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How *Modern Family* and *Parenthood* Represent Equal Parenting: A Feminist Discourse

By

Samantha Coffin

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

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Mankato, Minnesota

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How *Modern Family* and *Parenthood* Represent Equal Parenting: A Feminist Discourse

Samantha B. Coffin

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the thesis committee.

Dr. Jocelyn Stitt, Advisor

Dr. Laura Harrison

Dr. Emily Boyd

## Abstract

Within recent discourses about parenting, the concept of equal parenting and fathering is a prominent theme. I have chosen two popular television shows that portray families to see if they represent ideas about equal parenting. I have identified three prominent themes that researchers agree comprise equal parenting: parents' equal power in decision-making, fathers challenging masculine gender expectations by actively nurturing children, and fathers sharing household duties. The findings of this thesis conclude that the television shows *Parenthood* and *Modern Family* are contradictory in their representations of equal parenting themes. *Parenthood* has strong examples of equal parenting, but remains more conservative in the representation of traditional gender roles, while *Modern Family*'s representation of family is more liberal, not enforcing gender expectations on the family with two gay fathers, yet the fathers with different-sex partners are not allotted the same flexibility in their gender roles.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Equal parenting is a hot topic in today's American society. There is an abundance of literature telling parents how to share parenting duties, as well as research on how today's parents are sharing parenting responsibilities (Deutsch, *Halving it All*). Parents are making decisions together, standing behind one another's choices, and providing children with more stable environments. Gender expectations of men are challenged by parents, allowing men to become the best parents they can. Challenging gender roles ranges from fathers allowing their daughters to paint their nails and do their hair, to allowing their children to see their father's emotional side. According to Scott Coltrane and Masako Ishii-Kuntz, fathers are completing approximately 21% of household duties, traditionally deemed as mother's work, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children, and moving away from the sole role as provider ("Predicting the Sharing"). This percentage of men participating in household duties is rising, however these are not the only changes occurring in parenting roles, yet the most commonly discussed and researched by theorists such as Coltrane, Ishii-Kuntz and Francine Deutsch.

Since the 1950s, representations of American families on television have either attempted to represent the ideal family or the modern family. In the 1950s, the structure of the American family was changing as a result of WWII (Kutulas 51). The country appeared to be in transition and men's identities as fathers and sole providers was in jeopardy. Theorists Stephanie Coontz and Judy Kutulas both discuss how shows like *Leave it to Beaver* created this new idea of a traditional nuclear family (Coontz 25-26, Kutulas 49). By the 1970s, the baby boomers had rejected fathers' traditional roles of provider and disciplinarian in the family, giving mothers more credit (Kutulas 54, W.

Douglas 92). Children began to gain more authority in television families. Domestic comedies, such as *The Cosby Show*, dominated the 1980s (Cantor and Cantor 23). In the 1990s, television families were not scripted to be viewed by entire families, but instead, different audiences, allowing some show to be created for children while others were created for parents. (Dubowitz and Zuckerman 66, Kutulas 56). This continues today, as writers and producers create shows for specific audiences.

Feminist theorists, such as Susan Douglas and Andrea Press have a lot to say about media representations of American families on television. Although feminism has come a long way since the 1950s-1970s, there are still many issues with representations of women and girls on television. Press argues that, “prime-time television will continue to play an important role in establishing for the public what can be acceptable in modern family life” (147). Both S. Douglas and Press discuss in their research how women as mothers are often still portrayed within the house with no outside identity separate from her role as mother. Some working mothers are represented on television, but not demographically representative of American families with working mothers. In their article, “The Class of Cultures,” Nicole Dubowitz and Diana Zuckerman argue that gender expectations are maintained on most shows for men and women, as well as boys and girls by representing traditional roles as the only socially acceptable behavior. Yet, viewers are demanding more reality television and more representations of the modern family. Shows representing adoption, step-parenthood and working mothers are becoming more popular because that is the current reality of American families.



Newer television shows have begun to incorporate representations of equal parenting. This thesis determines that although *Modern Family* and *Parenthood* represent examples of equal parenting, they are contradictory in their representations of equal parenting themes. While often representing more shared power in decision-making, the television families on these two shows are still maintaining gender roles in relation to household duties and gender expectations. As these shows have many characters, there are family trees located in the Appendix for reference.

In order to conduct this research using cultural studies, data was gathered from the first seasons of two contemporary shows: *Modern Family* and *Parenthood*. I gathered literature on the history of television families, feminist analysis of television families, and literature on men as equal parents to better understand the representations of today's television families.

All over the blogosphere, bloggers are writing about *Modern Family* and *Parenthood*. From *The Frisky* to *Feminist Frequency* these bloggers are excited and thrilled to see working mothers, equally shared parenting, adoption, gay parents, and much more. Bloggers are noticing the impacts of having male and/or female writers on shows and how that affects the scripts. James Poniewozik of *Time Magazine* argues that because *Modern Family* has two male creators, it “does a lot of interesting work with the ideas of what men are today.” Justine Fields of *The Frisky* notes that viewers should watch *Parenthood* because there are representations of a breadwinning mother, a single mom, and great male role models.

This thesis will draw from three different equal parenting categories and evaluate them together as a representation. Equally shared parenting theorists, such as Francine Deutsch, argue that evaluating such parenting is a challenge since each couple divides its duties and responsibilities differently. These two shows have begun to represent common themes expected to appear in representations of equal parenting, yet some parenting representations contradict those philosophies.

This research is important in understanding how the complex relationship between media and society. Consistently impacted one another, media shows society what is socially acceptable while society chooses to follow or challenge media representations. This study displays the complex representations of men as parents on popular television. Both *Modern Family* and *Parenthood* represent what is socially acceptable of fathers and their families in today's American society.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

For this study, I used feminist cultural analysis to investigate how men, as equal parents, are represented in both sitcoms and dramas. I have collected data from the first seasons of two contemporary television shows: *Modern Family* and *Parenthood*. I have watched each episode and coded any representation of men as equal parents. This method is the most appropriate as it allowed me to collect scenarios that I deemed to represent the subject of men as equal parents. I believe this research is vital in understanding the relationship with literature on equal parenting, the culture of equal parenting and how television shows represents equal parenting. My research is simply a small piece of the large topic: how men are portrayed as equal parents on television.

I selected *Modern Family* and *Parenthood* because they are popular, major network television shows that represent ideas of different American families. There are many shows that could have been chosen, yet I wanted to select newer shows that reach a large audience and cover modern philosophies on equal parenting. With the largest viewership of 12.9 million viewers, *Modern Family's* first episode aired on September 23, 2009 (Cater and Vega). This ABC network comedy features three related, yet very different, families and their triumphs and struggles through everyday life. The first season consists of 24 episodes, each approximately 22 minutes in length. *Parenthood's* first episode aired on March 2, 2010 with 7.7 million viewers (Toff). This NBC network family drama revolves around four siblings, their own families, and their parents. The first season consists of 13 episodes, each approximately 43 minutes in length. These two shows have continued on with consecutive seasons. For the purpose of this study I will

only be discussing the first season of each show. Focusing only on the first season of both shows will allow me to complete this study in the time allotted, yet does not allow me to analyze the series completely where characters may be more developed. It is important to recognize that the shows may have progressed, changed, and developed in many ways in the sequential seasons.

There are alternative ways to collect the data needed, yet I find cultural analysis to be most feasible. Cultural analysis allowed me to select specific themes before I began viewing the shows. To gather the information needed for this study, cultural analysis of the first season of both shows was the research method recognized as suitable. The data needed for analyzing the content of the episodes is qualitative in nature, as men as equal parents will enter the scenes in various ways. Quantitative data would only reveal the number of times men as equal parents were represented in the television shows, but would not reveal the nuances of those representations in the way that qualitative cultural study approaches would. Qualitative research allows me to “apply an inductive, interpretive framework to cultural artifacts,” aiding in explanations about fictional conversations that may be representative of scholarly writings on equal parenting (Reinharz 159). In completing qualitative research, there is room for interpretation of what men as equal parents look like to the researcher, which allowed me to work through complicated scenes in the shows. Specifically, I was able to interpret if I should include scenarios that may not be directly related to my three coding categories, such as when the mothers have the power in decision-making, do the household work and challenge gender roles themselves. Recognizing where media fails to represent men as equal parents allows

for deeper understanding of what media is truthfully representing. Without this flexibility, this research would not be able to accurately discuss the complexities of equal parenting. 7

Prior to conducting my research, I selected three categories to code. All three categories are derived from academic literature on equal parenting. Having predetermined categories allowed me to take note not only of when they occurred, but also when they were absent all together. With this information, I am able to analyze if these shows accurately represent men as equal parents or just as another character.

First, I was looking for the occurrences of parent's equal power in decision-making processes. Equal power in decision-making processes among parents is an important concept in the literature on equal parenting because sharing parenting responsibilities begins with having equal power in all decisions made. Deutsch argues that over time, children's preference for each parent shifts between who has recently spent the most time with them (Deutsch, "Equally Shared Parenting" 26). Children do not permanently favor one parent over another. Rebekah Coley and Coltrane discuss how children react differently when disciplined by their mother or father (Coley, and Coltrane 227). Coley and Coltrane argue that mothers and fathers discipline does affect children differently. When disciplined by their father, children react to the father's distress and anger, while with mothers they react to her emotional expressions (Coley, and Coltrane 228). Therefore, it is most helpful and more common for equal parents to agree on and use a shared parenting script with the children (Adams et al 48).

Second, I watched for the father characters challenging gender expectations of men. Challenging gender expectations of men is an important concept in the literature on

equal parenting because many aspects of parenting are labeled feminine tasks and in order for fathers to become equal parents, they must complete such tasks. Are they putting family before work or are they playing dolls with their daughters? Are fathers teaching their sons to be rough and tough? Berit Brandth and Elin Kvande argue that modern fathers are constantly challenging masculinity (295). Although definitions of masculinity being challenged are always adapting to cultural and historical contexts, fatherhood is still an “ongoing process of social construction” (Brandth, and Kvande 295). Therefore, fathers have to challenge masculinity and be caring fathers, yet struggle to maintain their masculine identity in other forms.

Last, I took note of when household duties were shown being completed by parents, and then throughout each of those, how often were fathers shown doing the tasks. Literature on equal parenting deems fathers completing household duties as essential to equal parenting because tasks traditionally done by fathers are occasional and primarily occur outside the home. Duties often completed by mothers are routine and daily, occurring inside the home. Who is cooking dinner and doing the dishes? Are these tasks shared or done primarily by one parent? Pulling directly from multiple studies by Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz on men and household labor, I defined household duties as preparing meals, washing dishes, cleaning up from meals, shopping, doing laundry and regular house cleaning (“Predicting Household Labor,” “Men’s Housework”). Other tasks such as household repairs, car maintenance, paying bills and playing with children are excluded, as they are labeled as masculine tasks that many fathers do while the prior

are labels as feminine tasks (Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz, “Predicting Household Labor” 635).

When I began coding the shows, I watched one show at a time, starting with *Modern Family*. I watched it one episode at a time and continued in the same fashion with *Parenthood*. I created an excel document with three different pages for the three different coding categories. Each page was set up with a column for the show name, episode name, episode number, explanation of the scene or scenario, and a space for notes on each. In the beginning of conducting my research, I was going to write the time in the show each scene or scenario happened, yet I realized that would be a huge challenge with the resources I had and in some episodes the scenes and scenarios were very frequent. I did record the time for a few episodes but decided it was not relevant for the research. I decided that in order to handle the volume of incidents I had to pause the show and record what happened, after the event occurred. In many cases I had to rewind and re-watch the scene to record exactly what happened. Sometimes I recorded visual scenes, while other times I took note of exactly what was said, recording quotes from the characters. After completing a season, I took additional notes to record my reflections on the entire season’s relationship with the three coding categories. Recording my coding research in this way worked best, as I am easily able to refer to the document and recall exactly what happened. If needed, I also have the information to revisit the scene for further interpretation.

Bringing culture and feminism together can be both a challenge and a blessing. Theorist Celia Lury believes, feminist cultural studies have been “repeatedly held back

by the continued dominance of ungendered understandings of culture,” stemming primarily from authorities in media outlets (33). However, theorist Patricia Lina Leavy believes this style of research “illustrates how a feminist perspective on culture can challenge dominant ideologies” (224). She goes on to share that this research was “developed out of the assumption that we can learn about our society by interrogating the material items produced within the culture” (229). Although I understand Lury’s perspective, my approach to feminist cultural analysis is closer to that of Leavy. I believe in order for our culture to accept more feminist ideals, we must challenge society to think about how culture impacts dominant ideologies.

My own position had an impact on this research. Being raised by a young, lower-class white woman has affected my interest in how media representations of mothers are socially constructed. My mother shared nothing with television moms, as she could not attend Parent-Teacher Association meetings and had no parenting partner. My father was absent and I resent him for that. This influenced me to explore what equal parenting actually looks like in addition what television families portray. As a college-educated white female, I am not able to interpret the shows in the same way that people with differing identities may. My knowledge on equal parenting is very new and limited to academic writings, as I am not a parent. I understand that my perspective is not the only perspective and that other researchers may critique these shows differently. I invite other researchers to expand on the conversation.



### Chapter 3: Literature Review

In order to analyze the connections between feminist discourse and representations of American families on television, I first present a chronological history of American television families from the 1950s to present. Next, I explore the literature concerning feminist analysis of media representation of American families and popular sources on *Modern Family and Parenthood*. Finally I look at discourses on men as equal parents. These three bodies of knowledge help to best demonstrate that the representations of equal parenting in contemporary television shows have an impact on what is socially acceptable of men as parents and how media represents fathers and their families.

#### **History of American Television Families from the 1950s to Present**

In her article, “Who Rules the Roost? Sitcom Family Dynamics from the Cleavers to the Osbournes,” published in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*, Kutulas introduces the chronological history of television families, focusing on representations of fathers. Since the 1950s, television families have been on the television screen with their endless plot possibilities (Kutulas 49). Adding to Kutulas’ discussion, W. Douglas in his book, *Television Families: Is Something Wrong in Suburbia?*, argues that television families have experiences that virtually all viewers can relate to, measurable in their popularity (Kutulas 49, W. Douglas 1). Therefore, shows about families will always exist. In the 1950s, many television families such as those in *Leave it to Beaver*, were traditional, maintaining parental authority, with the father as provider and mother as homemaker. William Douglas and Kutulas argue that social movements,

such as second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution, impacted changes in television families through the 60s and 70s. Some of the largest changes for television families happened in the late 1970s with the introduction of shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *One Day at a Time*, and *Maude*. Joel Cantor and Muriel Cantor, authors of *Prime-Time Television: Content and Control* argue that family shows dominated television in the 1980s with *The Cosby Show*, *Family Ties*, *Growing Pains* and other alternative family forms (23-24). Starting in the 1990s and continuing on today, shows such as *Roseanne* began giving mothers occupations and a life outside the family and in turn, television families were developed for different audiences instead of for family viewing (Kutulas 56). As time continues, the representations of the American family on television will change and adapt to what viewers are seeking.

In the 1950s, the United States was experiencing the aftermath of WWII. The idea of a normal family had been blurred as fathers returned home from an extended absence, where mothers did all of the parenting and in many cases provided financially (Kutulas 49). More than ever before, young families were being encouraged to take a modern approach and establish single-family homes (Coontz 26). Shows like *Leave it to Beaver* were introduced, representing a modern twist on the American family rather than the normal family, as a strategy to encourage a new definition of the traditional family (Coontz, 27). These shows limited wives and mothers to domestic roles, while husbands and fathers reclaimed their role as family provider (W. Douglas 98). This 1950s modern husband occasionally helped by drying the dishes, yet always modeled appropriate gender roles for his sons (Kutulas 51). Since traditional families were the ones where

parents maintained authority, problem children came from dysfunctional families such as Eddie Haskell on *Leave it to Beaver* (Kutulas 52, R. Lichter, S. Lichter, and Rothman 128). In *Prime Time: How TV Portrays American Culture*, the authors argue that some television families portrayed wacky housewives such as Lucy on *I Love Lucy*, yet it was common for all housewives to act the same, obeying their husbands and keeping house (R. Lichter, S. Lichter, and Rothman 112, 128). Kutulas states, “Father knew best, mother understood, and children obeyed” in television families all through the 1950s (52). The end of WWII meant restructure, relocation and social changes for all American families.

Although television families did not change a lot in the 1960s, social changes impacted what viewers wanted to watch and accepted. Both in television and in American life, second-wave feminism and sexual liberation impacted college-aged adults to rebel against traditional ideas of family (Kutulas 52). There was variation in types of housewives on the television screen and children began to have their own shows such as *Mickey Mouse* and *The Flintstones* (Kutulas 52, R. Lichter, S. Lichter, and Rothman 112). In the late 1960s a few sitcoms were destabilizing parents’ authority by portraying independent adult children (Kutulas 52). This rebelling started many of the changes that would come to television families in the early 1970s.

Television families began to take many different shapes in the 1970s, with the most dramatic changes ever. One-third of American college students rejected marriage and having children. As they grew up watching shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, “young women feared becoming June Cleaver, sweet, servile and invisible, vacuuming in her

pearls and high heels” Kutulas 53). Baby boomers did not believe in fathers’ authority as mothers had been the authority figures when their fathers were absent (Kutulas 54). According to Kutulas, shows such as *One Day at a Time* primarily focused on mothers, while fathers barely made any appearances (54). Robert Lichter, Linda Lichter, and Stanley Rothman argue that second-wave feminism impacted television families at this time with shows such as *Maude*, a show with a modern woman demanding her rights and independence (140). Domestic comedies became popular trends, showing both two parent and single parent households, although the later was the minority and not preferred (Cantor, and Cantor 24). By 1975, shows had become more risky and as a result, families demanded a Family Viewing Time from 8-9pm, by the United States Federal Communications Commission, in an attempt to have appropriate shows on for families at least an hour each night (R. Lichter, S. Lichter, and Rothman 154). However, this viewing hour only lasted two years as viewers’ desires and choices changed.

By the 1980s, the modern family dynamic on television was showcasing different representations of family life. New shows such as *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties* began to dominate (Kutulas 56, Cantor, and Cantor 23). The ideal family changed into a married couple, with or without children, while alternative families began to appear on television regularly (Cantor, and Cantor 25). Spousal relationships on television in general became more sexual, as shows such as *Roseanne* and *Married with Children* did not hide parents’ sexual relationships from children (Cantor, and Cantor 32, W. Douglas 100). Analysis of 80s television families suggests that, “rights and responsibility in the

family had come less gender specific,” and the television families portrayed more modern families (W. Douglas 99).

A different shift happened to television families in the 1990s. Shows began to split for different audiences, such as *Growing Pains* for teenage girls and *Everybody Loves Raymond* for parents and other adults (Kutulas 56). Twentieth century families became more child-centered and children had many of their own shows to choose from (Cantor, and Cantor 113). The same trends carry into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as “more recent family comedies are likely to give mom an occupation aside from child-rearing, but the scripts rarely stray far from domestic situations” (R. Lichter, S. Lichter, and Rothman 115). Television families have changed as a result of the changing role of women in society and the effects that has on family relations (W. Douglas 92).

As we have seen a change in television mothers over the year, fathers’ roles have shifted less. It has been common for working-class fathers to be viewed as a buffoon. Commonly, this father is a well-intended man who is loveable but also inept, immature, and awkward (Cantor, and Cantor 28, W. Douglas 97). While this is happening to working-class fathers, middle class fathers are represented as wise and the television humor came from their children (W. Douglas 97). However, “compared to earlier generations, modern fathers are more frequently involved in domestic life, in general, and child care and parenting” (W. Douglas 99). Shared parenting has started to become more present on television and is predicted to continue in this direction (W. Douglas 99).

Television families are still not representative of what an American family looks like, yet shows are becoming more progressive and creative, changing with social change

and viewers' demands just as they have historically since the 1950s. Big changes have occurred, while some traditions have been maintained. In order to cater to different aged audiences, parents' authority fluctuates on shows. It is rare for today's families to gather around the television set as technology has allowed for many different viewing capabilities.

### **Feminist Analysis of Media Representation of American Families**

Throughout feminist popular culture analysis, there are many discussions and theories surrounding television. According to both Press and S. Douglas, two prominent feminist popular culture theorists, there was no single moment that TV producers introduced or included feminism. S. Douglas states in her book *The Mommy Myth*, "there were efforts, Hollywood style, to address and yes, take advantage of the women's movement" in the early 1970s, but what is debatable is if they did so with the intention of supporting or discouraging the movement" (75). S. Douglas uses the show *Maude* as an example, as the main character is the matriarch, yet she is married, well off and has a maid. Television was representing what a feminist may look like but was not displaying feminism.

Many themes are apparent in feminist analyses of media representations of American families in scripted television shows. From upholding and deconstructing gender roles, to mothering and representing strong women, feminist theorists agree that feminism has had an influence on television's representations of families.

It is well known that society learns what is expected of certain genders from media (Dubowitz and Zuckerman 60). Television is one of the main sources of mainstream

media that teaches people how to act, what is expected and what is unacceptable. In their chapter “Clash of Cultures: Women and Girls on TV and in Real Life,” from the book *Featuring Females: Feminist Analysis of Media*, Dubowitz and Zuckerman state, “TV and other media influence what people say, think, and believe for a wide range of topics, including appropriate roles for women and girls” (60). Therefore, television influences what viewers believe is acceptable in society and how to act accordingly. This develops an interesting relationship for media and society as they balance and reflect one another.

In *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture*, Latham Hunter’s chapter, “Motherhood, Primetime TV, and Grey’s Anatomy,” she discusses how some television representations of mothers have been viewed as restrictive (320). Most mothers portrayed are viewed as perfect. There is no space for independent women, women who do not desire to be mothers, and definitely no space for postpartum depression. In her article, “Tom vs. Brook: or Postpartum Depression as Bad Mothering in Popular Culture,” Jocelyn Stitt discusses “popular culture’s unrealistic representation of mothering, and American culture’s failure to adequately support new mothers” (346). It is assumed that all women will, and must be, naturally perfect mothers. Hunter asserts “mainstream American TV has not been kind to mothers,” only representing perfect mothers or awful mothers who have something wrong with them (320). Equally shared contributions to family finances are not represented, ultimately displaying one parent as the breadwinner and the other as the dependent.

Working mothers have made it to the television screen, but it was not an easy venture. In *The Mommy Myth* S. Douglas discusses how “by 1975, TV executives appreciated that there really was a transformation in motherhood afoot, and one that would attract female viewers” (75). Yet, they went about showing these mothers, starting in the 1970s, by portraying them as mouthy and mean (Kutulas 54). Television has not represented the working mother consistently until more recent years, yet the representations still cast a battle between the “bad” working mothers and the “good” stay-at-home mothers instead of recognizing the balance of work and motherhood that would reflect today’s society. Hunter goes on to share, “the case of the working mother versus the stay-at-home mothers is one of the most pervasive approaches to motherhood in the media today” (328). According to W. Douglas, when the working mother is represented on television, although often intelligent, rational and responsible, she either has no partner or cannot trust or rely on another to do the necessary work (97).

Television has come a long way since the 1970s; there are many representations of women and girls on television that are positive and representative of society. In the 1960s and 70s there were far fewer women on television compared to men, and the ones who were present were perfect stay at home moms. There were very few women of color or older women (Dubowitz and Zuckerman 61). Yet, women in society began making choices between work and family in the 1980s and 90s, allowing themselves to have a career and children (Dubowitz and Zuckerman 62). There was an outburst of black sitcoms such as *The Cosby Show* and *Good Times*, starting in the 70s and lasting through the early 2000s (Cantor 33). Also, shows like *Roseanne* began portraying working-class



mothers. In order to retain their viewership, scripted television shows began to talk about the women's movement. Press argues in her article, "Gender and Family in Television's Golden Age and Beyond" published in 2009 that, "television has even taken a step toward a more honest portrayal of women's choice issues" (147).

While fighting for many other women's rights and gender equity, "feminists in academia had begun cranking out hundreds of studies of how women were depicted in ads, soap operas, comic books, women's magazines, movies, and sitcoms, and the results of many of these studies were published in popular magazines" (S. Douglas 199). Hollywood tried to ignore this uprising. At first, television producers and writers tried to laugh about how silly feminism was. In her book *Where the Girls Are*, S. Douglas states, "Ridicule often took the form of placing feminist rhetoric in the mouths of ridiculous sitcom characters" (196). None of the portrayals could be taken seriously because all feminists wore bad clothes and did not have boyfriends.

Feminist theorists recognize Maude as the first real feminist on television. Many women loved her, while men hated her (S. Douglas 202). *Maude* portrayed an outspoken, sarcastic woman who was not young or skinny. As noted by S. Douglas in *Where the Girls Are*, "at the same time that Maude ridiculed sexism and male privilege, she reinforced the stereotype of the feminist as a strident, loud, unfeminine, bruiser who could afford to be a feminist because she was older" (203). She was feared and laughed at so it is debatable how feminist the show really was, but it was a start within the media.

For generations, television has had an influence on American culture (Press 140). Television influences viewer's perceptions about jobs women can hold and how women

should act. What makes things complicated is that “early television’s representations of gender and the family presumed a unified American majority identity” (Press 140). Press discusses how in the beginning of television shows, we only saw stay-at-home moms who were white, middle-class and loved and cared for their children. If these are the only women that women and girls see on television, then they assume that things should be that way and other representations throughout society are wrong.

The more recent shows with strong women have started to become more popular. Dubowitz and Zuckerman believe “there are many TV characters that would be perceived as role models for women but would not be especially appealing to girls” (64). *Gilmore Girls* is a great example. Many feminist popular culture theorists have written about *Gilmore Girls*. On the air for seven years, the show can be noted as a success. It represents a successful single mother, yet she is white, working her way up easily at work, and is able to rely on her wealthy parents to fund her daughter’s Ivy League education, a representation most girls cannot relate with. *Sex in the City* is another hot show for feminist theorists. Operating from a postfeminism perspective, the women in *Sex in the City* discuss choices about sex, careers and relationships in every episode over the six years it was on television. Abortion is discussed in one episode as one woman shares her experience, while another debates if she is going to exercise her right to abort an unplanned pregnancy. Yet the entire series has an undertone of finding “Mr. Right” centering the show on achieving a lasting relationship with a man. *Roseanne* took a different spin. “Working-class wives, like Roseanne, who have to work to help support

the family, were rare,” and not often on television (Butsch 101). Yet, lasting for nine years, *Roseanne* was a realistic mother, attracting a large audience. S. Douglas discusses in *The Mommy Myth* how fantastic it was to have a working class mom who overeats, has a crappy job, and talks to her kids like “real” moms do. She is not portrayed as a “good mom” but she keeps her kids alive and well (217).

Dubowitz and Zuckerman note that television viewers are watching more reality TV shows than shows like *Gilmore Girls* and *Roseanne* (66). Although both show lasted many years, their demographic reach was narrower than expected. Richard Butsch also discovered that these kinds of shows scare off advertisers, while attracting an audience, offering a particularly complex scenario for producers (105).

It is difficult to negotiate “within a culture whose feminist inheritance struggles for growth in an as-yet stubbornly patriarchal power structure,” yet it can be noted that feminism currently influences what television writers and producers create (Hunter 330). In order to keep up with changing culture, different representations of families such as gay couples, adoption scenarios and working mothers exist on television. Media representations of families have to change in order to keep up with the viewers. Dubowitz and Zuckerman argue, “the public may want to blame network executives and producers, but unfortunately that blame need to be shared [since] programs are on television because they attract viewers” (68). The annual premiers of new shows are “what the viewers want or what the network executives think viewers want” (Butsch 104). Press and other feminist theorists understand that even with changes to television programs to better represent families, “prime-time television will continue to play an important role in

establishing for the public what can be acceptable in modern American life” (Press 147). Representations of families and mothers have changed dramatically since the peak of network television, yet there is still work to be done.

### **Secondary Sources on *Modern Family* and *Parenthood***

All over the blogosphere and throughout magazines and newspapers people are discussing the new families on television. Writers such as Poniewozik and Fields believe *Modern Family* and *Parenthood* are the most feminist shows around. People are watching these shows and magazines such as *Time Magazine* and *New York* are writing about them.

Two male creators are behind the scenes of *Modern Family*. Journalist Poniewozik believes that, “with two male creators—[*Modern Family*] does a lot of interesting work with the idea of what men are today.” It is noted by journalist Poniewozik that Cam and Mitchell, the iconic gay couple, are not pressed into “husband” or “wife” roles. This sitcom shows that men can work both away from home and work within the home.

Emily Nussbaum, journalist for *New York*, discusses in her article, "The Family Sitcom Gets A Rewrite," how the creators came up with *Modern Family*. The writers knew they wanted to represent families and they considered the many different forms families take today. The show developed around Jay’s second chance at fatherhood, as he tries to maintain his relationships with his two older children. The writers were encouraged to bring stories in from their own family lives. Consciously the show made

sure to do certain things. According to Nussbaum, the creators wanted to make sure the father occasionally knew what was best because in real families, sometimes the father is right (Nussbaum 36-39). Especially with characters Gloria, Jay's young Latina wife and Cameron, Mitchell's diva-loving partner, the writers wanted to upend stereotypes, yet sometimes embrace them. The creators wanted to dive into emotion, but not too far. Nussbaum also shares how some characters, such as Cameron, are a lot like the actors who play them, making the actor's character portrayal more realistic. Although *Modern Family* is not able to represent all modern American families, the show includes many different issues relevant in today's society.

With a mix of men and women as writers and producers, *Parenthood* portrays multiple variations of today's American families. On *The Frisky*, a popular culture blog, author Fields created a list of ten reasons women should watch *Parenthood*. She shares that the show represents a breadwinning mom, a single mom and many great male role models.

Dave Krager of *Entertainment Weekly*, discovered that "executive producer Jason Katims prefers a naturalistic, free-flowing style, where three cameras are filming at any given moment and improvisation is welcome" (60-63). Katims also shares that he wants the show to be emotional without getting to be melodramatic. Some scenes are heavy, but the writers always plan on pulling "them back to a lighter place" (Krager 60-63). This comedic drama is intense and emotional, yet representative and realistic, drawing viewers from many demographics.

## **Men as Equal Parents**

Prominent theorists on equally shared parenting must be discussed in order to research representations of equal parenting in *Modern Family* and *Parenthood*. Fathering in the United States has been changing immensely over the past two decades. Today there are single dads, stay at home dads, step-dads, gay dads, natural dads, and potentially more. In his article, "Fatherhood and Social Change," Ralph LaRossa states that some men who function as equal parents shared with theorists that spending time with their children is like "doing time," some type of punishment inflicted on them for being fathers (454). Coley and Coltrane, writers of "Commentary: Impact of Father Involvement on Children's Developmental Trajectories: New Findings Panel for the National Fatherhood Forum," argue how "the influence of fathering differs from that of mothering due to social and cultural norms" (227). Some people even note that women are better parents since, "children reacted more negatively to fathers' hostility and anger than to mothers" (Coley and Coltrane 227). Coley and Coltrane suggest that, "if fathers are less socially constrained in their parental role than mothers, they may show greater variability in their parenting practices and behaviors" (227). Coley and Coltrane argue that, "popular cultural ideals about parenting continue to encourage different expectations for fathers and mothers," such as mothers doing the majority of the childrearing and housework while fathers remain the breadwinners (228). In the United States, we expect new behaviors from fathers. For centuries we have expected a lot of mothers, and continue to do so, but the societal expectations for fathers are changing faster than most fathers' actions. LaRossa argues, "today's fathers often are depicted as major parental figures,

people who are expected to, people who presumably want to, be there when their kids need them” (451). Drawing a parallel between the culture and conduct of fatherhood is challenging for LaRossa, as he theorizes that the culture of shared norms and values surrounding men’s parenting is changing faster than the actual conduct of fatherhood (451).

It is easy to understand that, “the culture of fatherhood changed primarily in response to the shifts in the conduct of motherhood” (LaRossa 452). When the behaviors of one parent change, the other must adapt in order to maintain adequate parenting. Changes have occurred as a result of “the rapid increase in women’s participation in the paid workforce, and the rise in dual-earner couples with young children have been among the most influential changes affecting family life during the past 35 years” (Bradley & Corwyn 1). The conduct of fatherhood is predicted to change as the result of a changing American culture.

Gertrud Mander, author of “Fatherhood Today: Variations on a Theme,” believes that more women are successfully raising children on their own. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the percentage of single women households has increased 1.5% since 1990, while the percentage of husband-wife households had decreased 6.8% (Census). “Women expect to be able to have a career and, like men, to be able to divide their time between family and work with the help of caregivers and technical gadgets,” yet this would be a reachable goal with an equally sharing partner (Mander 143). Mander’s largest argument is that, “the modern father comes in many different forms, some more difficult to define legally than others, and he cohabits much less often with the mother or mothers of his

children than he used to a hundred years ago” (Mander 143). It is common for fathers to help financially more often than being present in the child’s life (Mander 143-146).

Unlike the research showing how equal parenting helps children’s self-esteem, Mander argues, “it does not look as if growing up has become any easier for the children of these liberated men and women” (Mander 146).

Three major themes can be extracted from this literature on men as equal parents. Theorists often discuss how men can be equal partners in the decision-making processes, challenge gender expectations of men and allowing them to be emotionally available fathers, and participating in daily routine household duties usually reserved exclusively for mothers. When fathers are able to do all of these, the couple can notably practice equally shared parenting.

Equally shared parenting encourages parents to not only hold each other responsible for the well being of their children, but also to create an orderly environment of consistence and fluidity. In their article, “Feminists and the Ideology and Practice of Marital Equality,” Katherine Allen and Karen Blaisure argue that parents can consider themselves equal if and when they jointly participate in decision-making of all sorts (12). Although equal parenting has the potential to allow both parents to maintain and expand their nonfamily self, such as their careers, equal power in decision-making can be challenging and time consuming for parents. Equal power in decision-making also looks different for every family.

In the article “Fathering and Adolescent Adjustment Variations by Family Structure and Ethnic Background,” the authors discuss how successful equal parenting



allows parents to draw from similar parenting scripts and agree with or uphold each others parenting choices (48). Allen and Blaisure argue that some parents wait to make decisions until they are able to consult their partner (12). In their article, “Predicting the Sharing of Household Labor,” Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz argue that, “studies by psychologists and sociologists remind us that parenting is a complex and contradictory endeavor for both mothers and fathers” (631). Equally shared parenting is not easy and does not happen quickly for all parents, but this style of parenting something that parents must work hard to maintain and develop throughout their parental years.

Louise Silverstein discusses in “Fathering is a Feminist Issue,” how “a shared ethic of care provides a sense of togetherness,” for a parenting couple, not only enhancing their parenting style but also supporting their growth as a couple (11). Having children undeniably transforms a couple and can convert an equalitarian couple into a traditional patriarchal family (Silverstein 12). Although this can be avoided by consciously attempting to share the power in decision-making, researchers such as Brandth and Kvande have found that it is easy to fall into patriarchal roles after introducing a new responsibility, such as having children, because traditional parenting has often been the only example available to new parents (300).

Transhistorically, gender expectations restrict fathers into traditional roles. Having shifted, primarily as a result of the change in motherhood, the culture of fathering is unable to have a simple definition (LaRossa 451-452). Traditionally being a good father meant generating an income, which meant primarily working away from home (Brandth & Kvande 299). Now, as some men strive to be better fathers in new ways, they

are forced to challenge traditional gender expectations of men (Brandth & Kvande 300). Brandth and Kvande argue that, “being a father today demands that you are genuinely concerned about your children and interested in following their development” instead of solely providing for them financially (300).

Deutsch, a prominent author on equally shared parenting, argues how fathers have not traditionally been expected to soothe a crying infant, leave work to care for their sick child, or attend PTA meetings, today some mothers expect that level of shared parenting (“Equally Shared Parenting” 26). In her article, “Equally Shared Parenting,” Deutsch argues that in order to do this, men must challenge gender expectations. Since “ideals of fatherhood are confused today,” equally sharing parents have begun to transform gender roles into human roles, allowing fathers to care for their children the same way mothers do (26-27).

Silverstein discusses how mothers are assumed to be more naturally responsive to children’s needs than fathers as a result of gender ideology (13). Deutsch argues that, “redefining fathering as nurturing is central to freeing women from the interlocking inequalities of their public and private roles” and “when fathers are thrust into the primary parenting role, they become capable of acquiring ‘mothering’ skills,” something gender roles restrict men from experiencing (“Equally Shared Parenting” 16-19). Silverstein argues that men experience psychological disequilibrium as they make the developmental shifts necessary to become fathers (11). Fathers must demand the space within masculinity to soothe and support their children both financially and emotionally.

Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz have written extensively on men sharing household labor with their partners. In their article, "Predicting the Sharing of Household Labor," Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz found that wives complete approximately two-thirds of household duties and men participating in household duties takes diverse forms and looks different for every family (630).

In a complimentary article, Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz research further into men's participation in housework. In their article, "Men's Housework," they state that as more women have entered the workforce, many theorists expected more men to take responsibilities at home, but they have not (43). One trend Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz have found is that having children later in life has enhanced men's participation in household duties and these delayed parents are more likely to categorize childcare and housework synonymously, while younger fathers separate the two ("Men's Housework" 44-45). "Fathers tend to derive their primary parenting identity from being a 'provider,' rather than from the direct performance of childcare," yet fathers who do routinely care for their children report having parenting experiences similar to those of mothers (Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz, "Predicting the Sharing of Household Labor" 631).

Household duties are not created equally as there are indoor, daily routine duties and outdoor occasional duties. Silverstein argues that "a husband's willingness to share housework and child care is the single most important factor in decreasing stress," allowing for better parenting (11). Traditionally, fathers have completed outdoor occasional duties such as household repairs, car maintenance and taking out the trash (Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz, "Predicting the Sharing of Household Labor 635). Tasks that

are more routine and traditionally viewed as women's work are feeding, bathing, and dressing children, putting them to bed, housecleaning, shopping, cooking, and laundry (Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz, "Predicting the Sharing of Household Labor" 635). Fathers who are equally sharing household duties would be completing routine housework that must be done for the welfare of the child.

In his book, *Family Man*, Coltrane continues the conversation of how housework is seen as "naturally" women's work (163). One solution discussed by Coltrane is, "when men get more involved in caring for their children, they get more involved in doing housework" (165). Factors such as being employed fewer hours, partners working more hours or earning a greater percentage of the family income, having fewer children and a partner with less traditional values encourage fathers to participate in more housework (Coltrane 165).

When attempting equally shared parenting, Deutsch discusses the findings in her book, *Halving it All*, that many new parents attempt to share and split everything evenly. After parents are able to articulate that equally shared parenting looks different for every couple and constantly changes, they are able to share more strategically (Deutsch, *Halving it All 2*). One example given by Deutsch is a family who both completed the bedtime routine with their one child. They quickly realized it was a waste of energy, as only one parent was needed to the task. The couple decided to alternate the duty and allow the other parent to complete a different task during the child's bedtime routine (Deutsch, *Halving it All 2*). Therefore, it is notable that equally shared parenting is not simple or easy but a complex and multi-leveled representation of parenting.

## **Conclusion**

Literature on the history of television families, feminist analysis on those representations, secondary sources on both of the family shows I have chosen to concentrate on, and discussions on equal parenting, all aid in my understanding of how *Modern Family* and *Parenthood* represent today's American families. Without this literature, I would be unable to critically analyze data from both shows. Though many of these theorists do not overlap, I have developed conversations between them, interweaving all the theories related to equal parenting, as portrayed on television.

## Chapter 4: Results

*Modern Family* and *Parenthood* are inconsistent in their representations of equally shared parenting. Although not represented by every television family analyzed, each show has some parental characters that represent equal parenting strategies. Focusing on the three prominent themes from equal parenting research (parents equal power in decision-making, challenging gender expectations by actively nurturing their children, and fathers sharing household duties), I found *Parenthood* to have a more conservative portrayal of gender expectations; yet, nearly all families practiced some equally shared parenting. In *Modern Family*, I discovered that although liberal with their representation of same-gender parenting, the show restricts the gender roles of all other characters. Therefore, this study contributes information on how a television show can have representations of equal parenting throughout a season while remaining inconsistent in its overall equal parenting presentation.

*Modern Family* is an American family comedy on the ABC network that began in 2009. It has continued on to three consecutive seasons and is still on air. The show is filmed in Los Angeles, California and represents the lives of three related families (see figure 1). Jay is the father of adult children Claire and Mitchell. Jay is remarried to Gloria, who has a son from her first marriage, Manny. Claire is married to Phil and they have three children, Hailey, Alex and Luke. Mitchell is in a domestic partnership with Cameron (Cam) and they have recently adopted their daughter, Lily. At the very beginning of the first episode, the viewers are shown the beautiful homes each of the families represented live in, sharing with the audience that these families are wealthy.

*Parenthood* is an American family comedy/drama on the NBC network that began in 2010. It has also continued on to consecutive seasons and is still on air. The show is filmed in Roseville, California and portrays the lives of five families (see figure 2). Zeek and Camille are the parents of adult children Adam, Sarah, Crosby and Julia. Adam is married to Christina and they have two children, Haddie and Max. Sarah is recently divorced and solely raising her two children, Amber and Drew. Crosby is not married to or living with his son Jabbar's mother Jasmine. Julia is married to Joel and they have one daughter, Sydney. All of these families appear to have beautiful homes and steady jobs, yet their financial status is not as obvious as that in *Modern Family*. For further reference, there are family trees for both shows provided in the Appendix.

### **Parents' Equal Power in Decision Making**

Today's literature on equally shared parenting suggests that children respond best when parents support each other's parenting decisions and remain consistent with choices (Allen and Blaisure). Power in decision-making has shifted from being predominantly held by the father, yet during WWII, mothers began to hold most of the parental authority (Kutulas 54). Theorists believe that not only can family structures where both parents make decisions together be beneficial for the children involved, but it can also aid in the growth of a couple's relationship and help them feel cohesive and supported in their parenting choices (Silverstein 11). As the primary movers behind equal parenting, mothers have traditionally been viewed as the default primary care provider for children from the very beginning. When equal parenting is introduced, mother's career or personal

goals are less likely to vanish without a cohesive conversation between the couple (Deutsch, “Equally Shared Parenting”).

In the first episode of *Modern Family*, the show displays one of the mothers, Claire, making all of the parenting decisions, while her husband Phil is scripted as the “cool” parent. This episode opens with the matriarch of the family, Claire, telling her daughter Hailey that her skirt is too short. Claire looks for Phil’s support but instead he does not listen to his wife’s distressed voice and tells his inappropriately dressed daughter that she looks cute. Just moments later, their son Luke shoots their younger daughter Alex with a BB gun and Claire makes the decision of what his punishment will be, being shot with the BB himself. Phil responds to the punishment the same way Luke does, whining and complaining. The family then gathers around a calendar and pencils in when Luke will be shot with the BB, portraying the Dunphy household as an overscheduled middle-class family. Phil claims that Claire is not as cool with parenting as he is. Phil’s character represents the buffoon character noted by the research of both Butsch and William Douglas. Butsch believes that “[a buffoon] character of the husband is in almost every sitcom depicting a blue collar head of household,” leaving the humor to come from the children (101-102). I believe the writers of *Modern Family* often insert Alex, the witty middle child for intellectual humor, mocking her parents and siblings as she is represented as the brains in the family. The humor in *Modern Family* stems predominantly from how the writers portray Phil as stupid and Claire as having to “deal” with him. The writers represent this humor within Claire’s struggle to negotiate any level of equal parenting with Phil. Claire is represented as the matriarchal mother, a



character that S. Douglas discusses as being present in many shows, yet not always represented fairly as a strong woman. As theorist Deutsch argues, equally shared parenting looks different for every family. Even though the representation of Claire and Phil's parenting does not represent a cohesive relationship, it does represent the mother's struggle with attempting shared parenting, something viewers may be able to relate with.

In episode 3, "The Bicycle Thief," Phil says to Claire, "just give me the answer," referring to how he should be a great dad. Phil's character appears to be struggling with how to parent and expects his wife Claire to have all the answers, as her character often questions Phil's parenting choices. It is apparent that in this representation of family, the mother makes the choices since the father acts as if he does not want to be a parent and instead wants to be friends with his children. This representation of family reflects how any couple can develop into traditional family roles, where the mother does the majority of the parenting and housework, after the birth of children (Silverstein 12). As argued by theorists such as Deutsch and Coltrane, finding an equal balance with parenting for each family is a huge encounter. Nussbaum argues that the writers for this show bring in scenarios from their own lives, making humor out of real life parenting scenarios. Throughout the complete first season, Claire makes the parenting choices, is stressed out and portrayed as the bad parent. Phil and Claire's characters are both portrayed as inept parents, often unsure of their choices and represented through their children's actions. The representation of Phil and Claire's inability to parent successfully is used for the majority of the humor throughout the entire season. Although not representing a

successful equally parenting couple, this representation shows a realistic family, struggling to parent together.

*Modern Family* characters, Cam and Mitchell, represent a different parenting style. Becoming new parents in the first episode allows the writers to explore and experiment with the type of parenting style the couple will have. When Cam and Mitchell present their newly adopted daughter Lily to the family in the first episode, the entire family is surprised. Mitchell's father, Jay suggests that they should have adopted a pet instead, as he is represented as never expecting them to have children. However, Cam and Mitchell work through the stereotype that the couple would forever be childless based on their sexual orientation and their family is excited about their newest member.

Although some parenting choices are tough for Cam and Mitchell, they work as a team. Cam and Mitchell work together with Lily's sleeping habits. When Cam struggles with letting Lily cry in her bedroom, Mitchell shares how he does not always want to be the bad cop parent, like his sister Claire. Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz have compiled research demonstrating that parents who have children later in life are more likely to function as equal parents for both financial reasons and the length of their personal relationship, pre-child ("Men's Housework" 44). Couples are able to develop a equal relationship and maintain it after having a child through clear communication and understanding of what each other wants. Interestingly, the benefits of later parenting are portrayed well in Cam and Mitchell's relationship, and although not an immediate issue on the show, their ability to function as equal parents is represented as being reflective of their ability to develop a strong relationship before adopting Lily. I believe this representation allows

viewers to see the benefits of parents being a well-adjusted, high functioning couple before having children and how this can help maintain a strong relationship when struggling to find an equal parenting balance.

The writers represent Jay and his wife Gloria as equally sharing parents as well. Perhaps this could be since the character, Jay is represented as becoming Manny's father at a later age, just like Cam and Mitchell adopted Lily later (Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz, "Men's Housework" 44). Being Manny's stepfather does not appear to be an issue for the writers as Gloria and Jay both make decisions surrounding parenting choices. The couple is portrayed discussing parenting choices, yet Gloria does override Jay when she disagrees. Although Gloria is Manny's birth mother and Jay is his step-father, Gloria and Jay discuss their parenting choices as if Jay's position of step-parent is not a vital issue. Mitchell and Claire discuss how Jay parents Manny completely differently than he did his older children. Mitchell was a flamboyant child, yet his father was constantly in denial of his sexuality, while Claire was forced into the role of son since Mitchell did not fill that void for Jay. The writers portray the two characters as being jealous adult children and the authors/writers expand Manny's character to be the mature and well-mannered child, calling Mitchell and Claire's children his nieces and nephew.

Aside from Phil and Claire, the two other families on *Modern Family* portray a level of equally shared parenting. Some of the parenting challenges represented are those discussed in the literature on equally shared parenting. *Modern Family* encourages viewers to find humor in unequal parenting and most of the show's humor stems from Claire and Phil's dysfunctional household, as the other characters are scripted to

represent smarter, more intelligent families. The humor that stems from Cam and Mitchell or Jay and Gloria is unexpected humor, while the humor coming from Phil and Claire is predictable after viewing the first episode. As the first season progresses, there is less discussion on parenting and more on the parents' relationships as couples. As discussed by Silverstein, parents that equally share parenting are able to grow stronger as a couple, and *Modern Family* represents the parents who can share their responsibilities equally such as Cam and Mitchell to succeed as a couple while Phil and Claire struggle to maintain a healthy relationship (11). Television families, like *Modern Family* have experiences that virtually all viewers can relate to and find humor in, as discussed by theorists Kutulas and William Douglas. Therefore, it seems as though the writers are attempting to associate the television families with real families and find humor in the struggles most families' experience. The writers do this by representing humor in the children and in the struggle with developing an equally shared parenting relationship.

*Parenthood* displays a great deal of equally shared parenting and the struggles in maintaining shared responsibilities day to day. Influenced by the impromptu directing style, some of the equal parenting representations could come from the actors while others from the scripts, yet all scenes are strategically kept by the director and editors. The scripted parental characters on *Parenthood* can be termed as representations of equal parents since they jointly participate in decision-making processes (Allen and Blaisure 12). The first episode of *Parenthood* focuses mostly on Adam Braverman's involvement in his siblings' families. Most of the parents on this show are represented as being great at communicating and sharing parental responsibilities.

Adam and Kristina share a lot of decision-making power within parenting choices, and when they are unable to, they discuss the choices the other parent made and agree to support one other. Although they do not agree on all parenting choices, these characters are scripted as upholding the choices made by one another, supporting a more stable environment for their children (Adams et al. 48). Kristina is portrayed as making decisions instead of her husband, Adam, because she is with their son Max, who has Asperger's Syndrome, throughout the day. Kristina is privilege to be home with her child, versus a dual-earner family. In episode 2, "Man versus Possum," Kristina allows Max to wear his pirate costume and when Adam confronts her about it, she reminds him that she has to deal with the repercussions all day, not Adam. *Parenthood* constructs this episode and other episodes involving Max to represent the tension that develops between parents when making parenting decisions for a child with Asperger's.

Other characters who share decision-making in *Parenthood* are Adam's sister, Julia, and her husband, Joel. Joel is primarily the stay-at-home parent, while Julia is a lawyer who works many hours. The writers portray Julia's character as second-guessing her ability to be a good mother. Julia struggles with her relationship with her daughter, Sydney. Julia's parenting struggle connects greatly to literature on equal parenting. As discussed by Deutsch, "in equally sharing families, children's preferences often shift back and forth between parents, depending on who has taken care of them more recently" ("Equally Shared Parenting" 26). Amazingly, the writers may have wanted to portray this struggle and later show that Julia's relationship with her daughter is not due to a lack of parenting or presence in her life, but a direct result of Joel's recent interactions with

her. This is portrayed well when Julia gets upset about her relationship with Sydney. However, there are times when Sydney wants her mother and other times when Julia's siblings tell her how great of a parent she is. Julia's character represents the "bad" working mother many feminist theorists have found to be represented in television families since the 1970s who has a successful career but no time to bake cupcakes for the bake sale (Kutulas 45). However, since the characters discuss how she is still a great mom, the traditional representation of a working mom is debunked, representing how a working mother can be a "good" mother. Julia and Joel are able to maintain equally shared parenting when they communicate, remaining on the same page with their decisions, and proving consistency and parental agreement to Sydney. I believe this is a great representation of equally shared parenting and the struggles that working mothers often face and how having a male partner who shares responsibilities can aid a working mother in being present and available for her children.

The writers add an interesting twist by having Crosby learn he has a son that is five years old in the first episode. Jasmine, the child's mother, and Crosby are able to make most of the parenting choices together throughout the first season. It is hard to analyze this parental relationship in the same way as the others since Crosby just learned he is a father. The writers represent the struggle for both parents in such a situation, but do not overdevelop this family dynamic just yet. In episode 9, "Perchance to Dream," Crosby and Jasmine attempt a date night while Jabbar visits with his new Aunt Julia and Uncle Joel. Receiving a call about Jabbar, the parents rush to Julia and Joel's house to find that Jabbar is afraid to make a bowel movement in this new house. The two parents work

together as a team, cheering their child on, and later returning to their date. This scene lays the foundation for the beginning of an equally shared parenting endeavor.

Unfortunately for Crosby, in episode 13, “Lost and Found,” Jasmine and Jabbar move to New York City and Crosby has no say in the decision. If Jasmine had suggested that Crosby come with them, the writers make it seem that Crosby would move to New York City, as he has fallen in love with both her and his child is just a few months. Ironically, in the first episode, the writers portray Crosby as an adult man that cannot commit to his then girlfriend. As soon as he learns he has a son, Crosby jumps in and takes responsibility, representing that fatherhood has the ability to change men when they participate in their children’s lives in more ways than providing financially. This representation is seldom portrayed on television, yet becoming more of the norm in recent years.

The writers of *Parenthood* appear to consciously include conversations about struggling to share the power of decision-making with one another. Often represented as a parenting success, all dual-parent families in this series work together and support all choices made by the other parent. The only representation of family excluded from this analysis is Sarah, as she is representing a single-mother headed household, with no father present. The show does represent the struggle she has in raising two children on her own.

Equally shared parenting is being represented, and appears to be a main topic on *Parenthood*. Often the main storyline, all of the families portrayed on this show succeed and struggle with shared parenting strategies. The lack of representation of successful shared parenting in Claire and Phil’s relationship on *Modern Family* is mocked and the

root of humor for the audience. Regardless of the success in each show related to equal power in decision-making processes, the representation is present as either the root of humor or drama. In *Modern Family*, most of the humor is stemmed from the struggles with or lack of equally parenting such as Claire penciling in a scheduled time for her husband Phil to shoot her son Luke with a BB gun. On *Parenthood*, the drama is developed around equally parenting struggles such as Kristina spending more time with Max and using bribery to achieve sanity. These shows are based off what network executives and producers believe viewers want to watch, and will watch for more than one season (Dubowitz and Zuckerman 68). This argument verifies that equally shared parenting is thought to be something viewers are interested in, as it has surfaced as a main theme in both *Modern Family* and *Parenthood*.

### **Challenging Gender Expectations**

Gender expectations of both men and women have an effect on parental choices. In order for parents to equally share parental responsibilities, both parents must be willing to transform gender-based roles into human roles, according to Deutsch ("Equally Shared Parenting" 27). Men cannot limit their parenting responsibilities to the masculine roles of playing with children, fixing cars, paying bills, and completing household repairs because as soon as they do, gender restrictions are placed on how they parent, limiting their parental ability to being a provider (Coltrane & Ishii-Kuntz, "Predicting the Sharing of Household Labor" 635). Although "ideals of fatherhood are confused today," fathers must move out of their masculine roles and into their fathering roles, such as cooking,



cleaning, bathing children and putting children to bed (Coltrane & Ishii-Kuntz, "Predicting the Sharing of Household Labor," and Deutsch, "Equally Shared Parenting" 26). In order to be the best fathers they can be, men cannot limit themselves to financial provider, but must also make themselves emotionally available to their children. Both *Modern Family* and *Parenthood* are representing men challenging gender expectations, offering different models of fatherhood to viewers.

Challenging gender expectations is not highly represented in *Modern Family*. The most noticeable episode that deals with gender expectations is episode 3, "The Bicycle Thief." In this episode, Jay teases his son-in-law Phil and his grandson Luke when he sees that Luke is riding his sister's old bike, wrapped in black tape. Phil gets worked up over Luke having a girly bike and buys him a boy's bike even though his wife Claire does not think he is ready for the responsibility. Phil quickly goes to a bike store, not worried about finances, and purchases a new bike for Luke. Although Claire is left out of the decision, her character is never portrayed supporting Phil to challenge the gender expectation enforced by his father-in-law Jay. According to LaRossa, mothering must shift in order for traditional gender roles of fathering to be challenged (451-452); yet that representation is not portrayed in this episode. During these situations that occur with Luke getting a black bike, the traditional gender roles of fathering are never challenged, but simply maintained.

*Modern Family* does something very different with Cam and Mitchell's gender roles. Cam and Mitchell, are never placed inside gendered boxes or expected to each take

on the role of husband or wife. Cam dresses up their daughter Lily but he loves football, quits his job to stay home with his daughter, but when a man at the gas station bullies Mitchell, Cam becomes very masculine and protective. Mitchell is the primary financial provider for the family, yet hates sports and is often portrayed as fearful. This representation shares with the audience that gender roles can be transformed into human roles in terms of parenting (Deutsch, "Equally Shared Parenting" 27). Traditionally men are not expected to soothe a crying infant or attend Parent Teacher Association meetings, yet when both parents are men, gender expectations must shift for them to provide basic needs for the child (Deutsch, "Equally Shared Parenting" 26). Throughout the entire season, neither Mitchell nor Cam fit normative male gender expectations, allowing the audience to recognize that same-gender couples need not follow traditional gender roles and function fully as a parent. Also, this representation challenges patriarchal family structures, as this family is portrayed as high functioning and successful. This representation allows the viewers to see a same-gender couple succeeding at parenting a child without a mother, as well as offering real same-gender couples a television family similar to their own.

Since the only major challenge to gender expectations of men happens in the same-gender relationship, *Modern Family* does not represent the need to challenge gender roles for men in different-gender relationships. As a prominent theme in equal parenting, the lack of representation of challenging gender roles suggest to the audience that it is not essential for a family to practice equally shared parenting. Pieces of equal parenting can be achieved without challenging gender expectations of men, yet as argued

by Coley and Coltrane, once fathers are less socially constrained they will be able to participate in parenting practices and behaviors at deeper levels, such as emotionally. Having *Modern Family* not represent this aspect, the viewers are led to believe that gender restrictions are not an issue when a mother is present to provide the nurturing side of parenting. This representation neither encourages nor discourages male viewers to challenge gender expectations. I would argue that representing a same-gender couple challenging gender expectations, and no other character contributing heavily, limits challenging gender solely to same-gender couples, excluding any other fathers.

In *Parenthood*, two of the fathers notably challenge gender expectations. The first father, Joel is a stay at home dad who helps with a fundraiser bake sale, takes his daughter Sydney to the playground, swimming lessons, and plays dress up. Joel's character is representing how men can be good fathers in new ways (Brandth and Kvande 300). Silverstein argues how, when placed in primary care provider roles, men can acquire "mothering skills," such as nurturing children, maintaining mental lists of children's schedules and needs, and being emotionally available, challenging and sometimes deconstructing traditional gender roles (16-190). Interestingly, Joel's character is portrayed doing many "mothering skills," showing how a father can challenge gender expectations to become an equal parenting partner. Deutsch discusses how it is socially acceptable for women to develop into nurturers soon after the birth of their children and how if men allow themselves to change, they too will become nurturers through their relationships with their children ("Equally Shared Parenting" 26). The representation of Joel breaking gender expectations goes even deeper, as his relationship with his daughter

is stronger than the other fathers portrayed on the show and clearly portrays Deutsch's statement that men too can take on necessary nurturing roles. I think this representation allows for viewers to see gender expectations as restrictive for fathers and encourage parents to challenge them.

The other father character in *Parenthood* challenging gender expectations in order to be a good father is Crosby. Throughout the entire first season, Crosby's character is portrayed as subconsciously challenging gender expectations as he develops his new father identity in the first episode. When faced with the news that he is a father, Crosby does not worry about a paternity test and owns his responsibility, quickly developing into a representation of a strong and present father. In episode 4, "Wassup," Crosby has his son Jabbar visit for a sleep over and his finger gets stuck in the top of a soda can. In panic, Crosby tries to get his son's finger free from the can. On the way to the emergency room, Crosby attempts to call his brother, Adam, for parenting help, as he is very new at parenting and Jasmine, Jabbar's mother, is temporarily unreachable. The character of Crosby being able to rush to the emergency room displays both white privilege and class privilege. He knows he can get medical assistance at the hospital and is not worried about the financial repercussions of an emergency room visit. It is interesting for the writers to have Crosby call Adam first and not either of his sisters. This representation shows that fathers can be nurturing and care for their children when the opportunity arises. Crosby's character is a direct example of how when fathers spend more time with their children, they become nurturers themselves (Deutsch, "Equally Shared Parenting" 26). This representation offers a spin on what a modern father may look like to the viewers. He

does not become an absent father, delivering a monthly check but instead transitions from irresponsible bachelor to respectable father in just a few episodes. The representation of this character allows for a more broad definition of a father and removes some expectations placed on non-traditional fathers.

All the other fathers, although not overbearing with their masculinity, do not challenge the expectations of their gender. However, by representing Joel's character as a happy and fulfilled father, the show encourages the audience to accept men in similar parenting roles as women, challenging traditional gender roles and redefining what it means to be a father. The lack of gendered issues for the other fathers suggests to the viewers that challenging gender roles is not necessary to be a good father, similar to the representation portrayed in *Modern Family*. Yet when fathers do challenge gender expectations, such as Crosby's character, viewers are shown that this is an acceptable behavior of fathers.

It appears that struggles with masculinity can only be portrayed through one or two characters within a show. Masculinity is being challenged in television families, but in a small and careful way, challenging yet not uprooting gender expectations. As noted by Dubowitz and Zuckerman, society learns what is expected of genders from media. Interestingly, learning about challenging gender to be a better father from these shows' limited scenarios such as being a stay-at-home father, during an emergency, or in a same-gender couple leads viewers to believe that only men in those scenarios need to challenge gender expectations in order to parent equally (60). I believe that if viewers do not like the representation, they may just blame it on that one character instead of the

entire show. Viewers may be attracted to characters like themselves, therefore if one character is reinforcing masculinity, the writers reach a larger audience by having another character challenge gender expectations. Therefore, these shows are not encouraging men to challenge gender expectations but sharing with viewers that when fathers do, it is an acceptable behavior.

### **Participating in Household Duties**

In equally shared parenting, taking care of children means a lot more than just playing with them (Coltrane & Ishii-Kuntz, “Men’s Housework” 46). There are many routine household duties such as cooking, cleaning and bathing children. Here, I was looking for men doing daily, routine tasks that are traditionally deemed as feminine tasks. This does not include other tasks such as household repairs, car maintenance, paying bills and playing with children, as they are labeled as masculine tasks that many fathers do, not reaching deeper into their responsibilities of being parents (Coltrane, and Ishii-Kuntz, “Predicting Household Labor” 635). Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz suggest that men doing household duties such as preparing meals, washing dishes, cleaning up from meals, shopping, doing laundry and regular house cleaning is a fair representation of men participating in household duties (“Predicting Household Labor”; “Men’s Housework”). Dinner, bathing, bedtime routines, and washing dishes are tasks that need to be done daily, while maintaining a car is done more infrequently, leaving mothers to do much more frequent work. Household duties did not appear heavily in any of these shows and were often visual representations, without any conversation around the parent who was completing the task.

*Modern Family* primarily shows Claire doing household duties and other parents are only sparingly doing any housework on the show, mother or father. All of the characters in this show are represented as white-middle class well off families with no financial issues. While some of the families are shown doing very few household duties, the overall issue of domestic work is invisible. When made invisible, the importance and degree of work is degraded and seen as insignificant. The only people of color in the family are Gloria and her son Manny, who were poor before Gloria married Jay, a successful entrepreneur. In the first episode, Claire holds a laundry basket in three different scenes. She is always cooking, baking, disciplining the children and getting everyone, including her husband Phil ready for the day. One example of Claire doing the majority of the housework is the broken step that appears six times with Phil saying, “gotta fix that step.” It is first mentioned in episode 2 and reappears in episodes 3, 8, 11, 12 and 20. In the last episode of the season, Claire says, “screw it, I’m gunna fix that!” Even though this is a more masculine task, normally completed by men, Phil still does not pull his weight in the family household duties. Phil is only shown playing with the children, primarily his son Luke. Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz talk about this behavior among fathers, yet the authors state it is usually accompanied with taking out the trash and mowing the lawn, which surprisingly Phil is never seen doing (“Predicting the Sharing of Household Labor” 630). It is expected for traditional fathers to do specific household tasks and nothing more, yet Phil’s character is not even able to complete a traditionally masculine task. I would argue that this representation portrays Phil’s character as an incompetent parent. The writers of *Modern Family* have Claire’s character step outside of

feminine gender expectations and fix the step. Therefore, this representation shows that not only does Claire complete all the traditionally feminine roles, repetitive and daily tasks necessary for the functioning of all family members, she also completes tasks deemed as masculine because they have to be completed. The viewers see that Claire can do it all, allowing Phil to get away with this. Yet, having one person accomplish all the tasks for a family of five is unrealistic and Claire is portrayed as resenting Phil for never helping around the house, damaging their relationship even more. I think this representation shows viewers that their partner could end up resenting them when a husband does not help with anything around the house.

Jay and Gloria's household tasks are rarely represented. Jay does masculine tasks such as installing a ceiling fan in episode 3, but does not read the directions provided with the packaging, and complains throughout the entire process. Gloria is seen grocery shopping only once in episode 12. It is as though all the daily routine tasks are invisible and not worthy of representation in this portrayal of family. This could be because the writers want all the characters in *Modern Family* to represent wealthy, ideal families that can afford to hire people to clean for them.

In Cam and Mitchell's relationship, Cam does most of the shopping as shown in episode 4 but then Mitchell gets excited because he goes to Costco for the first time. This scene appears to be shown for humor purposes only and no undertone of Cam completing household tasks surfaces. Again, showing daily routine tasks is not necessary in order to share the family story the writers are presenting.



Once again, the relationship portrayed on the screen with the least amount of shared household duties between parents is Phil and Claire's, yet the other representations of families doing domestic work is limited on the screen. Of course since this show is a comedy, the representation of daily tasks needs not be represented unless for comical purposes. Coltrane discusses how men will participate more in household duties if they work less than their partner, are involved more with the children and the partner works as well, yet none of these scenarios are present in *Modern Family* (165). The literature on sharing household duties does not apply for the family portrayal desired by the writers of *Modern Family*.

Although *Parenthood* does not often show characters completing household duties, there is a better representation of men participating in household duties compared to *Modern Family*. This show does consist primarily of middle-class white characters with a few exceptions, yet the characters are shown completing household tasks such as emptying the dishwasher and cleaning up toys. All though all families are presented as middle-class, they appear to do more of their own housework compared to the well off characters portrayed on *Modern Family*. The only family portrayed as financially struggling is Sarah Braverman and her two children, because she recently left her children's drug addicted father. There are only two main characters of color on *Parenthood*, Jasmine and her son Jabbar. This show is a drama and therefore there is more room for serious representations of parenting struggles. *Modern Family* is a comedy that needs to extract humor out of their representations, often difficult to do with taunting

tasks such as washing dishes. There is no dialog surrounding household duties, yet all representations are visual depictions.

Since Joel stays home with his daughter Sydney, he is seen cooking dinner, cutting Sydney's food at dinner, singing songs to Sydney at night, and putting away the dishes. This happens sporadically throughout the season. This representation correlates with Coltrane's argument that when a father is more involved with his child and his partner works, he will do more housework (165). Therefore, this representation portrays a realistic parenting situation. This also shows the viewers that fathers who are home should participate in household duties. Throughout the show, Julia tries to help with everything, representing the struggle of equal parenting and how parenting cannot always divide everything evenly. Julia wants to spend time with her daughter when she gets home but also needs to help Joel with household duties. Joel and Julia are shown working together to empty the dishwasher or clean up toys when their daughter Sydney is sleeping, allowing them to catch up or discuss parenting choices they made. In her book, *Halving it All*, Deutsch discusses how for some parents, it is silly to split all tasks evenly, as some duties only call for one parent, therefore dividing duties evenly means different things for different families. Surprisingly, this representation also places some pressure and expectation on the mother, Julia to be able to work full-time as a lawyer and come home to do housework. Instead of being a simple role reversal where Joel does all the traditionally feminine work and Julia only provide financially, this representation of family shows Julia cleaning and Joel outside of the home. The representation of Joel

completing household tasks is not placed on the fathers throughout this show, continuing the traditional expectation that housework is the non-breadwinner's work.

In *Parenthood*, Adam is not shown doing many household duties. As the oldest adult child of Zeek and Camille as well as the oldest brother, Adam is shown helping all his siblings throughout the season. In one scene, Adam helps Crosby "baby proof" his boat house before Jabbar's first sleep over. In another he picks up his kids from school. When his wife Kristina leaves for three days in episode 9, "Perchance to Dream," Adam has to do all the household duties. Although nothing is verbally noted, it seems as though Adam is struggling with the weight of all the household tasks normally completed by his wife Kristina. While the demand to complete the housework is there, Adam cannot pull his weight, contradicting Coltrane and Ishii-Kutz's theory that when necessary fathers can and will help with household duties ("Men's Houswork" 43). Kristina is then offered more work on a political campaign, yet she is unable to pursue it because of the demands placed on her at home. However, Adam is able to have the non-family obligation with his career that Kristina's character is not granted. Kristina is shown doing the average amount of housework most wives complete, about two-thirds (Coltrane and Ishii-Kutz, "Predicting the Sharing of Household Labor" 630). She is shown cooking, doing laundry, and washing dishes a few times but it is not shown heavily or consistently. This representation reinforced the expectation placed on mothers to complete housework before focusing on their needs and desires as an individual person, separate from the family.

Crosby and Jasmine are both shown equally cooking. Since both parents are equally supporting the family financially and Jasmine was previously a single mother, the couple has less traditional parenting values. The literature on shared household duties expects such a relationship to be an equally shared parenting situation (Coltrane 165). In episode 8, "Rubber Band Ball," both Crosby and Jasmine plan Jabbar's birthday party together. Although Jasmine is originally resistant, she later encourages Crosby's involvement, allowing him to help with shopping, cooking and hanging decorations. Even though only in the beginning steps, this relationship is portraying what Coltrane expects. This representation shows the development of an equally shared parenting relationship, allowing viewers to see how such a relationship develops.

*Parenthood* shows housework among all families through visual representations, allowing us to see how they make equally parenting work for each of their unique family dynamics. It can be noted that housework is not highlighted as necessary for equally shared parents, but an aspect added to enhance the parenting for some couples. Most of the representations of housework are visual depictions and not dialogue between the characters. This suggests to the viewers that household duties are worth representing, yet not as important as equal power in decision-making.

The equal sharing of household duties is heavily discussed throughout the literature on equal parenting, yet the shows both highlight different areas. *Modern Family* and *Parenthood* represent the families that easily share household duties to be healthy and peaceful relationships. However, the representations that lack of shared responsibility for the completion of household duties are often mocked, roots of humor or ignored.

## Conclusion

After analyzing *Modern Family* and *Parenthood*, it is notable that they represent themes discussed in literature on equal parenting. However, traditional parenting roles still appear in some capacity. In *Modern Family*, some parents are sharing responsibilities, yet Claire and Phil are still representing a stay-at-home mom with no outside life and a disconnected father. *Modern Family* includes a lot about parenting in the first few episodes but after that it was more about the parents' relationships with each other and less about the children. In *Parenthood* there is a lot of equal parenting. The parenting among all five families is not always equal, but they work it out and the effort appears to be there from most parents. *Parenthood* appears to relate most to the literature on equal parenting.

Both *Modern Family* and *Parenthood* are changing and evolving with our society as they strive to represent equal parenting strategies. Almost all literature on equal parenting discusses the struggles with dual-earning families and unfortunately this is not portrayed in the first season of either show. Perhaps this happens in the consecutive seasons, yet as my research shows, it is lacking in the first season of these two contemporary television shows.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

*Modern Family* and *Parenthood* are two major network television shows that portray different equally shared parenting themes. This study concludes that although contradictory in their representations of the three equal parenting themes studied here, the writers have represented a level of parental equal power in decision making processes, fathers challenging gender roles in order to nurture child and participating in household duties through a handful of characters. Equal power in decision-making is represented as a struggle for Claire and Phil on *Modern Family* and something that comes easier to Adam and Kristina on *Parenthood*. Challenging gender expectations by actively nurturing their children is highlighted primarily within the same-gender couple on *Modern Family*, while two other father characters, Joel and Crosby, are portrayed as overcoming masculine identities to become nurturers, a role traditionally reserved solely for mothers on *Parenthood*. The category least discussed throughout both shows is fathers participating in household duties. On *Modern Family*, Phil's character is unable to even complete masculine household tasks such as fixing a step, while in *Parenthood*, the sharing of household duties is only visually represented, with no scripted conversations on the issue.

The representations of equally shared parenting on *Modern Family* both take the role of providing the viewers with humor and slipping into the parental representations where humor primarily comes from the children. Claire and Phil's struggle with equal parenting offers viewers the chance to laugh at scenarios they may have experienced within their own families. The two other representations of families, although

occasionally fueling the comedy, often find humor in children's actions such as Manny's inability to act like a child and Alex's intelligence surpassing that of her parents.

On *Parenthood*, equally shared parenting representations vary. Adam and Kristina's characters work on sharing decision making power, yet Kristina is limited to her identity as a stay-at-home mom, completing the majority of the housework and handling most of the mentally draining struggles involved in having a son with Asperger's. Joel and Julia's relationship displays a working mother and primarily stay at home dad and their struggle to balance and share every aspect of parenting. Crosby's character is a more complex representation, as viewers are introduced to his character while he finds out he is a father. Crosby's character is a modern father representation, breaking both norms and gender expectations.

Although the majority of these findings were expected, due to their popularity, I expected to find more equally shared parenting examples. As previously stated, perhaps more examples of these three themes could be found in the consecutive seasons as the plot and characters are both more developed. It would be interesting and worthwhile to evaluate each series as a whole after their completion.

Theorist Press has noted that television has taken a step towards more authentic portrayals of women, and it can be expected that as social issues change and influence culture, television will change again. As this happens, more research should be done on how television represents popular culture, since feminist theorists, such as Press and S. Douglas, have argued that television plays a vital role in instituting what is acceptable in American culture.

My research demonstrates that in their first seasons, both *Modern Family* and *Parenthood* represent equal parenting themes. Some of the representations correlate demonstrably with what equal parenting theorists discuss, while other portrayals are underdeveloped or contradict equal parenting literature. I believe this research is vital in understanding the relationship between what is socially acceptable of men as parents and how media represents fathers and their families.

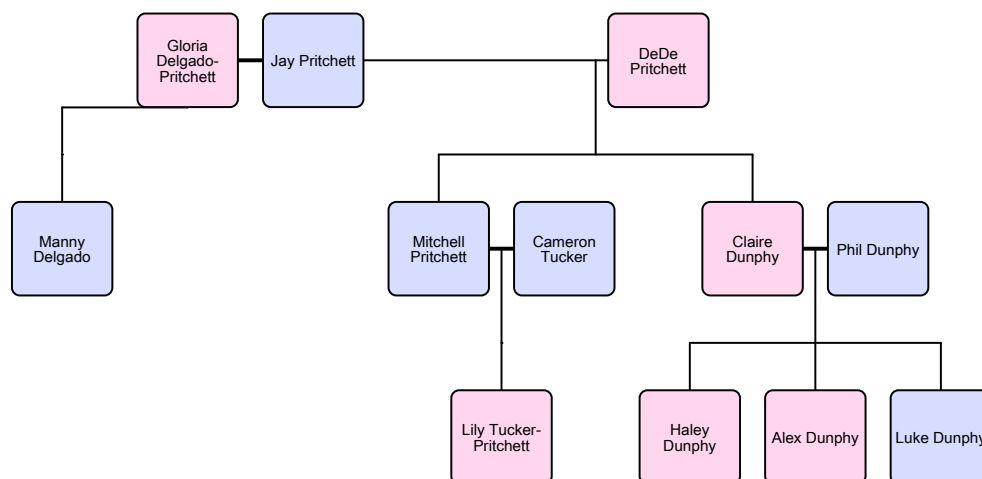
Television families have experiences that virtually all viewers can relate to and as a result, shows about families will always exist. As noted by theorists such as Press, television will continue to establish for the public what is acceptable. I believe this research is vital in understand the relationship between what is socially acceptable of men as parents and how media represents both fathers and their families. It is always important to realize that representations of American families on television will change and adapt to what viewers what to see.



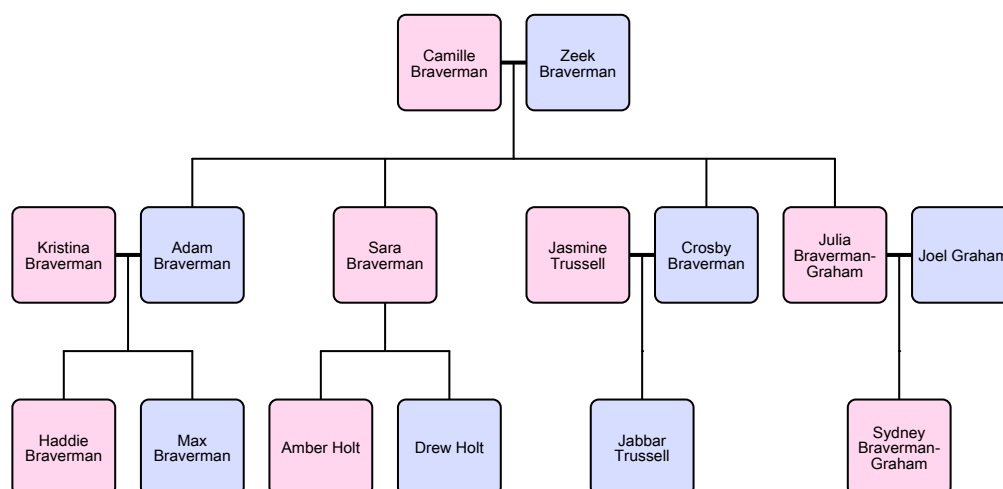
## Appendix

Figure 1 Family Tree for *Modern Family* Characters

## Modern Family

Figure 2 Family Tree for *Parenthood* Character

## Parenthood



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