifies most with his professional life. Staying at home with a baby is not challenging for a lawyer like himself and he longs for the adult interaction. The episode normalizes a stay-at-home

mother figure and a working dad and further embeds the traditional family ideology into our culture, even for gay couples.

In each of the three families, the mother figure is played by the woman, or more feminine partner. Gloria, Claire, and Cam all express an intense desire to raise and care for a family over a desire to have a professional career for themselves. In the following section I analyze, the father figure characters and the ways in which gender roles and a larger family structure are communicated through their portrayals.

### *The Father Figure*

Just as the female characters are placed in specific gender roles within the family, so are the male characters. From the head patriarch, Jay Pritchett, to the gay co-parent, Mitchell Pritchett-Tucker, each male assumes the traditional role of the ideological father figure. The research from the literature reminds us just what that figure looks like.

At an early age, young boys are encouraged and socialized to be masculine—strong, ambitious, rational, emotionally controlled, independent, and self-oriented (Wood, 2008). Our culture's dominant belief is that men are naturally more competitive, aggressive, smart, and powerful due to testosterone (Bem, 1993). This widely accepted view makes separate and distinct gender categories seem natural and normal. Androcentric views take these beliefs a step further by regarding masculine values and practices as the norm. Any idea or practice that strays from the males' perspective is deemed deviant, abnormal, and even unacceptable by those within the dominant group (Bem, 1993). Examples of the father figures in *Modern Family* highlight these views and unfortunately, further embed them in our culture.

In terms of gendered family, the ideological expectation is that a father's role includes a professional career outside of the home. His sole responsibility is to meet the financial and safety needs of his family (Aulette, 1994). This is very much the case for the three father figures in *Modern Family*. In response to the aforementioned gender roles constructed for fathers, men choose to partake in one of three gender ideologies of marriage—traditional, transitional, and egalitarian (Hochschild, 1997). The traditional man identifies most with work outside of the home and wields power over the marriage and family by economic means and decision-making. He does not partake in household chores or child raising because the traditional view categorizes those tasks as feminine and therefore, the woman's job.

Although these gender constructs persist, the reality of 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. is both men and women are financial providers for the family and working outside of the home (Hochschild, 1997). However, they are not both working inside the home. It is the women who take on the "second shift," while most men's efforts towards household responsibilities are minimal at best. This "second shift" includes house and family duties long after their professional workday has ended. Walzer (1996) reports that in addition to the physical responsibilities, women also take on more of the mental work such as worrying and advice seeking for their family. To no surprise, the extra shift is tolling on all aspects of a woman's life, leaving many dissatisfied with work and their marriage. The men, on the other hand, enjoy a less stressful and less demanding evening upon arriving home from work. Equal efforts on both parties could prevent the "second shift" from just being a woman's issue and potentially make for a more enjoyable home life for all.



The father figure in domestic sitcoms is presented differently over the years. Recently the head patriarch in an upper class, white-collar family is conveyed as the head of the household without ridicule (Scharrer, 2001). In middle-class, blue-collar family sitcoms such as *Roseanne*, *Home Improvement*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond*, we see the father in a position of mockery and less authoritative than before. Perhaps too new for the sitcom world, no research addresses gay co-parents in their respective gender roles in primetime television. The present analysis of Mitchell and Cameron Pritchett-Tucker is one of the first to do so. Based on the research, we know that some gay co-parents tend to follow the egalitarian gender strategy (Sullivan, 1996). This means that both partners take an equal share in working both inside and outside of the home.

After careful review of the episodes, I found that dissimilar to its treatment of the mother figure, *Modern Family* communicates a father figure that matches our dominant ideology *and* our reality. All father figures work outside the home and focus most of their attention on providing financial stability and safety. However, the characters themselves differ slightly, one more traditional than the next. In both Jay and Mitchell, we see a very traditional portrayal of the father. With Phil, the patriarch of the most “normal” family, we see a less traditional role portrayed.

#### *Jay Pritchett*

Jay Pritchett is the patriarch of all three families and is married to the much younger trophy wife, Gloria. Together they parent Manny, Gloria’s son from a previous marriage. Jay portrays the prototypical traditional father figure for he is powerful, insensitive, and career oriented.

Jay Pritchett is a powerful man who wields control over both his professional and personal life. Firstly, Jay's character is powerful as shown by his position as the owner and manager of a local contracting company. The company itself is a traditionally masculine one, rich with physical labor and male employees. In one episode, Jay exercises his power over his employees by firing one of them after he allowed Manny to drive (and wreck) a forklift. The employee is dismissed immediately and silently leaves the premises without any sign of protest, a clear indication that Jay's decisions at work go unchallenged. Jay allows no further discussion of the matter—not on the ride home, not at the dinner table, never. Each time Manny broaches the subject, Jay refuses to discuss it with him. Manny insists on Jay rehiring the employee and even takes on Mitchell as an attorney, but to no avail (S.2, Ep.7, 2010). Jay makes it clear to Manny and Gloria that his decision is final and not to be questioned. The tone in Jay's voice shows that he means business. Manny surrenders and the ex-employee is never seen again. Jay uses his authority as a company owner and a middle-aged white male to control the employees under his reign. Jay's position as an owner and a dictator is acceptable according to our culture's belief in the traditional man. He is powerful, in charge, and decisive. Jay uses this same authority in other aspects of his life, too.

Jay's powerful nature is seen at home with his family. One of Jay's favorite hobbies is flying toy planes and he refuses to allow anyone else fly his planes (S.1, Ep.3, 2009). When Manny asks, he tells him "planes are a complex thing, not everyone is cut out to fly them." After Claire pleads with her father to spend quality time with his son-in-law Phil, Jay agrees. Initially, Phil wants to fly one of Jay's

planes, but Jay refuses and instead places him on the receiving end of a flying trick to show his dominance. The trick goes terribly wrong and Phil ends up on the ground with a broken nose. Claire has a hunch that her father harmed Phil intentionally and suggests that he apologize. Jay goes as far as to blame the accident on Phil's lack of skills. This type of insensitive behavior is often shown towards Phil but never toward his adopted son, Manny which raises an interesting question—why is Jay slightly paternal towards Manny and completely insensitive toward Phil? I believe that Manny is not a threat to Jay's power within the family seeing as that he is a young boy. Phil, a man of similar status with a respectable career, is viewed as competition to Jay. As Jay continues to embarrass and degrade Phil's masculinity, he no longer becomes a threat.

In another episode, Jay aggressively confronts Manny's basketball coach, who later quits and is replaced by Phil (S.1, Ep.20, 2010). Still dissatisfied with the coaching, Jay steps in and takes the head coaching position from his son-in-law. Not once in any of these situations does the other party stand up to Jay, instead, they acquiesce and allow him to take control of the basketball team. Jay's family and other families see his demeanor as a sign of authority and allow him to take control without hesitation. They give up any power they might have and place it in Jay's hands. It's a vicious cycle. The more power Jay exercises, the more power he receives. As the eldest male in the family, he holds a position of power that goes unchallenged and unquestioned. This communicates an androcentric ideology, one that places the man at the center of our culture. As the eldest Patriarch, Jay is placed at the center of the three families. It is he who makes decision, he who takes control,

and he who offers rules to live by. In the end of each episode, a male voiceover sums up the family parable and most often it is Jay's voice. Again, subtly supporting the dominant ideology and androcentric view of the father figure.

More specifically, Jay's role in his own family is one of authority and power. When his Colombian wife and stepson wish to celebrate Halloween as they do in Colombia, Jay refuses. In a degrading manner, Jay tells his family, "we are in America, and in America we don't play practical jokes on Halloween." (S.2, Ep.6, 2010). Both Gloria and Manny are saddened by this decision, but they abide by his rules and forgo their culture's traditions. Before the episode comes to a close, Jay recants his earlier rule and plays a practical joke of his own on the family. Then, and only then, are the members of the Pritchett household allowed to celebrate Halloween the Colombian way. This specific episode reveals our culture's dominant ideology that the father figure is the powerful figure within the family. It is he who makes decisions and those decisions are accepted by the other family members no matter how unpopular or unfair they may be. Even in 2011, where women are found to share in decision-making, and even in a "modern" blended family, the traditional gender role of the father figure is communicated.

Jay also fits the ideological role of the masculine father figure because his character is insensitive. In the above episode where he crashes a plane into Phil's face and breaks his nose, Jay immediately runs over to the accident and check to make sure his plane is still intact paying no mind to the fact that blood is pouring from Phil's face (S.1, Ep.3, 2009). When Jay's daughter asks him to be a little nicer to Phil, Jay replies, "Well, he's technically not my son." These reactions and comments are

common for Jay's character. During a mockumentary confessional moment, Jay is asked what it takes to be a good father, to which he replies, "That's a tough one, I'm still thinking." (S.1, Ep.2, 2009). His responses show no emotion and fit well with the description of the traditional father figure as emotionally restricted.

His insensitivity expands to his spouse. Jay's ex-wife, Dee, caused quite the scene at Jay and Gloria's wedding. She kicked their cake over and shouted racial slurs as security escorted her from the reception (S.1, Ep.4, 2009). As Gloria retells the incident on camera she becomes upset at the thought of her ruined wedding. Instead of Jay comforting his wife, he chooses the insensitive route. He jokes and pokes fun at the debacle, laughing at Dee's impersonation of Gloria. When a family dispute arises between Luke and Manny, many of Jay's relatives suggest that spending time together and putting family first is most important. Jay tells them to sweep the issue under the rug because "football is important." (S.1, Ep.5, 2009). Jay's degrading and insensitive remarks reveal his belief (and communicates our culture's dominant belief) that men are to be masculine. It is common for Jay to call male family members sexist names when their behaviors don't meet his standards. For instance, Jay is seen calling his son, Mitch, a "girl" for being "too sensitive." Jay calls his son-in-law, Phil, a "woman" when Phil complains that the basketball coach is too mean. What does this communicate to audiences? It communicates that the highest insult you can give to someone is to call them a woman. Sexist comments detract very much from a show that promotes modernity. It comes out later that many of the other family members inability to show emotions stems from Jay's closed off nature (S.2, Ep.2,

2010). This is not surprising seeing as Jay's power within the family encourages those to act in a manner like his so as not to receive ridicule.

Jay's character is traditional in every sense of the word. He works to provide financially for his family and uses his power as the head patriarch to his advantage. He is bossy and often times insensitive to those around him. In response, his family members accept his behaviors and see them as normal for the head of the family. Phil is quoted saying, "He's a father-in-law, they're supposed to be difficult but you just got to respect." (S.1, Ep.20, 2010). Jay's behavior seems normal because it follows our dominant ideology of the traditional father figure—one who is powerful, emotionally constrained, and competitive. Any behavior that strays from the norm is chastised by figure in power causing it to become less frequent and eventually, nonexistent. This results in a family with members who follow and believe the dominant ideology who will later produce their own family that will follow and believe the dominant ideology.

*Mitchell Pritchett-Tucker*

Mitchell is married to his partner, Cameron Tucker and together they are parents to their adopted daughter, Lilly. Mitchell works as an environment lawyer, while his partner, Cam, plays the role of the stay-at-home parent. Though one might assume that Mitchell rejects our dominant ideology of the father figure, this is not the case. In many ways, Mitchell very much represents an ideological father—he's adamant about his role at work, emotionally reserved and hands-off at home. In many ways, he is just like his father, aside from the "minor" fact that he is gay.

Mitchell identifies most with work outside of the home. Mitch is often seen working, both at the office and at home. Cam criticizes Mitch for taking work calls while at home and ultimately placing his career above his family. As a result, Mitch misses many of his daughter's "first moments" (S.1, Ep.17, 2010). Eventually, Mitch decides to give up his job but only lasts at home for several days. He is bored with the "trivial housework" and wants nothing more than to be at work. After watching Cam leave for work every day, Mitch admits to the camera, "I secretly want to be at work. I'm jealous Cam gets to interact with adults all day." (S.1, Ep.20, 2010) Before long, Mitch has his old job back. The dominant belief is that the father figure most identifies with his professional career over his family. This is exactly what we see in Mitch's character. He longs for a career and adult interaction. Even though he misses several of his daughter's milestone moments, he loyalties lie in his career. Even during a family vacation in Hawaii, Mitch has a difficult time being away from work (S.1, Ep.23, 2010). Cam has to force Mitch into relaxing and laying out by the pool, something he otherwise would not do. He is driven by his career and the ability to provide financially for his family rather than actually be a part of it.

Compared to his partner, Cam, Mitch is less emotional which often conveys insensitivity. An on-camera interview at the beginning of one episode addresses each character's fears. Cam say's his biggest fear is losing Mitchell. This exemplifies Cam's character as other-oriented, a traditionally feminine trait. Mitchell says his biggest fear is hotel bed spreads (S.1, Ep.16, 2010). Unlike Cam, Mitchell's fear is self-oriented, a traditionally masculine trait. It is subtle but abundant comments like these that support the dominant ideology of gender roles within family. Through just

comparing these two responses, it is clear that Mitch is less open about feelings towards his husband. Cam chooses to admit his fear is losing his husband and companion. This response shows vulnerability, something not associated with masculinity. Mitch does not respond in the same fashion. Instead, his fears revolve around matters unrelated to family or loss of love. They revolve around lack of sanitation in hotel rooms. This subject matter is impersonal and rid of emotional attachment. We see no sign of vulnerability and his masculinity remains in tact. Mitch is not expressive of his feelings towards his husband and his actions communicate the same. This point is made clear in one of the program's most publicized episodes, "The Kiss" (S.2, Ep.2, 2010). During this episode, Mitchell rejects a kiss from Cam while at their local shopping mall. When Cam confronts him, Mitch expresses that he has a problem with publicly displaying affection and accuses Cam of being "needy." After much backlash from Cam, a small peck is offered in the background of a family event. Although Mitch is in a gay marriage, his character as a father figure is very similar to that of Jay's. He is emotionally restricted and chooses to criticize Cam for acting "needy," a label that androcentrism uses to negatively define emotional connections.

The kissing incident was not the first time Mitch hurt Cam's feelings. On occasion, Mitch is guilty of asking Cam to trade his flamboyant shirt for a lesser one. It appears that Mitch is embarrassed of Cam's "too gay" behaviors (S.1, Ep.16, 2010). He goes so far as to ask Cam to restrain from "dancing like a gay guy" prior to one of Lilly's play dates. Although Mitch claims his only fears are that of the sanitation type, it seems as though his fears are of the masculinity type as well. Any time that Cam



acts too feminine, Mitch works to correct his behavior in order to communicate a more masculine identity. This again promotes an androcentric view that a masculine identity is respectable and necessary for a male. One of his biggest insecurities is appearing too gay to the outward world. For if he does, negative consequences will ensue—they'll appear to be unfit parents, his boss will think he's incapable of producing solid work, or his family will think less of him. These are the consequences that many homosexuals face in real life as they are deemed sexual deviants (Bem, 1993). The more Mitch acts like the traditional father figure, the easier life is for him and so he continues to curb both his and Cam's behavior when they stray too far. This behavior communicates that conforming to the dominant ideology is not only more acceptable, but that it will make life easier for you. Placing yourself into a prescribed gender role, no matter if it goes against your own beliefs or way of life is necessary for a gay couple to be accepted.

If we look at Mitch's interactions with his family away from work it becomes clear that he takes the hands-off father figure approach. He has no part in arranging play dates, picking a school, or shopping for Lilly. When discussing Lilly's diapers, Mitch confesses to not knowing where Cam purchases them (S.1, Ep.3, 2009). While on vacation, Mitch goes on a lavender field tour alone, leaving Cam and Lilly to spend the day without him (S.1, Ep.23, 2010). If a problem arises with Lilly, Cam is the first to take care of it. For instance, when Lilly's first words are "Mommy," it is Cam who arranges a dinner date with her pediatrician (S.1, Ep.16, 2010). Mitch chooses to work outside the home, forgoing the "second shift" and allowing Cam to handle the home life duties. He does not share in the egalitarian gender strategy that

most gay co-parents use (Sullivan, 1996). Rather, Mitch leaves Cam to raise Lilly. As a result, the gay parents with the adopted child resemble a nuclear family structure with a father figure who holds a professional and contributes very little at home.

*Phil Dunphy*

Phil seems to fit the traditional father role. He works as a real estate agent and is the sole financial provider for the Dunphy family. However, it's revealed over time that Phil actually rejects a lot of our common beliefs regarding masculinity. As the patriarch of the nuclear, most "normal" family, Phil's character rejects our culture's ideological father figure. He is dim-witted, sensitive, and hardly authoritative. Phil's character is representative of the buffoon father that is cast in many working-class domestic sitcoms (Butsch, 1995).

Phil is most known for his dim-witted nature and is often found as the focus of many jokes among the three families. This goes against our ideological belief that the father figure is smart or intelligent. This is not to say that Phil is not an intelligent human being, but instead his character is cast as the bumbling dad seen in other popular sitcoms. For example, Phil attempts to describe the lingo that teenagers use in text messages, "LOL is laugh out loud, OMG is oh my god" and without hesitation he says, "and WTF is why the face." (S.1, Ep.1, 2009) He is completely confident and unfortunately, completely wrong. His dim-witted nature shines through again when he describes his abilities as a real estate agent. He is so confident in his skills that he could "sell a fur coat to an eskimo." (S.1, Ep.1, 2009) Phil's wife, Claire, is most affected by his lack of common sense. She accepts her husband's flaws, but admits that Phil is "like being married to a child." (S.1, Ep.2, 2009) Phil's character is very

similar to that of the bumbling dad found in domestic sitcoms over the years. His character lacks the power and authority that is typical of the ideological father figure. He is unwilling and unable to be the family decision maker as his childlike mentality deems him unfit for the position. Instead, his wife takes over and wields power over both he and their children. Audiences are familiar with this setup for they saw it in sitcoms such as *Roseanne*, *Home Improvement*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. It is interesting that only in the instance of a bumbling dad do we see a powerful mother figure take charge.

Unlike the macho-man Jay, or the emotionally reserved Mitchell, Phil is overly sensitive compared to our cultural perception of masculinity. One way in which this is obvious is through his relationship-oriented nature and desire for physical attention. Both of which reject the dominant ideology of a traditional father figure. When his father-in-law crashes a plane into his face and breaks his nose, Phil apologizes afterwards and extends his arms for a hug. Phil constantly seeks physical attention from all members of the family and is often shut down, even by his wife. Jay When Gloria and Claire share harsh words, it is Phil who encourages them to hug and make up (S.1, Ep.3, 2009). Phil's family overly criticizes his touchy-feely behavior as they view this behavior to be abnormal for an adult male. Phil is also sensitive because he is a hopeless romantic—even more so than his wife. On a family vacation in Hawaii, Phil suggests they treat it as the honeymoon that they never had due to the early arrival of eldest daughter Haley (S.1, Ep.20, 2010). Throughout the trip, Phil plans romantic dinners and events while Claire unwillingly obliges with the occasional eye roll or two. When it comes to family, Phil's sensitive side also comes

out. He learned both the words and choreography to each *High School Musical* and chooses to break out into song and dance in front of his kids and their friends.

Additionally, his claustrophobia gets the best of him in an episode where he and Luke explore under the front porch. Rather than taking the fatherly role and going in first, Phil tricks Luke into going because he is too scared.

The above examples allude that Phil is not the prototypical father figure. He is sensitive and always seeking acceptance from his family and peers. This portrayal rejects the dominant ideology of the traditional father figure, yet the message it communicates to audiences is not all positive. Though Phil strays from the traditional father figure, the responses he receives are negative. He is chastised for straying from the normative behaviors and is treated differently by family members, especially Jay. He is encouraged to act emotionally restrained, but that he is not.

To many, the father figure is authoritative and makes family decisions but this is not the case with Phil Dunphy. Just as Phil rejects the above portrayals of a father figure, his lack of authority is no different. He is one of those parents wants his kids to like him and think he is the “cool dad”. (S.1.Ep.1, 2009) He defines this parenting style as “peerenting. . . It’s where you act like a parent but talk like a friend”. (S.1, Ep.9, 2009) He uses this strategy on Haley and insists that she share what is going on in her life. “Go ahead, talk to me like I’m a boy in your Science class, tell me everything, who are you crushing on?” (S.1, Ep.1, 2009) This method fails terribly, but as usual, Phil carries on without hesitation. Additionally, when it comes time to reprimand the children, Phil sits back and allows Claire to take the lead. It is she who schedules the BB gun shooting for Luke as punishment for shooting his sister (S.1,

Ep.5, 2009). It is Claire who decides what parties Haley can go to, enforces homework hour, and ultimately makes decisions for the Dunphy family (S.1.Ep.9, 2009;S.1, Ep.6, 2009).

Again, we see that Phil's character lacks many of the qualities that our culture deems appropriate for a father figure. In these instances, Phil's family members intercede and attempt to correct his behaviors to better fit their beliefs. When Phil is too sensitive, his father-in-law ridicules him and calls him a "girl." When Phil lacks the authoritative parenting skills, his wife Claire commands him to reprimand their children. Even though Phil's character does not quite fit idea of the "normal" father figure, his family members do everything they can to encourage "normal" behaviors. It is as though they are rehabilitating Phil to fit in. As a result, the larger message that is being communicated is that sensitive fathers who lack authority are unacceptable in today's society and must act in accordance to the dominant ideology if they wish to be accepted.

The above analysis shows the many ways *Modern Family* communicates messages about gender roles within the family. Gloria, Claire, and Cam fit nicely into the category of the traditional mother figure. Though not all of them are women, they are feminine, other-oriented, nurturing, and do not hold professional careers outside the home. Jay, Mitchell, and Phil are placed within the category of the traditional father figure. They are masculine, self-oriented, emotionally constrained, and identify most with their career outside of the home. Together, these gender messages communicate a larger ideology regarding the American family.

*The Family*

This section explains and describes how the above gender messages work to communicate a larger dominant ideology about the family unit. Regardless of the supposed modern family structures, seen in the married gay couple with an adopted daughter and in the blended family with an older man married to a younger, Colombian wife, the dominant family ideology manages to prevail.

Scholars find family to be the primary source of gender identity (Stewart, Cooper, Stewart & Friedley, 1998). In many ways, the family serves as a model for appropriate communication and behavior. Interestingly enough, fathers appear to be most important in shaping gender in children (Wood 2008). If we apply this same idea to *Modern Family* we can see how Jay Pritchett's behaviors and beliefs about family trickle down the family tree to his offspring, and then to theirs. Children of parents with traditional gender beliefs tend to be conservative and hold rigid gender stereotypes (Wood, 2008). Jay is the eldest member of the family and holds closest to the traditional ideologies regarding family. His values serve as a guide for the rest of his family members. Arguably the most prominent male figure, Jay's beliefs and actions are noted by family members and passed down the Pritchett family tree. His children and grandchildren value his acceptance and the more they work to please him, the closer they feel to the family and to Jay. In the same manner but on a much larger scale, our culture works to maintain the status quo and gain acceptance. As a result, the dominant ideology is sustained.

Jay's stance on the role of the mother and the father reinforce the dominant ideology and is passed onto his children. Jay believes the male is the head of the household and should work to provide for his family. This belief reflects the

traditional gender ideology found in marriages (Hochschild, 1997). In return, his children model this behavior because that is the way they were socialized into our culture. This gives insight as to why Mitchell chose to keep his job as a lawyer and why Claire turned down the opportunity to advance in a career in order to raise her family. Both Claire and Mitch were raised in a traditional family. Jay worked outside of the home while their mother, Dee, stayed home to raise them. The role of the mother and the father was and continues to be placed in two distinct categories with no overlap. Mitch and Claire were socialized into their gender roles beginning in childhood and now act them out in their own families and perpetuating the belief.

As a result of their traditional upbringing, Mitchell and Claire are privy to traditional standards of what are appropriate and normal behaviors for men and women. Mitchell, although gay, does not fall into the stereotypical flamboyant role. Instead, he is reserved and attempts to curb his husband Cam's overly dramatic personality. The discourse surrounding their daughter also communicates this belief as they dress her in bows and frilly lace and treat her as delicate and fragile. Claire has the same expectations of masculinity and femininity for her spouse and children. She frowns upon Phil's overly sensitive nature and attempts to rehabilitate him through bossing him into proper behavior. She projects the feminine and masculine ideologies on her children, encouraging them to dress and act the part.

The cycle continues to embed and as a result, Claire's children model this behavior just as she modeled Jay's. The toys they play with, the clothes they wear, and the activities they are placed into reflect our culture's dominant ideologies. Any behavior that strays from the norm is immediately corrected. For instance, when their

middle-daughter becomes too consumed with studying and making good grades, Claire becomes worried. She is worried that this traditionally unfeminine desire to excel academically will hurt Alex's ability to date and make friends. Likewise, when Alex wants to wear pants to a wedding, she is nearly punished until she agrees to wear a dress—a solely feminine article of clothing. The beliefs promoted by the families in *Modern Family* transcend the television set to real life families across the country. They are reminded and guided to behave in the same fashion. More importantly, they *want* to behave in the same fashion.

Aside from the assumed roles of each member of the family, the structure of the family itself has a prescribed formula. To them, a family consists of married couple with at least one child. Jay was married to his first wife and together they raised Claire and Mitchell. Claire and Phil married and had three children of their own. Mitchell and Cameron are married and in the very first pilot episode they adopted their daughter Lilly. The message communicated here supports our culture's dominant ideology that a family is married and has children.

Characters on the show who do not share in this family dynamic are viewed as abnormal and different. Jay's ex-wife and Mitch and Claire's mother, Dee, did not remarry and is typecast as a free-spirited, irresponsible woman. She roams from place to place and plays the outcast. Her role in the family is minimal, as they go about holidays and special events without her involvement. Similarly, those characters without spouses or children are placed under scrutiny and asked to provide reason and justification for their choice. This promotes the idea that choosing to not partake in the family ritual results in criticism and ridicule.



Both Claire and Mitchell willingly accept and internalize Jay's (and the culture's) dominant belief and thus take part in the hegemonic process. They buy into the idea that there is a preset gender role to which they must abide and perpetuate this belief by passing it onto their children, even if it means abdicating their own desires and placing them into a rigid stereotype. They limit themselves and their opportunities by falling into this trap.

Sadly enough, the cycle does not end there. As television audiences watch these gender roles carried out in *Modern Family* they serve to embed the dominant ideology in their own families. Research shows that we look to others, especially mediated others, to define how we are supposed to be (Wood, 2008). If one were to look at *Modern Family* for a definition, they would find reinforcement of the dominant familial ideologies. The family structures portrayed in this program look familiar to viewers. It is not hard to imagine June Cleaver playing the Cam's character or vice versa. The interchangeable natures of the characters connect with audiences on the basis that they are comfortable. They would be reluctant to stray from the role of the traditional mother and father for fear of being different or worse, not being accepted. Thus, they behave accordingly and teach their children to act accordingly who then teach their children to act accordingly and so on. This continues to keep the traditional, nuclear family in power. It was widely accepted in 1950s domestic sitcoms and continues to be acceptable today.

## Discussion & Conclusion

The long-awaited family photograph is finally captured. Their unifying white ensembles and smiling faces hide the dysfunction and drama that took place minutes prior. The mothers begin to round up their families as the fathers release sighs of relief—the family photograph was a success. Though Claire, Gloria, and Cam were responsible for the family photo, Jay, the patriarch, has the last word. His voice-over reflects on the day and reiterates the importance of family. The credits roll and the episode comes to a close. The photograph marked another year in life of the Pritchetts, Dunphys, and Pritchett-Tuckers, as well as the end of *Modern Family* season one. At first glance they appear to be one big happy “modern” family but this cultural analysis reveals otherwise.

### *Discussion*

What can we make of the behaviors and beliefs carried out in this *Modern Family* tree? Well, for one they are not modern at all. Not once do we see praise offered to a progression or stray from the norm. A modern family might praise their daughter’s desire to forego a boyfriend and devote her time to her studies, but not this family. A modern family would encourage their children to be open to males who wish to express their emotion or open up in times of trouble, but not this family.

As a result, communicating such messages is harmful for those families who do not fit into this belief. Just as we see corrective behavior taking place on *Modern Family*, the same corrective behaviors take place in our culture. Parents or children who reject the dominant ideology become part of the minority. Their opinions are rarely heard and certainly never valued. In the eyes of the majority, those who reject

the dominant ideology threaten the current power structure. They threaten the longstanding status quo of tradition. As a culture, we value tradition and history. We cling to the familiar and find comfort in predictability. The “others” threaten the longstanding power structure, one where people fit into nice, neat categories and voluntarily accept their oppression. As the oppressed become aware of their subjugation and work toward change, they no longer give power to the dominant class and ultimately lessen the control placed over them. This makes way for new ideas and beliefs to be heard and distributes power to groups other than dominant class. Alas, transformation can take place.

Unfortunately, media artifacts such as *Modern Family* do not invite transformation. They only work to maintain what is already in place and in the case of this present-day program, the characters and their traditional gender roles serve as benchmarks for audiences. Each weekly airing provides audiences with proper mother and father figures that support the dominant ideology. Carey’s theory of cultural communication states that ritualized behavior creates and recreates shared meanings. The repetition of such characters throughout varying media outlets resonates with audiences and over time, the characters are acted out in their own lives and with their own families. As a result, the media continue to reflect these character-types back to us and the cycle continues to perpetuate. This explains why a sitcom in 2011 portrays ideas, beliefs, and characters that can be traced back to sitcoms that aired nearly a half-century prior. Just as Jay views the other father figures as competition, we too view opposing ideologies as competition. The choice to include a married gay couple in *Modern Family* is viewed as a way that our culture repairs its

definition of family. The portrayal of such a couple poses a threat the dominant ideology. To appease the dominant ideology, the Pritchett-Tuckers take the form of a traditional family with defined mother and father figures when in actuality, research reflects the division of labor is split equally in majority of same-sex parent families (Sullivan, 1996). However, because the Pritchett-Tuckers act like a “normal” family, they are viewed as such. In this way, our definition of family is repaired and prevents the shared meaning of family from changing entirely. The nuclear family structure works for our culture--it is familiar and comfortable and most importantly, it is supported by the masses.

Television programming is an industry and its number one goal is to create profit. A show that rejects the dominant ideology feels weird to its audiences for the very reasons listed above. A program that strays from the norm will not invite a large following, and lessens the likelihood that it will gain the advertisers needed to keep it on the air. In the end, *Modern Family* demonstrates that it’s simply too much of a risk for screenwriters to create something truly “modern” and edgy. It is much safer to convey dominant ideologies than depict real modern-day families—families where both parents income earners, families where single parents exist, families that are childless. What that leaves is a program that strives to maintain an ideology over the modern reality.

Firstly, *Modern Family* maintains the dominant ideology of family through its characters. The mother figures reproduce and maintain the belief that women are naturally more nurturing, emotional, and other-oriented. Claire, Gloria, and Cam’s characters can easily be replaced by housewives from 1950s sitcoms without causing

much disruption to the show. They are stay-at-home parents who place their families' needs above all else. They are the parent most involved with their children's lives. This present-day sitcom communicates to audiences that it is "normal" for the mother figure to stay home, care for their families, and tend to household chores. Regardless of the reality, *Modern Family* upholds the dominant ideology of family through its portrayal of the mother figure. Through further embedding this ideology in our culture, the nurturing and self-oriented mother figure seems natural to audiences and creates an expectation for all mothers to act accordingly.

Likewise, the father figures reproduce and maintain the belief that men are naturally more masculine, emotionally restrained, and self-oriented. This is communicated through Jay, Mitchell, and Phil's characters. They hold professional careers and serve as the financial supporters of their family. Jay is firm in his belief about how a family should look and act and his passes these beliefs onto other members of his family. With the exception of Phil's somewhat feminine traits, these characters reinforce the dominant ideology of the father figure. All of the father figures are portrayed in the same traditional manner, reiterating to audiences that this is the proper way for a father to behave. The continual maintenance of this ideology over time solidifies its place in our culture, ensuring that it remains prominent and powerful.

As a result, traditional gender roles make the larger family structure feel familiar and "normal" regardless of the modern appeal that each family unit possesses. The Pritchetts are not a typical nuclear family. Jay remarried the much younger, Colombian native, Gloria, and is now the stepfather to her son from a

previous marriage. Gloria became the stepmother to Mitch and Claire even though there is a very little age difference between her and her stepchildren. The Pritchett-Tuckers are not a “normal” family either. Mitch and Cam are gay co-parents to their adopted Vietnamese daughter, Lilly in a time where gay marriage and gay adoption are not widely accepted. The Dunphys are most like the nuclear family portrayed in majority domestic sitcoms, though they appear modern because the mother figure is outspoken and the father figure portrays a bumbling dad. For these reasons, the three families appear modern to the audience, yet their fulfillment of the traditional mother and father figures and family structure of a mother, father, and child stifle any indication that they are somehow “different.”

Furthermore, *Modern Family* repairs our culture’s damaged reality when necessary. To do so, the show “normalizes” characters in a manner that does not threaten the dominant ideology. In the case of the gay couple, the Pritchett-Tuckers represent a minority both on television and in our social reality. Seeing a gay couple on television is something novel and scary to many audiences because they present a threat to the status quo of normality. The gay co-parents take on traditional family roles and the inclusion of Lilly makes this gay couple a family according to our cultural definition. Mitch takes after his “normal” father and is the more masculine partner that provides for his family financially. Cam is similar to the traditional mother figure and is nurturing and emotional. In this way, both Cam and Mitch are “normalized” to ensure their “otherness” does not challenge our culture’s dominant belief.

However, by creating familiarity out of what is different, the characters are viewed as acceptable. Cam and Gloria both stand apart from the rest of the family as they are most unlike our idea of “normal.” The characters are made to seem “normal” because they emulate our traditional gender ideologies. They give audiences satisfaction in seeing their own beliefs, however inaccurate they may be, reflected back to them. At first glance, Cam is a stereotypical gay man, but the analysis reveals more. Cam is cast into the feminine gender category. He is nurturing, emotional, and family-oriented. He is the partner most likely to take care of their daughter Lilly. Likewise, the analysis reveals that Gloria is not just a Latina wife, she is the emotionally charged, attractive, and feminine trophy wife. Cam and Gloria’s characteristics are comparable to Claire’s, the most traditional mother, and therefore overshadow the fact that they are different. As long as they act feminine and appear “normal”, they are accepted by their family and more likely to be accepted by the television audience. Thus, the damaged reality is repaired but not changed, ensuring the safety of the dominant ideology.

It becomes clear that power over others is the main reason why the dominant ideology remains in place. *Modern Family* places importance on the SNAF that our culture defines as a mother, father, and at least one child. Those who partake in a SNAF or nuclear family are viewed as “normal” giving them privileges that other family structures do not receive such as social acceptance and government benefits. With each submission, the dominant ideology acquires more power. This is most prevalent in the divide of gender roles within each family. In *Modern Family*, the father figure holds power over his spouse and children. He is the financial provider

and in charge of much of the decision-making. He determines where and when resources are allocated. The mother figure remains at home and is seen as less valuable to the family because she does not offer a tangible contribution, such as an income. The power disparity is even seen in the Pritchett-Tucker family where both partners are seemingly equal. Mitch is authoritative, works as a lawyer, and makes decisions for his family whereas Cam remains at home and cares for Lilly. The mother figures willingly accept their position in the family and give into the hegemonic process. The traditional family structure remains most powerful, with a strong father figure who runs the family.

In a time like the present, where our social reality is full of changes to the definition of family, *Modern Family* has the opportunity to transform our conceptual understanding of families and gender roles. The show has all the necessary components to offer a modern representation of current gender roles in our society. Yet it does no such thing. Instead, it reverts any progress currently seen in gender roles and reinforces the traditional gender behaviors that claim women should be submissive, nurturing, feminine, and family-oriented while men should be authoritative, masculine, emotionally restrained, and self-oriented. To make matters worse, both the oppressed and the favored characters show complacency with their situation and allow the hegemonic process to take place. The mother figures accept their position in the family and promote their role as a positive one, even though it contradicts our social reality. Though Claire's indecisiveness about giving up her career is a theme in one episode, the episode ends neatly with Claire realizing her place is at home with her family. The ease and quickness of this decision



communicates to audiences that traditional gender roles as well as their subsequent expectations are still very much a part of our culture today.

Based on what we learn from *Modern Family*, opposing views are subject to ridicule and rehabilitated by even their closest friends and family members. It proves to be easier to continue to live one's life in accordance to the dominant ideology. Hence, those in power continually reinforce the importance and normality of traditional gender roles.

The analysis revealed that *Modern Family* communicates our culture's dominant ideologies regarding family and gender. The mother and father figures in the sitcom reinforce our beliefs about how a "normal" mother and father should behave. The following chapter discusses how the perpetuation of such ideologies results in implications for American audiences at large.

### *Conclusion*

This study situates *Modern Family* within the genre of domestic situational comedies and offers it up as a cultural artifact for analysis. This research contributes heuristically to the field of Communication Studies as it lends insight into the way we come to know our culture, specifically through its understanding of family. This study set out to find what ways the sitcom *Modern Family* communicates our culture's dominant ideology about family. Family is communicated in a number of ways, though each way maintains and repairs the dominant ideology. Though the episodes analyzed differ from one to the next, the general theme of family remains the same. Whether it is the gay couple, the older man and his trophy wife, or the seemingly "normal" family, traditional gender roles persist and make themselves known.

Collectively, the television series *Modern Family* embeds the dominant ideology of family and its hegemonic process that ensues through its use of traditional gender roles within its characters and recurring traditional family structure.

At the time of origination, the domestic sitcom relied heavily on the structure of traditional gender roles within family. Shows like *I Love Lucy* and *Leave It To Beaver* reflected current family values and roles back to its audiences. Both in reality and on television, a nuclear family was most the prevalent form of family structure. The father figure worked outside of the home and was emotionally distant from his wife and children. The mother figure worked inside of the home, tending to the children and household chores. She was nurturing and submissive. At the time, a small margin of women made up the workforce as men were the breadwinners.

However, in 2011 we see an evolved family structure. Now, over a half of a century later, women make up 51% of the workforce resulting in households with two parent earners. Additionally, more families are products of divorce and remarriage than ever before. This is the reality for present day American families and this is what *Modern Family* partially portrays. It presents audiences with modern family structures, like the gay co-parents with an adopted Vietnamese daughter and an older man in his second marriage to a much younger, Colombian trophy wife and her son from a previous marriage. Yet, within these families the dominant ideology is still there by way of traditional gender roles. Each episode communicates the dominant ideology without opposition or criticism. Although this makes for a familiar domestic sitcom, it also has negative implications for its audiences because this message is at odds with the reality of the present-day American family.

For it is the television sitcom that serves as a guide for how to act, communicate, participate in relationships, and so on (Hirst, 1979). *Modern Family* is watched by millions of viewers and received Emmy's for its characters and screenwriting. *Modern Family* proves to be prominent show in American culture and ultimately a set of rules for functioning within this culture. This situates it highly among watched shows and this highly as a guide for how to fit into American culture. Carey's view of communication as culture tells us that communication is the process in which beliefs are produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed. It is a ritual process in which the communication results in culture. With this in mind, let's take one final look at the *Modern Family* family, as it reveals much more than what meets the eye.

The roles and responsibilities acted out by the mothers and fathers are not arbitrary, they are a result of the ritual process of communication in which the dominant ideology is embedded over time and interaction. Claire, Gloria, and Cam embody nurturing, motherly figures that place their family above all else, which explains why they were the ones who organized the family photo. They communicate to audiences what a "normal" mother looks like. Throughout the episodes, their lack of professional careers and at-home daily activities communicate to audiences how a "normal" mother should act. Likewise, Jay, Phil, and Mitch emulate the dominant ideology of the "normal" father. They are uninvolved and show disinterest in the photograph because this is the way they were socialized to be masculine, strong father figures. The fathers are the source of power in the family, as they have control over finances, decision-making, and their voluntarily submissive wives. The families go

about their daily activities in a familiar and comfortable manner without fear of threat to the dominant ideology and threat to their power. Those with power hold onto it firmly and those without it have learned not to challenge for it only results in even lesser power. At the end of the day, they are seemingly one big happy family. The value in this research is to understand that the above representation of family is just one constructed reality (Hall, 1977). There are in fact many other views of family and reality not portrayed in this program. Through acknowledging the existence of other constructed realities, this gives the oppressed the understanding that they can create change (Kellner, 1995).

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

There are several limitations to this study that should be noted in the instance of future studies or replication. This study was conducted beginning in August 2010 and at that time *Modern Family* season one was available on DVD. However, season two was currently in session making it possible for only several episodes to be included in the research. Later episodes in season two covered topics relevant to this study, notably a Mother's Day episode that depicts Cam as Lily's mother for the first time since the airing of the show. Episodes such as this would add to the research and strengthen the claims of traditional gender roles in modern family structures. Additionally, because *Modern Family* is one of the first sitcoms to cast gay co-parents, little research existed in the area of gay parenting portrayals in television sitcoms. This is both an exciting and scary situation to be in as a novice researcher as I was then responsible for contributing novel research to the field.

Future research could analyze remaining episodes in the second season and compare the messages that were communicated over the course of two seasons. Additionally, future research could also expand to analyze additional cultural artifacts. One option would be to compare present-day domestic sitcoms, rather than focusing solely on *Modern Family*. Another option is to compare one past domestic sitcom and one present-day domestic sitcom in order to make clearer the correlations, if any, over several decades.

Furthermore, future research could take a closer look at the use of stereotyping within *Modern Family*. Media use stereotypes to make up for their lack of time and space to tell a narrative and television sitcoms are no different. The analysis of character stereotyping may be useful in future research. Additionally, the mockumentary style of the program makes it an adequate artifact to explore the areas of farce, parody, and satire. Lastly, a broader definition of family, rather than the traditional family structure, would open doors for a more encompassing study of this program.

#### *Concluding Remarks*

Though the family photograph only captures a brief moment in time, the dominant ideology embedded will leave lasting impressions on its audiences. The television families that American audiences invite into their living rooms satiate entertainment needs but also provide a model for how to be a social being in our culture. In the end we find that our ideologies, just like *Modern Family*, are not so “modern” after all.

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## Appendix-Episode Guide

### Season One

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#### Season Two

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